

Is the Threat of Al-Qaeda Over for Europe?

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CONOR HEFFERNAN, MAY 14 2014

“We will continue to fight you as long as we have weapons in our hands.”[1]

Osama Bin Laden, 2003

The relationship between Al-Qaeda and Europe is one of great uncertainty. Scholars continue to debate about what Al-Qaeda actually is, yet few consider the threat Al-Qaeda poses to Europe today. This paper contends that the threat of Al-Qaeda to Europe, especially Great Britain and France, remains. While the core of Al-Qaeda (as represented by Bin Laden, Al-Zawahiri, etc.) are no longer a physical threat to Europe, but rather an ideological threat, looser groups connected to Al-Qaeda, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) or ‘lone wolf’ terrorists, are more imminent threats to European States, businesses, and citizens. In arguing this, the paper will examine what ‘Al-Qaeda’ means in various contexts before examining the three different facets of Al-Qaeda individually and assessing their threat to Europe. Finally, the paper reviews recent European responses to Al-Qaeda and their effectiveness.

When discussing Al-Qaeda’s threat to Europe it is important to note that scholars disagree regarding how to define Al-Qaeda.[2] This paper utilises Jason Burke’s theory of Al-Qaeda as a trifecta of groups, composed of the “hard-core” (Bin Laden et al.), the “network” (those who take part in Jihad or training camps and have returned to their home countries), and the wider “movement” (being those who associate with the ideology and have no connection with the hardcore and a loose connection at best with the network). The three layers are fluid and always moving.[3] Burke’s theory is similar to that of Abu Musab Suri, one of Al-Qaeda’s military thinkers, who argued that Al-Qaeda was “a system, not an organisation.”[4] The “network” and “movement” of Al-Qaeda are particularly important as they validate scholars’ claims that Al-Qaeda is a powerful brand that attracts support around the globe and, stemming from this, that it is a transnational group.[5] Having established the parameters under which Al-Qaeda will be examined, this paper will now consider each of the three groups individually and assess the threat they pose to European States, businesses, and civilians.

A decade ago, the “hard-core” of Al-Qaeda presented a real and imminent threat to Europe. Yet in 2014, many members of Al-Qaeda’s core, notably Osama Bin Laden, have been killed or captured primarily through US drone and counterinsurgency strikes in the Middle East.[6] Briggs argued that Al-Qaeda’s threat has diminished as key leaders have been incarcerated or killed and intelligence agencies have stepped up their efforts on the ground.[7] How accurate is this assessment? The current Al-Qaeda leader, Al-Zawahiri, has been notable in his absence in recent months, and scholars have postulated that the remaining core of Al-Qaeda are now more concerned with their own safety than planning attacks against Europe.[8] Whereas Bin Laden facilitated the financing and plotting of attacks such as those in New York in 2001, Al-Zawahiri has to content himself with a largely symbolic role.[9] Indeed, news surrounding Al-Zawahiri now focuses on his anti-European and anti-American rhetoric rather than news of tangible Al-Qaeda threats.[10] The threat facing Europe from the core of Al-Qaeda appears to be negligible in terms of death or disruption. However, the propaganda stemming from Al-Qaeda leaders, past and present, poses an ideological threat for European States.[11] Awan noted that Al-Qaeda leaders are still adept at using the Internet to recruit followers in Europe.[12] The ideological threat from Al-Qaeda has long plagued Europe. In 2006, Cronin argued that the West was losing the propaganda battle with Al-Qaeda, and it appears that little has been learnt since.[13] Such propaganda is especially threatening to Europe as it has been shown to help radicalize European

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citizens.[14] This is not a passive threat. Recent Al-Qaeda online propaganda detailed how to make bombs from a kitchen environment and encouraged both the Al-Qaeda network and movement to initiate attacks on European citizens and businesses.[15] While the extent of the ideological threat is not quantifiable it becomes more apparent when one discusses the “network” and “movement” of Al-Qaeda.

If the physical threat to Europe from Al-Qaeda’s core is now negligible, the opposite is true of Al-Qaeda’s network. Indeed, the biggest threat to Europe from Al-Qaeda centers on Al-Qaeda’s network currently operating in Africa.[16] Two of the most deadly Al-Qaeda attacks in 2013 were committed in Africa. In January 2013, an Al-Qaeda network led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar took 800 people hostage at the Tigantourine gas facility near In Amenas, Algeria.[17] In September 2013, gunmen from the Al-Qaeda network Al-Shabaab attacked the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya resulting in 67 deaths.[18] Both attacks showed the threat Al-Qaeda poses to European interests in Africa. The attack on the gas field in Algeria was a prime example as it affected major European business interests. The Algerian State, British Oil Firm BP, and Norwegian Oil Firm Statoil operated the gas field prior to the attack and all three suffered from a temporary stoppage to production.[19] BP suffered the loss of its Vice President for North Africa in the attacks.[20] Businesses clearly suffered, and there are suggestions that such an attack may happen again.[21] Worryingly, an internal Statoil report into the In Amenas attacks suggested that European companies in Africa might still be unprepared for future attacks on facilities by Al-Qaeda groups.[22] Similarly, the attack in the Westgate Mall resulted in European businesses losing money.[23] European citizens also suffered in both attacks. Among those killed were British, Norwegian, and French citizens.[24]

The attacks in Algeria and Kenya are not the only examples of the danger Al-Qaeda’s network poses to Europe. AQIM and its offshoots pose a significant threat to Europeans within Africa. Since 2001, AQIM have kidnapped European citizens and ransomed them to finance their terrorist activity.[25] France has borne the brunt of AQIM’s kidnappings due to AQIM’s opposition to French foreign policy.[26] The number of French citizens spread across Africa suggests reason for French concern. In Mali alone, a previous AQIM stronghold, there are 6,000 French citizens, along with French companies and the French embassy.[27] Europe is continuing to expand its diplomatic and economic relations with Africa as a whole, and it is likely that European interests in Africa will remain.[28] Should Al-Qaeda networks continue to strengthen in Africa, there are legitimate questions to be raised about protecting European interests and also ensuring the safety of regions such as Spain, which have already experienced terrorist attacks and are in close proximity to Africa.[29] Al-Qaeda’s network has shown that it is a real, tangible threat to European businesses and citizens in Africa. There is little to suggest this will not continue.

Similarly, Al-Qaeda networks based in Syria pose a threat to European security. Since an outbreak of unrest during the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011, Syria has become “a pre-eminent location for Al-Qaeda-aligned groups to recruit, train, and equip a growing number of [European] extremists.”[30] The threat to Europe is potent, as the potential for fighters to return to Europe and attack from within European States is high. Recent reports have detailed a rise in European citizens from Albania, Great Britain, France, and Spain fighting in Syria.[31] What will happen when these citizens return to Europe? There are already indications that some are planning terrorist attacks.[32] In January 2014, British Security forces arrested 16 British citizens on suspicion of terror offences after travelling between Syria and England.[33] European States, such as Great Britain and France, are concerned their citizens are being trained and radicalized by Al-Qaeda in Syria.[34] How to respond to this threat is currently baffling policymakers.[35] While security forces are arresting and monitoring citizens returning from Syria, Lake noted that Turkey, a neighbour to Europe, has vulnerable borders and presents a stepping-stone for fighters in Syria to re-enter Europe.[36] While it is uncertain what will happen when the fighting stops in Syria and European citizens return, it is clear that the threat of Al-Qaeda’s network to European states is not over.

If studies into Al-Qaeda’s network are rich in detail, works on Al-Qaeda’s movement are shrouded in mystery. The reason for this stems from the ambiguous nature of the movement. Burke described it as “all those who ... have no connection with the hardcore and a loose connection at best with the network”.[37] Networks like AQIM may be clandestine, but they are identifiable. This is not the case for Al-Qaeda’s movement. Scholarly and public discussion on the movement focuses on unknown ‘lone wolf’ attackers or groups whose attacks catch State authorities unaware.[38] Regarding those who perpetrate attacks, scholars argue that second generation immigrants in Europe, who are socially isolated within their own communities and home countries, tend to turn to Al-Qaeda radicalism.[39]

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Coupled with this, the current European economic and social climate arguably contributes to radicalization.[40] Many attacks from Al-Qaeda's movement fit such analysis. The Woolwich Murder in England in 2013 is a prime example. Two British citizens, second generation Nigerians, and influenced by Al-Qaeda propaganda, attacked and murdered a British soldier.[41] Similar 'lone-wolf' attacks have been planned or executed in Belgium, France and Sweden in the last three years.[42] While 'lone wolves' and small groups may not attack on the scale of 9/11, their plans are low-cost and high reward.[43] Such attacks are difficult for security forces to detect and prevent. EU security forces estimate that at present, 400 suspected 'lone wolves' are operating and planning attacks in Europe.[44] While the validity of such figures is disputable, it is clear that the threat from Al-Qaeda's movement for Europe remains.

How are European States currently dealing with the threat Al-Qaeda poses? France is perhaps the most active in trying to tackle the threat in Africa. In January 2013, France began a military intervention in Mali following the Malian Government's request for help after radical groups, including AQIM, took control of Northern Mali.[45] While the French mission appears to have been successful, the spillover effects for France were costly. Members of AQIM responsible for the attack on the oil field in In Amenas fled from Mali into Algeria. [46] This presents an interesting case study for European intervention in Africa. While France was successful in weakening Al-Qaeda networks in Mali, some of the network moved into Algeria and attacked French interests. Spillover effects were not adequately accounted for. While France has looked outward in tackling Al-Qaeda, England has looked inwards. The success of England's policy is disputable. Some scholars argue that the lack of a terrorist attack during the 2012 London Olympics was proof that Al-Qaeda is no longer a threat in England and that the government's policy of crackdowns on radicals within England has been successful.[47] Yet the 2013 Woolwich Murder contradicts this argument. The murder stemmed in part from the persecution felt by one of the attackers due to his constant harassment by M15.[48] England has pledged to continue surveillance of suspected terrorists.[49] While such a policy is perhaps necessary for national security, spillover effects may appear once more. There is no comprehensive and effective policy to tackle Al-Qaeda as the French and British approaches demonstrate and the spillover effects are unpredictable and potentially damaging. This contributes to the difficulty in reducing the threat of Al-Qaeda to Europe.

While the supposed decline of Al-Qaeda has been discussed for many years, this paper argues that not only is Al-Qaeda still relevant, but that it is still a threat to Europe. In arguing this, the paper examined the structure of Al-Qaeda before discussing the three different facets of Al-Qaeda and assessed their threat to Europe. Finally, the paper examined recent European responses to Al-Qaeda. Europe faces a number of threats ranging from climate change to economic stabilization. This paper argues that Al-Qaeda must still be regarded as one such threat. In 2003, Osama Bin Laden vowed that Al-Qaeda would continue to fight Europe and America as long as Al-Qaeda had weapons in its hands. Over a decade later, Al-Qaeda's threat to Europe and its citizens remains.

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