

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF TERRORISM IN COASTAL WEST AFRICA

Brian Perkins

A spate of deadly attacks by militant groups in Mali and Burkina Faso came just weeks after a key meeting of the Economic Community Summit of West African States (ECOWAS) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. During the meeting, member states pledged to fund a one billion dollar counterterrorism initiative between 2020 and 2024 in an attempt to curtail the terrorist violence that has wreaked havoc on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and threatens to spill into coastal West African nations such as Ghana, Togo and Benin ([Aljazeera](#), September 15).

The funding from ECOWAS will help supplement the chronically underfunded French-backed G5 Sahel force comprised of troops from Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania and demonstrates the commitment and forethought of those countries yet to experience the level of violence that has plagued Burkina Faso and Mali. Ghana, in particular, has been leading the way in taking preemptive measures to assist and prevent the

spread of al-Qaeda and Islamic State groups in the region.

During the meeting, Ghana stressed the importance of the Accra Initiative, a security partnership initially signed in September 2017 by Ghana, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, and Togo aimed at countering terrorism and transnational crime. Mali and Niger joined the initiative as observers in 2019 ([AllAfrica](#), September 16). With preexisting coordination, staffing, and funding issues, further security initiatives that overlap with the G5 Sahel and Lake Chad Basin forces could further muddle the situation.

The Accra Initiative, however, does present numerous positives and could fill important gaps not fulsomely addressed by the G5 Sahel force. Namely, the Accra Initiative seeks to move beyond reactive counterterrorism measures and will involve the security forces of countries that still enjoy a modicum of peace without requiring them to pledge to send troops into active areas of hostility. The initiative envisions a collaborative resource and intelligence sharing partnership that emphasizes joint accountability and is funded solely by member states. Further, there is significant emphasis on addressing the underlying social and economic causes

of radicalization. Cote d'Ivoire has already begun working with religious leaders to track and prevent radicalization, and Togo created an inter-ministerial committee for preventing and countering violent extremism in May ([Togo First](#), May 16).

If the Accra Initiative can avoid muddying the waters between the preexisting security partnerships and focus its efforts on "in-house" proactive measures, it could provide a framework to help stem the spread of terrorism into coastal West African countries. While it is unlikely to help turn the tide in Mali and Burkina Faso, the initiative as well as the funding pledge by ECOWAS does demonstrate a greater regional commitment than what has been seen in recent years.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAND-HOPPING TERROR NETWORKS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Brian Perkins

Since the fall of Islamic State (IS) in Syria, there has been renewed attention on the group's efforts to expand in Asia through its long-time affiliates and through recruiting new cells. Southeast Asia, in particular, poses a unique challenge for security services and a significant opportunity for IS.

Over the past several years, investigations into terrorist attacks and networks in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines have underscored the interconnected networks that operate across the island nations and their unique geography. Recruitment, financing, and material support spans across the various militant groups in these countries, including Jemaah Islamiah and Jemaat Ansharul Daulah in Indonesia and the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, and is made easier by poorly secured coastal borders that offer countless points of entry. In fact, it is not uncommon for funding or training to cross the lines between al-Qaeda affiliated groups and IS affiliated groups.

Malaysian security forces arrested 16 terror suspects between July and late September across seven regions—Sabah, Selangor, Sarawak, Penang, Pahang, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor. Among those arrested were 12 Indonesians, three Malaysians, and an Indian ([Straits Times](#), September 27). According to authorities, the suspects were involved in recruiting and financing on behalf of IS, or were planning attacks in Malaysia and Indonesia. A 25-year-old Indonesian farmworker reportedly helped facilitate an Indonesian family's involvement in the devastating bombing on a cathedral on the island of Jolo in the southern Philippines in January ([Benar News](#), September 26). The individual had also funneled money to the Maute Group, an IS affiliate in the Philippines. Earlier, in May, authorities arrested two Malaysian militants that had reportedly been testing triacetone triperoxide (TATP) explosives—the same type used in the Surabaya bombings in 2018—after receiving training from Jemaat Ansharul Daulah in Indonesia ([Malaysiakini](#), May 24). Indonesian militants have used Malaysia as a haven and transit point to join militant groups in the Philippines while intermixing with local Malaysian cells. Meanwhile, Malaysian terror cells have received training in Indonesia before returning to Malaysia or traveling onward to the Philippines. Financing networks are simi-

larly interconnected, with funds collected from palm oil plantations as well as kidnapping and piracy activity carried out between the island nations being shared amongst the groups.

While Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines do maintain security partnerships, efforts to form a more coherent effective regional taskforce have been slow. Securing the waters between the countries as well as the countless coastal points of entry will continue to pose a significant challenge that local militants will continue to exploit. Additionally, many of the recent arrests have demonstrated that small terror cells work across national lines as well as across various terrorist organizations to achieve their aims.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

Political Crisis Deepens as Presidential Election Looms in Algeria

Hakim Briki

Eight months after the start of the anti-government protests in Algeria, the popular movement known as Hirak (the movement) is seeking to step up its actions. The standoff between Hirak and the regime is reaching an unprecedented climax. After Army Chief-of-Staff General Ahmed Gaid Salah imposed a crackdown on political activists and opposition members, arresting hundreds since February, Hirak has hardened its position against the military command, and vividly voiced its rejection of the upcoming presidential election.

The gap between the people and the regime has grown significantly since the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika last April. Despite the imprisonment of various former government officials for corruption and conspiracy against the state and the promise of deep political reforms, protesters continue to demand the removal of remnants of the Bouteflika regime and denounce a military power grab ([TSA-Algerie](#), April 6). General Ahmed Gaid Salah, who was once considered a savior for pushing the former president out of office, has become the main target of the popular movement and is widely seen as the obstacle to a better future. The general has repeatedly tried to break the momentum of Hirak since the summer season. The army chief banned the Amazigh flag during the protests and ordered the arrest of those carrying them, triggering outrage among the Berber community ([Elwatan](#), June 16). In September, he blockaded the entire capital in an effort to curtail protest turnout after stating that obscure parties were seeking to destabilize the country. Most recently, he ordered the arrest of opposition leaders, including two of the main Hirak figures, Karim Tabbou and Samir Benlarbi for “undermining the army’s morale” and “inciting riots” ([Liberte Algeria](#), September 18).

The most unexpected move that the army chief has made, however, remains the large-scale reshuffling of the military and police, which has allowed him to install loyal officers in high-ranking positions ([Algerie Toute Heure](#), September 10). This signals fears of a possible overthrow attempt, amid growing reports of dissensions within the military ([L’Obs](#), September 8). The army chief-

of-staff's relationship with Interim President Abdelkader Bensalah has been worsening in recent months, due to political disagreements. The former has reportedly refused to sign a decree submitted to him by the Ministry of Defense to give more power to Gaid Salah ([Algerie Part](#), September 2).

The political crisis has fueled social unrest at the local level. Emboldened by Hirak, populations across Algeria have been denouncing poor living conditions, unemployment, and infrastructure problems in uncoordinated protests which have led to road closures, strikes, and the shutting down of government buildings. An uptick in illegal immigration toward Europe via the Mediterranean Sea also shows that Algerian youths are losing faith in deep and meaningful change ([Elwatan](#), September 30).

Hirak protesters and leaders are seeking to send strong signals to the army chief-of-staff and the interim president about the boycott of the presidential election. The protesters believe that, under the current circumstances, a transparent and legitimate election cannot be guaranteed. Interim President Bensalah and General Gaid Salah are however adamant that holding the election before year-end is the only way out of the crisis. Hirak has flatly rejected the election schedule, and more than 100 elected officials refused to take part in the election process in Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia and Algiers, among other provinces. In addition to fears of election fraud, the lack of fresh blood in the political arena is a major concern. Former Prime Ministers (PM) Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Ali Benflis, both of whom served under Abdelaziz Bouteflika, maybe the most recognizable candidates, but they have failed to rally enough support among voters to be considered major contenders. A large number of opposition parties have refused to take part in the election. The Alternative Democratic Forces (FAD), a coalition of opposition parties, human rights groups and other NGOs, recently came out against holding the election, which they claim are being "shoved down the throats" of the Algerian people. AFD called for a longer transition period, governed by a constituent assembly ([APS](#), September 9).

In this respect, the forthcoming election has heightened the likelihood of civil disobedience. While the protests have been mainly peaceful since February 22, Hirak members are now pondering joining strike actions. Twelve independent trade unions announced a plan to launch nationwide strikes and sit-ins to oppose the elections. Such actions would paralyze many sectors, includ-

ing education, public administration, trade, healthcare, and construction. This would further incapacitate an already struggling economy, at a time when the government is seriously considering foreign financial help for the first time in more than a decade.

The crisis will persist in Algeria in the near to mid-term, and it will likely worsen before the upcoming presidential election, as Hirak and the authorities seem unwilling to make compromises. The popular movement will strive to give young civilians greater access to governance, so as to rekindle hope in the Algerian youth, and pave the way for deep political, social, and economic reforms. Despite the peaceful aim of the protest movement, strategic miscalculations or responses by the military as well as hostile groups' efforts to hijack the movement leaves Algeria in a combustible and precarious position.

Attack on U.S. Base and EU Trainers in Somalia Underlines al-Shabaab's Resilience

Sunguta West

An attack on a U.S. military base in Somalia has underlined the persistent threat posed by al-Shabaab, the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa.

On September 30, the militant group stormed a base housing U.S. Special Forces and soldiers from the Somali National Army (SNA) in the town of Baledogle in Lower Shabelle region ([Daily Nation](#), September 30).

In an attack widely seen to signify the group's growing confidence, the militants first detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) at the gate, before fighters moved-in on foot. Reports indicate that a U.S. servicemember suffered injuries in the attack, which took place approximately 110 kilometers northwest of the capital, Mogadishu.

On the same day, a separate group of militants attacked a convoy transporting a team of EU military advisors, who had been training soldiers from the SNA in Mogadishu.

The attackers drove a VBIED into one of the vehicles in the convoy as it was returning from the army headquarters. None of the EU soldiers were injured, but the armored vehicles they were using were damaged.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the two attacks. The group claimed it sent an elite unit of soldiers to raid the heavily fortified base, and that the soldiers engaged the "crusaders" in an intense fight after breaching the perimeter ([The Citizen](#), September 30).

According to reports, the U.S. Special Forces have been using the Baledogle Airfield complex to launch drone attacks against al-Shabaab and more recently, Islamic State (IS). It has also been the training base for commandos in Somalia ([Daily Nation](#), September 30).

In the last two years, the U.S. military has increasingly used aircraft and drone strikes to target the militants in southern Somalia. In 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump issued a declaration that defined southern Somalia as an area of active hostilities, which opened up the territory

for airstrikes, the number of which have increased sharply in 2019.

U.S. Africa Command (Africom) has conducted 110 airstrikes since 2017, targeting groups of fighters as well as individual commanders ([Standard Digital](#), February 26).

According to reports, the aim is to reduce al-Shabaab's ability to plan and carry out future attacks, disrupt its leadership networks, and reduce its ability to move within the region ([The Star](#), January 7). Earlier airstrikes killed key leaders including Shaykh Ahmad Abdi Godane. Godane, a co-founder of the Islamist group, died in a strike near the town of Barawe in 2014. Aden Hashi Ayro, the first al-Shabaab leader, was killed in another U.S. airstrike in 2008.

Despite the strikes and the increased onslaught by the SNA and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops, the al-Shabaab threat is far from diminished.

The group has remained the main destabilizing force in the region and the key obstacle to international efforts to reconstruct the Somali state ([The African Executive](#), August 20). It continues to exist as a resilient and tactful force that quickly adapts to new circumstances in Somalia's complex civil war.

With the increasing number of airstrikes, al-Shabaab has responded by avoiding gathering its fighters in large groups. Its fighters have also been moving in small units of three or four people to avoid detection. Gathering in large numbers has been forbidden by al-Shabaab leadership, unless the group is preparing to launch a major attack.

Since its establishment in 2006, the militant organization has maintained a tight grip on most of southern Somalia. In 2011, it lost the capital Mogadishu to AMISOM. The city of Kismayo—a major source of revenue through charcoal trade, taxation, and levies on arms and other illegal imports—was lost the following year.

Al-Shabaab has continued its pattern of violence, however, attacking government installations and buildings in the smaller towns and other areas. The group has assassinated senior government officials and politicians, and kidnapped foreigners, including aid workers. It has employed the use of roadside IEDs, VBIEDs, and suicide bombers to disrupt life in the town and southern Somalia ([Daily Nation](#), March 1).

Through its insurgency, the militant group is seeking to destabilize and overthrow the Federal Government of Somalia, with the aim of installing a government based on sharia (Islamic law) ([The Star](#), October 2, 2018).

Beyond these attacks, al-Shabaab continues to implement some forms of taxation, such as the collecting fines. The group is offering judicial services in the areas under its control, as well as in areas still under government administration.

The attack on the U.S. base and the EU trainers are likely to boost the morale of al-Shabaab's fighters and send a key message to the many forces trying to intervene in the war-torn country.

Although al-Shabaab is thought to be in disarray due to the onslaught by AMISOM troops and other forces, the attacks indicate that it can still coordinate attacks and produce reliable intelligence on military movements ([Standard Digital](#), April 6). These developments demonstrate that the group's insurgency in southern Somalia is more resilient and flexible than earlier anticipated, having shifted into a regional force, and exporting its terror activities to neighboring Kenya.

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Abqaiq: Lessons for Countering Drones

James Pothecary

Introduction

On September 14, a number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) reportedly attacked Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq energy facility, one of the world's largest crude oil processing sites, alongside the Khurais oil field ([Middle East Eye](#), September 15). The drones—possibly supported by cruise missiles fired from ground positions—were apparently successful in penetrating the site's missile-defense systems before unleashing their payloads, and in doing so temporarily disrupted around 5 percent of global oil supplies. Strikingly, satellite pictures of the facility after the assault shows that some of the attacking vehicles had apparently struck with pinpoint accuracy, hitting and damaging multiple processing units in almost exactly the same place. The Houthis, a rebel group based in Yemen, subsequently claimed responsibility, although the veracity of this claim remains disputed.

Although the implications of non-state armed groups acquiring weaponized drones have been well-documented, the scale and precision of the Abqaiq attack demonstrates that hostile actors are embracing this technology at a speed that compromises the ability of policymakers to respond effectively. Indeed, the advantages of drones for the terrorist actor—distance from target, ease of acquisition and use, ability to circumvent traditional security—make it a near-perfect weapon ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 11).

The Abqaiq incident is, for now, an extreme outlier event, both in terms of the attack's scale, sophistication, and the likely level of Iranian support. Yet as the sale of increasingly sophisticated and affordable drones continues to grow exponentially, their utilization as weapons of political violence will become increasingly common.

The Abqaiq attack, therefore, provides a valuable learning opportunity to examine the defensive failures that led to a "worst-case scenario" occurring. In so doing, policymakers can consider the implications for their own jurisdictions, and begin to plan their own responses proactively. The political challenges of mobilizing a response to a threat which is still in its infancy are consid-

erable, but failure to do so could lead to attacks like Abqaiq becoming routine across the globe.

Security Failures

The Kingdom's government had obviously recognized that Abqaiq was one of its most critical national infrastructure and had responded accordingly. The site was protected by at least one Patriot missile battery, Crotale anti-air missile systems and Skyguard 35mm cannons, not to mention a local garrison ([TRT Haber](#), September 20). That this assortment of advanced weaponry was apparently unable to protect Alqaiq in this scenario is likely to have been because such systems were designed to protect against established air threats, high-altitude missiles, conventional cruise missiles, and hostile aircraft, rather than small, low-altitude cruise missiles and autonomous or remotely piloted UAV fleets. Even if appropriate counter-UAV (CUAV) assets had been positioned, the damage pattern and timing suggest that the attackers may have adopted a swarm technique, attacking with multiple units simultaneously so as to avoid the targeting difficulty caused by smoke and debris resulting from the first weapon home. This technique, assuming that it was employed, would have likely overwhelmed all but the most robust countermeasures. That these systems were not in place at all was a failure of imagination; officials had simply not recognized that drones could pose such a significant threat, or if they had, were unable to source appropriate systems that are only now coming to the market following threats to critical national infrastructure elsewhere in the world.

However, although it is tempting to blame the attack's success on hardware issues, there were secondary failures in intelligence and training. There appears to have been no early warning of the incoming attack, suggesting that the Kingdom's defensive radar systems had failed to detect such small assets. Further, even if advance notice had been communicated to Abqaiq, it is unlikely that the local troops were sufficiently trained to respond to the threat, and indeed it is unclear whether they had the competence to utilize the defensive systems they already possessed.

Although casualties were limited and disruption temporary, the events at Abqaiq are an insight into the potential future of political violence. Islamic State has long recognized the potentially devastating impacts drones could have on Western cities and established their own research unit to develop this technology. If a site as well-

defended as Abqaiq was unable to protect itself, then the implications for securing Western cities are chilling.

A secondary consideration is state actors providing non-state groups with drone capabilities, in order to carry out deniable operations in furtherance of their foreign policy objectives. It appears that Russia has armed Ukrainian-based anti-government forces with UAVs, and it is almost certain that Iran has done the same for the Houthis. Given the inherent difficulties of identifying the instigator of a drone attack, this makes them ideal weapons in the "grey zone" conflict areas of Ukraine and Yemen. This, in turn, raises the risk of military-grade drones proliferating on the black market, where they could ultimately be purchased by groups or individuals hostile to Western interests.

Implications for the West

Regulation

In the first instance, governments must define their own regulatory framework concerning UAVs. Questions of legal exclusion zones around critical infrastructure such as airports, regulating line-of-sight operator requirements, use in urban zones and the type of drones legally acquirable are all vital first steps to clarify the operating environment.

However, as the UK found out in December last year, the difficulties of enforcing UAV legislation are considerable. Between December 19-21, reports of drone activity within Gatwick Airport's exclusion zone triggered the closure of the airport's sole runway, impacting over 100,000 travelers. Despite a major police response, the culprits have to this day not been identified, with two suspects released without charge on December 23. The fact that the operator can be far removed from the drone renders identification extremely challenging, particularly for non-specialist first responders, and by the time relevant assets can be deployed, the operator would have had time to cover their tracks.

As such, investment in developing the relevant capabilities among police is clearly an area of prioritization, both in interdicting plots before they can take place and in catching the perpetrators in the aftermath.

Physical Security

Perhaps even more significant, however, is how governments can develop the multi-layered defensive architecture required. While it is easy to point out that

Abqaiq shows the need for integrated defensive systems, it is much more complex to demonstrate how this can be achieved realistically in lower-security risk environments, particularly within urban zones. This is both due to concerns over cost and likely domestic unease at integrating air-defense systems into environments with high civilian traffic. There is simply not the political will or popular support for air-defense batteries to be installed in Western cities, and this would only change in the event of a mass-casualty terrorist attack utilizing drones.

Moreover, even if the political and financial argument can be won for critical infrastructure, or even for major population centers, no government has the resources necessary to provide complete CUAV coverage. A drone attack against a sports stadium or major retail center would be potentially devastating in terms of civilian casualties and political impact, even in less high-profile towns and cities.

Nor would such UAVs need to be as advanced as the ones deployed against Abqaiq. Even a commercially available model could be easily retrofitted to drop a small payload, either of explosives or a chemical-biological agent. Indeed, even white chalk fired into a crowded space would likely cause mass panic, meaning that even low-skilled lone operators could successfully cause high-level disruption with little training, equipment, or resources.

A Tailored Response

If blanket CUAV coverage is unfeasible, then policymakers must prioritize which facilities to harden, while considering non-hardware options. The encouragement of CUAV projects, either within the security forces or the private sector, is valuable but would only deliver results over the long term. Ultimately, the rapid development of UAV capabilities means that policy and technology responses must occur in months, rather than years. Policymakers must adapt to this new reality now, rather than respond in the aftermath of the West's very own al-Abqaiq.

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