



Terrorist attacks in Niger: not another Mali

by Tobias Koepf

On 23 May, terrorists carried out two suicide attacks in northern Niger which targeted a camp of the Niger armed forces in the city of Agadez and a uranium site run by the French nuclear company Areva in the city of Arlit. During the attacks, around 20 people (most of them Niger soldiers) were killed. Responsibility for the attacks was claimed by the terrorist group Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), one of the three Salafi-jihadist groups that seized control of northern Mali after the military coup in Bamako in March 2012 only to be driven out of Mali following the French military intervention - Operation Serval - in January 2013.

Niger is not the next Mali

The attacks raised concerns that they could mark the beginning of a descent into chaos in the country, similarly to what happened in Mali one year ago. And at first glance, Niger is indeed suffering from some of the same problems that caused the turmoil in Mali.

First, radical Islamist cells have gained a foothold in several parts of the country and, following Operation Serval, have been strengthened by fighters who fled Mali. MUJAO had already been active in Niger before the attack, having hijacked a number of Nigerien and Chadian aid workers in the country's southeast in early October 2012.

Second, as in Mali, radical Islamism could overlap and mix with the Tuareg question. Niger, too, has a large Tuareg population in the poor and marginalised north, which already rebelled in the early 1990s and again in 2007-09. Worries have therefore existed that armed Tuareg groups could team up with Islamist radicals to challenge the Niger authorities.

Third, Niger has a lamentable history of military coups, with three civilian governments overthrown over the past 20 years (1996, 1999 and 2010). The army remains internally split and parts of it remain sceptical of civilian rule.

However, the Niger government has learned its lessons from the 2012 events in Mali. Bamako neglected northern Mali and the activities of radical Islamists for too long. The Niger authorities, by contrast, have significantly stepped up their security presence in the north of the country in order to face the potential terrorist threat.

Furthermore, the 2009 peace agreement with the Tuareg has so far been respected by both sides. After the events in Mali in 2012, the Niger government reached out to its own Tuareg population and offered it additional aid. What is more, the Niger army has so far rallied round President Mahamadou Issoufou. With the support of external actors (mainly France and the United States), Issoufou has gained in stature since 2012 and is unlikely to be challenged from within his own ranks.

A regional problem

Rather than being just a replica of events in Mali, the attacks in northern Niger are symptoms of another, even more worrying development: namely, the increasing activity of terrorist groups that operate across borders in the wider Sahel-Sahara region. Their main goal is not - as was the case in Mali - to take control of a country or a region, but to destabilise local governments and target Western interests in an asymmetrical way (i.e. by carrying out suicide attacks and large scale hostage-taking operations).

After the French intervention, Islamist radicals involved in the takeover in northern Mali fled not only to neighbouring Niger but to various other countries in the region, including Mauritania, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, Algeria, Libya and even Sudan and Tunisia. There now is a clear risk that they could regroup and carry out further attacks.

Already before the recent actions in Niger, the attack carried out in January 2013 by

al-Qaeda-linked terrorists on the In Amenas natural gas plant in Algeria (jointly run by the Algerian state company Sonatrach, British Petroleum and the Norwegian company Statoil) offered a bitter foretaste of what the region could expect with at least 37 foreign workers killed on the occasion.

In particular, southern Libya has become a source of serious concern. The region has been beyond government control since Colonel Gaddafi's fall in 2011 and has become a safe haven for radical Islamist groups. As far as we know, it was from southern Libya that the attacks in Niger were planned and implemented. Notably, it was also in southern Libya that the attack at In Amenas was prepared.

Reportedly, both attacks were supervised by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, formerly a leading figure of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and now leader of the AQIM offshoot 'Signatories in Blood' (Signataires par le sang), founded in December 2012. Belmokhtar, who has already been declared dead several times, is also rumoured to be hiding in southern Libya.

A regional approach

Terrorism in the Sahel-Sahara region cannot be framed or tackled in the context of individual countries: it has long been a regional challenge. With its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel from January

2011, the EU disposes of a useful toolkit to address the terrorist threat in Mali, Niger and Mauritania.

To translate its strategy into action(s), the EU has already taken several measures. Within the framework of its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), it has launched two missions in Mali (EUTM Mali) and Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) to support the local security forces in improving their counter-terrorism capacities. These are flanked by further measures adopted within the framework of the EU's development policy and via the Instrument for Stability (IfS).

Nevertheless, a truly regional approach will have to encompass more countries, especially those in North Africa that are affected by terrorist activities. Integrating the EU Border Assistance Mission (EU-BAM) in Libya - launched in May 2013 to support the Libyan government in improving the security of

its borders - into the Union's approach could be a first step in this direction.

'The goal of the terrorists – that operate across borders – is to destabilise local governments and target Western interests in an asymmetrical way.'

A major additional challenge - for both the EU and the international community at large - will be to encourage regional actors to cooperate more closely and effectively in the fight against terrorism. Only if the countries that are directly affected by the terrorist threat join forces will it be possible to tackle it successfully.

In 2010 already, the so-called Combined Operational General Staff Committee (Comité d'état-major opérationnel conjoint, CEMOC) was established in the city of Tamanrasset, in southern Algeria, to improve the coordination of the anti-terrorism efforts of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger. Unfortunately, however, the CEMOC initiative has yet to really take off - mainly because Algiers has been reluctant to play the leading role it was expected to play inside the forum.

The attacks in Niger, as well as the attack at In Amenas, have given terrorism in the region another dimension, demonstrating to both local governments and European countries that their security and their interests in the region are seriously at risk. As a consequence, they have opened a window of opportunity for improved cooperation between the EU and the countries of the region as well as between regional actors themselves. It is a window that should definitely be used.

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