

Mali emerges as the latest al-Qaida hub

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Northern Mali, captured by Muslim fundamentalists earlier this year, is rapidly becoming a new haven and headquarters for the al-Qaida terrorist network.

Al-Qaida's growing presence in the Sahel region stretching across West Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea comes as it is under increasing pressure in its other base areas.

In Pakistan its hideouts near the Afghanistan border are under constant attack from missiles fired by United States drone aircraft. The same is true in Yemen, the homeland of assassinated al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

In Somalia the territory controlled by al-Qaida allies al-Shabab is shrinking rapidly as regional forces recapture the country on behalf of a transitional government.

But as Central Intelligence Agency director and former U.S. military commander in Afghanistan David Petraeus told a British journalist, al-Qaida is adept at shifting its bases and focus of operations when it comes under sustained attack. The problem for the U.S. and its allies, said Petraeus, is mounting a sustained and co-ordinated campaign to hit al-Qaida simultaneously in all its hideouts.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pointed on Thursday to the emergence of Mali as a centre for al-Qaida operations.

Speaking at a meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York she suggested the Sept. 11 attack on the American consulate in the eastern Libyan city of Benghazi was the work of groups associated with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which controls northern Mali.

Four Americans including Ambassador Christopher Stevens were killed in the attack, which American officials now believe was intended to mark the anniversary of the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

But elsewhere at the UN meeting there is as yet no agreement about what to do about the increasingly firm grip AQIM is exerting over the northern two-thirds of Mali.

After rejecting the idea of an intervention by foreign troops, Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traore finally agreed earlier this month to the deployment of a 3,000-strong force under the banner of the Economic Community of West African States.

Mali's neighbours, all of whom are seeing evidence of the spreading presence of AQIM in their countries, are in favour of removing the poison from northern Mali as soon as possible.

But there is as yet no similar determination at the UN Security Council, whose approval is needed for a legal military intervention.

The U.S. thinks approval should be deferred until a request is received from a legitimately elected government in Mali. Other Security Council members are unhappy at the lack of detail in the request.

Saharan semi-nomadic Tuareg rebels seized northern Mali in March after a military coup in the capital, Bamako, left a power vacuum.

At first a secular group aiming to create an independent Tuareg homeland appeared to be in control. But it was quickly supplanted by a militant Islamist Tuareg faction, Ansar al-Din, which was itself overrun by al-Qaidalinked groups in April.

There is already the application of strict Shariah law in the region controlled by the militants. There have been public whippings of alleged adulterers and some reports say that shrines of local saints in Timbuktu, designated a world heritage site by the UN cultural organization UNESCO, have been judged un-Islamic and destroyed.

The main local thrust for the growth of militant Islamic groups linked to al-Qaida in Mali and surrounding Saharan countries comes from the bitter civil war in Algeria in the 1990s.

Fundamentalists rejected the 1999 amnesty that ended the civil war and launched a terrorist campaign not only in Algeria but across North Africa.

In 2007 the main militant group, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat – salafist is an Arabic word meaning fundamentalist – announced it had joined forces with al-Qaida.

The link to bin-Laden's operation brought with it a wider regional and global perspective. In December 2008 al-Qaida militants abducted UN special envoy and former Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler and his associate, also a Canadian official, Louis Guay, in Niger. The pair was released in April 2009, but Fowler makes it clear in his book *A Season in Hell*, that their abduction was a purposeful attack on the UN and all that it stands for.

As is already evident the AQIM state in northern Mali is a base for operations elsewhere, and also a hub for expansion into neighbouring states.

Niger, which has a large Tuareg population, is vulnerable to having AQIM establish an enclave in its territory, according to the U.K.-based global analysis and advisory company Oxford Analytica. AQIM has also launched several attacks into Mali's western neighbour Mauritania and the Nigerian government believes its homegrown Islamic militants, Boko Haram, is forging links with AQIM and al-Qaida.

Bin Laden declared war on the U.S. and its allies in 1996. There is no end in sight.

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