



# Security Threats in the Sahel and Beyond: AQIM, Boko Haram and al Shabaab

Comprehensive Information on Complex Crises

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**Erin Foster-Bowser**  
Desk Officer  
North Africa

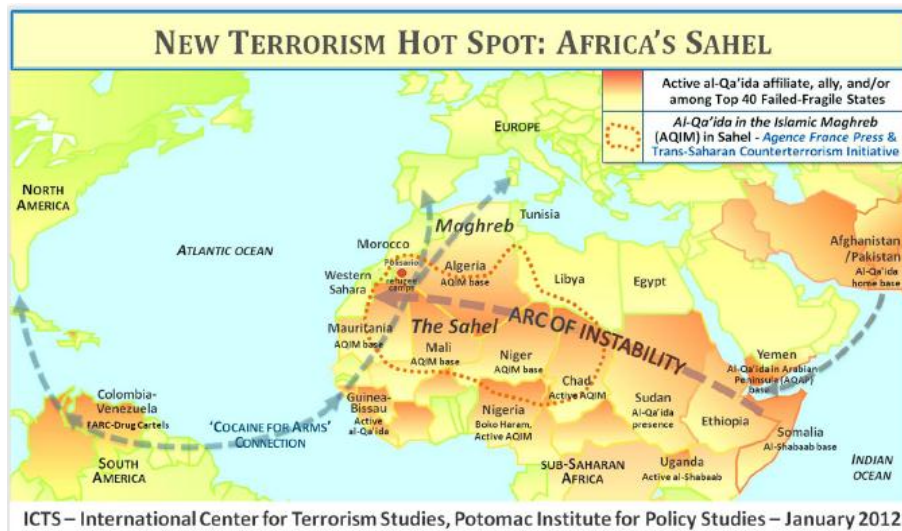
[erin.foster@cimicweb.org](mailto:erin.foster@cimicweb.org)

**Angelia Sanders**  
Desk Officer  
Northeast Africa

[angelia.sanders@cimicweb.org](mailto:angelia.sanders@cimicweb.org)

*This document discusses current security threats in the Sahel and surrounding regions, with the rise of groups such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram and al Shabaab. A brief background and current events will be presented for each group, along with a review of regional cross-cutting issues. Related information is available at [www.cimicweb.org](http://www.cimicweb.org). **Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.***

Security threats in Africa's Sahel region, spanning the northern tier of the African continent, have existed for decades. However, in recent years security analysts have focused their attention on the increasingly sophisticated attacks by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the now al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab based in Somalia and the insurgent group Boko Haram based in northern Nigeria. Increased fighting in this "[arc of instability](#)" as well as changing tactics among insurgent and terrorist groups might reveal a growing relationship<sup>1</sup> between these groups and as a result pose a greater risk for instability not only in the region but for the international community. The following report will provide a brief review of AQIM, Boko Haram and al Shabaab in the Sahel region based upon open source reports and will also highlight potential linkages.



## AQIM

According to the *BBC*, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) dates from the 1990s and grew out of an insurrection mounted by an Islamist resistance movement protesting the Algerian regime's decision to end

<sup>1</sup> See [Telegraph](#), "Top US General Warns of Coordination Between al Qaeda Linked African Terror Groups", 01 March 2012

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[parliamentary elections](#) in 1992. Experts believe that these elections would have resulted in the Islamic Salvation Front political party gaining a majority. The Islamist resistance group was originally part of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) but eventually declared its independence in 1998 out of concerns that GIA's violent methods were hurting the Islamist cause.<sup>2</sup> Once separated from GIA, the group was called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and was popular for its commitment to fighting the Algerian government while simultaneously working to prevent indiscriminate killing of civilians in the process. According to a 2007 [report](#) by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Osama bin Laden was involved in the GSPC's early formation. Although the group declared its allegiance to al Qaeda in 2003, it was not [officially approved](#) by al Qaeda's senior leadership until January 2007, at which point GSPC [changed its name](#) to AQIM, reports the US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). A 2010 US Congressional Research Service (CRS) [report](#), "Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for US Policy", explains that it is "not clear what AQIM's unity with or allegiance to al Qaeda means in practice as the group does not appear to take directions from leaders in Afghanistan/Pakistan".<sup>3</sup>

AQIM initially pursued a [targeted suicide bombing](#) campaign in Algeria, says the *Long War Journal*. However, by 2008 these attacks tapered off and were replaced with "ambushes against security forces and kidnapping operations", the latter of which provides millions of dollars in financing for its operations. AQIM collected an estimated USD 70 million in [ransom payments](#) between 2006 and 2011. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) suggests that AQIM conducted 33 [attacks in Algeria](#) in 2007 which increased to a high of 40 attacks in 2009. One of the more notable incidents was the bombing of the UN building and a court house in Algiers on 11 December 2007, which killed an estimated 67 people in the [simultaneous attacks](#).<sup>4</sup> Experts further suggest that AQIM is [capable of conducting](#) kidnapping operations of foreigners inside and outside of Algeria in order to collect ransom payments and/or for the exchange of militant Islamist prisoners. Hostages are said to be held in remote areas close to the Algerian border with Mali.

AQIM reportedly maintains mobile training camps along the Algeria-Mali border and has taken advantage of the porous borders of the Sahel region in order to move people and supplies. According to a 2011 US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security [report](#), "Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the US Homeland", AQIM has recently expanded its operations into Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and other countries in response to intensified counter-terrorism crackdowns by North African governments. As AQIM moves south, it has expanded its operations to include local militant groups and has become involved in drug trafficking. The CRS report states that the group has carried out raids on military and [police targets](#), kidnapped and assassinated soldiers and tourists, attacked foreign embassies, and repeatedly clashed with the militaries of Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Algeria.

The European Union's (EU) counter-terrorism coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, stated in August 2011 that AQIM had "gained [access to weapons](#), either small arms or machine-guns, or certain surface-to-air missiles," reports *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*. Confirmation of this came in November 2011, when one of AQIM's commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (also known as Khaled Abou al-Abbas), said in an interview with Mauritania's private news agency *ANI*, that the group had [obtained weapons](#) as a result of the Libyan conflict, reports *Reuters*. However he did not state what types of weaponry the group had obtained nor did he disclose how they obtained the weapons. In late November, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague stated that the fighting in Libya had created the potential for "[new recruits](#) for AQIM in the form of former mercenaries" who have left Libya and have little opportunities elsewhere.

The International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), a leading academic institute for global counter-terrorism studies, released a [report](#) in January 2012 on the new AQIM splinter group called *Jamaat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Garbi Ifriqiya* (The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa- MOJWA).<sup>5</sup> MOJWA comprises young militants who separated from the leadership of AQIM. Although they reportedly have the same goals as AQIM,

<sup>2</sup> According to the Council on Foreign Relations, GIA [gained a reputation](#) for targeting anyone even remotely affiliated with the military and government, in addition to killing civilians and foreign nationals. The GIA sought to establish a Muslim state ruled by *sharia* law. The Algerian civil war that resulted was ranked as one of the most violent conflicts in the 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> *United Press International* reported on 27 December that senior British officials believe al-Qaeda's core [leadership in Pakistan](#) has begun to move to North Africa.

<sup>4</sup> Actual numbers of those killed in the attack [varies by source](#), with others citing 41 killed in the twin attacks.

<sup>5</sup> Also known as the Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).



MOJWA seeks to fund their activities through the use of kidnappings for ransom.<sup>6</sup> A Mauritanian man, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, is the [presumed leader](#) of the splinter group, prompting Mauritania to issue a warrant for his arrest for “supporting terror groups in the Sahel”, reports *AFP*. MOJWA released a statement on 10 December 2011 claiming responsibility for the 23 October abduction of three Europeans in Algeria and threatened to [spread jihad](#) beyond North Africa to sub-Saharan West Africa, reports *Middle East Online*. Until this statement was released, it had been assumed the kidnappings had been carried out by AQIM. ICT reports that “MOJWA is unique in that its leadership is comprised of black Africans, despite a history of tension between Arabs and black Africans. In the past, perceived Arab disregard for blacks had given rise to inter-organizational tension and resentment; another possible reason for the split”.

Additionally, Algerian analyst Mohamed Mokeddem believes the splits in leadership are occurring as a result of “suspicions that the group’s [AQIM] Algerian leadership... is infiltrated by the Algerian [security services](#)” and also the new availability of weapons from Libya.<sup>7</sup> *Magharebia* reports that the split could also represent the broader trend across North Africa of young people turning against [unilateral authority](#) on the part of their leaders. “If the Arab Spring represents a civil revolt against despotic leaders, young terrorists could be seen as echoing that sentiment” explains Dah Ould Hamadi, an analyst of Salafist groups and Sahel terrorism. Previously, AQIM had sought to prevent internal resentment and defections by promoting disaffected young fighters to important roles and dividing the Sahara emirate into quasi-autonomous battalions in efforts to provide more titles and defined roles to more fighters, reports *Magharebia*.

### Recent AQIM Developments

#### Algeria

*Reuters* reports that [Libyan weapons](#), including shoulder-fired missiles, were discovered by Algerian security forces near the Libyan border on 18 February 2012. This discovery reinforces concerns regarding the smuggling of weapons out of Libya to unknown groups in the region, including AQIM.<sup>8</sup>

Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia reassured Algerians that the government is committed to [eradicating terrorism](#) in the country. His announcement came following an attack on a police station in Tamanrasset, which was reportedly carried out by the [splinter group](#) MOJWA. Tamanrasset is home to a regional security task force which aims to counter AQIM, with participation from Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. This attack is seen as an attempt to halt regional counter-terrorism activities. In related news, *AFP* reports that the MOJWA has [demanded a ransom](#) of EUR 30 million (USD 39 million) for the three aid workers, two Spanish nationals and one Italian national, taken hostage in October 2011 from a refugee camp run by the Polisario Front. The kidnapping was originally tied to AQIM but was later found to have been conducted by MOJWA.

Additional steps taken by Algerian authorities include the prosecution of suspected AQIM members. Most recently, the head of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, received a [death sentence in absentia](#) from Algerian courts on 13 March 2012, says *BBC*. He was found guilty on charges of “murder, membership of a terrorist organisation and attacks using explosives”, along with 17 others accused in bomb attacks committed in Algiers in 2007. It is alleged that Droukdel, also called Abou Mossab Abdelwadoud, introduced suicide bombings to Algeria following his return from fighting with the insurgency in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika signed a new [terror finance law](#) which requires banks in the country to monitor transactions that are suspicious, according to *Magharebia*.

#### Western Sahara

In an article from the Carnegie Endowment, Anouar Boukhars explains that the [danger of destabilisation](#) in Western Sahara<sup>9</sup> is real with AQIM’s ability to smuggle weapons, drugs and contraband among neighbouring

<sup>6</sup> AQIM has kidnapped foreigners for ransom; however *Magharebia* reports that MOJWA is defying the common Sahel terrorist’s practice of focusing on [only foreigners](#) for ransom. It is believed that MOJWA may be responsible for the kidnapping of a Mauritanian gendarme.

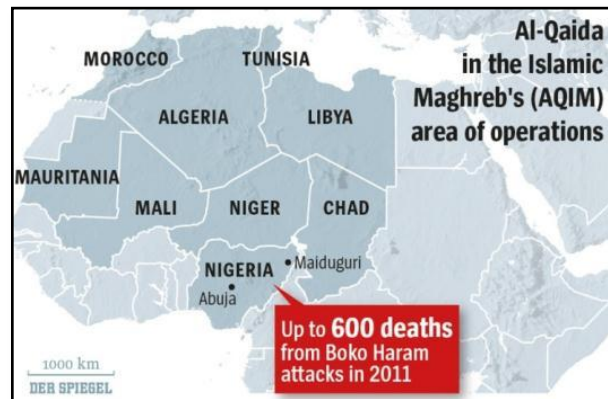
<sup>7</sup> ICT also believes that “like AQIM, it is likely MOJWA will exploit the [excess of weapons](#) looted from the fall of the Gaddafi regime to assist their operational activities”.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Libyan Weapons, please see CFC [report](#) “Unsecured Libyan Weapons: Regional Impact and Possible Threats”, January 2012

countries. Boukhars indicates that there are also growing links between AQIM and Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. The author suggests that, while the Moroccan controlled Western Sahara is generally stable, the Polisario-run Tindouf camps are becoming havens for “militancy, illegality and drug smuggling”. Malian officials have repeatedly claimed that the Polisario is involved in kidnappings and drug smuggling in the region.

### *Mali*

Malian officials assert that AQIM is responsible for the January 2012 [attacks in Afuehok](#) during which time summary executions were carried out by anti-government forces led by Tuareg rebels, says *Magharebia*. Officials say the style and nature of the attacks resemble those of AQIM. However, the National Liberation Movement for the Azawad (MNLA)<sup>10</sup> spokesman, Mossa Ag Atter, [refuted claims](#) that the group is linked to AQIM, further suggesting that “the MNLA shares no interests nor policies with this terrorist organisation”, reports *AFP*. Meanwhile, *AdnKronos* reports that AQIM is [moving its base](#) in northern Mali to southern Algeria as a result of the on-going conflict between Tuareg rebels and Malian soldiers. The new location is in a mountainous area some 90 kilometres from Timiaouine, Algeria.



### *Mauritania*

Elsewhere in the region, Mauritanian officials are increasing [border security](#) in an effort to fight AQIM, prevent the kidnapping of foreigners and address the smuggling of illegal immigrants, reports *Magharebia*. Three new transit points have been established for foreigners travelling in the southern province of Brakna, while the border area has been demarcated to facilitate patrols.

## **Boko Haram**

Boko Haram is an Islamist movement based primarily in the north-eastern region of Nigeria. According to the *Nigeria Guardian*, the group was [primarily based](#) in the states of Borno, Yobe, Katsina, Kaduna, Bauchi, Gombe, and Kano in its early beginnings, but have since expanded to “virtually all northern states and are advancing their frontiers to other parts of the country”. The *BBC* reports that the [group’s official name](#), *Jama’afu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’awati wal-Jihad*, is Arabic, meaning ‘people committed to the propagation of the prophet’s teachings and jihad’. In the north-eastern Nigerian town of Maiduguri where the group was founded, the local people call the group Boko Haram, which, in the local Hausa language, is a phrase loosely translated as “Western education is dangerous” or “Western education is forbidden”.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the charismatic radical young Islamist cleric Mohammed Yusuf created Boko Haram in 2002 with the aim of establishing a fully [Islamic state](#) in Nigeria. Yusuf’s followers consisted mainly of impoverished northern Islamic students and clerics. However, he gained other supporters by speaking out against corruption within the Nigerian government. A US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security [report](#) from November 2011 states that prior to 2009, the group did not aim to violently overthrow the Nigerian government but primarily engaged in low-level battles with local police forces and non-compliant villagers. This approach changed in 2009 when Nigerian police forces clashed with members of Boko Haram in Borno state, followed by more clashes in the neighbouring states of Bauchi, Yobe and Kano (see map below). The fighting culminated on 30 July, 2009 with a Nigerian army intervention in the northern city of Maiduguri in Borno state. More than 700 died during the regional uprising and Nigerian soldiers broadcasted the execution of Yusuf. In the aftermath of fighting, Boko Haram was forced underground and many members fled to

<sup>9</sup> A recent [three-day dialogue](#) was held 11-13 March, between Moroccan officials and the Polisario Front, representatives of the Sahrawi people, regarding the autonomy or self-determination of Western Sahara. During the past 36 years, more than 165,000 Sahrawis have fled into camps in Tindouf, southern Algeria.

<sup>10</sup> The United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that recent fighting between Malian forces and MNLA fights has resulted in the displacement of more than [172,000 Malians](#) from their homes in northern Mali into other towns and neighbouring countries.

neighbouring countries but in 2010, under the leadership of Iman Abubakar Shekau, Boko Haram re-emerged with members carrying out violent operations against government targets in northern states. The University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) [global terrorism database](#) shows there were 11 armed attacks and two bombings attributed to Boko Haram in 2010. Shehu Sani, in his 2011 [article](#) on the history, ideas and revolt of Boko Haram, listed eight explosive-related incidents in addition to armed assaults conducted by Boko Haram in 2010. The two most notable attacks in 2010 involved the freeing of more than 700 inmates from a prison in Bauchi state and a [series of bombings](#) on Christmas Eve, 2010, in Jos that killed 80 people. Jos is a town located in central Nigeria at the [‘Middle Belt’](#) dividing the northern Muslim and southern Christian regions of Nigeria.

In 2011, Boko Haram was allegedly responsible for several attacks throughout the April election cycle which included bombings of [polling centres](#) and electoral commission offices. Following [several bombings](#) in late May, the *BBC* reports that Boko Haram demonstrated a change in its tactics with the use of [suicide bombings](#).<sup>11</sup> The most notable of which was a 26 August suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (V-IED) attack on the UN headquarters in Abuja, in which [23 people](#) were killed and an additional 116 injured. On 04 November, the group bombed [police stations](#), churches, a bank and an army base in Damaturu, the capital of Yobe state, reports the *Christian Science Monitor*. According to *AFP*, the [coordinated attacks](#) left more than 150 dead and approximately 100 wounded. In December 2011, the group claimed responsibility for a series of [Christmas Day attacks](#) on multiple churches that killed at least 40 people, reports the *Telegraph*.

A recent [report](#) by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, suggests that Boko Haram will not be stopped by military force but that northern Nigeria's communities need to receive socio-economic support from the government to dissuade them from supporting the militant group. The author describes Boko Haram as a “fanatical sect” that is not in line with the majority of Nigeria's Muslim population.

### Recent Boko Haram Developments<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Prior to June 2011, there had not been a recorded suicide bomb attack in Nigeria. The *Telegraph* reports that Boko Haram members had traditionally carried out attacks using [hit-and-run](#) assassination methods from the back of motorbikes; however, in recent years Boko Haram has begun targeting high profile targets with greater casualties.

<sup>12</sup> Information on current attacks by Boko Haram was collected by CFC Desk Officers until 15 March 2012. For additional information, please see the Integrated Regional Information Networks [\(IRIN\) timeline](#) of Boko Haram attacks.



### *Nigerian Response*

Nigerian officials continue their efforts to counter attacks by Boko Haram in northern areas of the country. Nigerian police officials claimed to have [captured the Boko Haram spokesman](#) known as Abdul Qaqa in February 2012 by tracing his mobile phone, however, Boko Haram says the man is not the group's spokesman but a senior official in charge of "public enlightenment", reports *AFP*. Further gains were made with the "[recapture](#)" of [Kabiru Sokoto](#), the suspected mastermind of the 2011 Christmas Day bombing of a Nigerian church in Madalla, reports *BBC*. He is said to be affiliated with Boko Haram militants and escaped custody in February during a search of his home. Authorities have also taken additional measures to prevent foreign fighters from joining Boko Haram through the establishment of a repatriation programme for foreigners from Niger and Chad. Nigerian officials claim that Boko Haram militants recruit foreign fighters from neighbouring countries and this repatriation programme is aimed to undermine these efforts. Immigration officials say that nearly 11,000 foreigners from Niger and Chad have been [repatriated](#) in the past six months, reports *AFP*. In response to Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan's threat that he will [shut down](#) Boko Haram in three months, the group release a video suggesting that they will bring down the government in three months, reports *Vanguard*.

### *Security*

In February 2012, Boko Haram militants are said to have conducted retaliatory attacks for the arrests of suspected members in the Baga fish market in the north-eastern city of Maiduguri market. One attack killed at least 30 people, just a day after [explosions and gunfire](#) struck the same market. This was followed by yet another [bombing of a Nigerian church](#) in Jos, on 26 February. Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan urged citizens to remain calm, stating "those who seek to divide us by fear and terror will not succeed". Just two weeks later, on 12 March, *al Jazeera* reported that at least [14 people died](#) as a result of an additional bombing of a Catholic church in Jos and other attacks in the city. Boko Haram has reportedly carried out the attacks in retaliation for raids on Islamic schools, allegedly conducted by Nigerian security forces, by burning public and private schools. At least 12 schools have also been targeted in Maiduguri alone since late February, reports *Daily Trust*. Meanwhile, in a move to end the violence, the Nigerian government has [approved an amnesty bill](#) for members of Boko Haram, "if it agrees to negotiations and renounces violence", says *United Press International (UPI)*. Meanwhile, Malian security officials claim that Boko Haram is [now supporting](#) the Tuareg-led rebel movement in northern Mali, reports *International Business Times*. An estimated 100 members of Boko Haram, from Nigeria and Niger, are said to be in Gao, Mali and allegedly led the attack and kidnapping at the Algerian embassy in that city on 05 April. Finally, *AP* reports, on 08 April the city of Kaduna, fell victim to a suicide [car bomb](#) attack, in which at least 38 people were killed. The All Nations Christian Assembly Church and the ECWA Good News Church were damaged during Easter sermons. Nigerian authorities assert that the Boko Haram may be behind the bombing. Another attack occurred later on 08 April in a city of Jos, causing further injuries.

### *Dialogue*

In mid-March 2012, Nigerian officials and Boko Haram leaders were reportedly engaged in [indirect dialogue](#) in an effort to end violence in northern regions of the country. Boko Haram asked for the release of all its members from prison in return for a ceasefire. However, *Bloomberg* reports that current talks are [now in jeopardy](#) with mediator Datti Ahmad withdrawing from discussions citing the disclosure of confidential information to media outlets. He expressed [his dismay](#) to reporters stating "an opportunity to negotiate and terminate this cycle of violence is being missed".

### **Al Shabaab**

Somalia has experienced [14 separate governments](#)<sup>13</sup> between 1991 and 2010. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a lack of effective governance structures and rule of law in Somalia led to the establishment of neighbourhood *sharia* courts in the 1990s. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [backgrounder on al Shabaab](#) explains that 11 of these neighbourhood courts united and formed the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) to counter warlords in Mogadishu. The militant Islamist faction of the ICU came to be known as al Shabaab or the "The Youth" in Arabic. Al Shabaab's original fighting force comprised nearly 400 young members, remnants from the former Somali Islamist movement *al Itihaad al Islamiya (AIAI)*.

<sup>13</sup> The most recent system of government is the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that was established by international bodies in 2004.



In June 2006, the ICU led a military coup against the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which was subsequently [put down](#) by Ethiopian forces in December 2006. The involvement of foreign forces<sup>14</sup> in ousting the ICU is said to have “stoked extremist flames” and garnered support for the al Shabaab movement. Recognising the risk of militant groups within Somalia, by the United States<sup>15</sup>, United Nations, African Union and League of Arab States, the [UN Djibouti Peace Process](#) of 2008 was convened as an effort to prevent the rise of militant Islamism in Somalia. Ethiopian forces withdrew in January 2009 but by May, al Shabaab launched an offensive and took control of large portions of Mogadishu. African Union Mission in Somalia ([AMISOM](#)) forces remained in the capital and managed to secure a few square kilometres of government buildings, however, in June the TFG was forced to declare a state of emergency.

CSIS’s Rob Wise describes the [evolution of al Shabaab](#) in two phases: the Emergence (December 2006-Early 2008) and the Transformation (Early 2008-Present). During “The Emergence” phase, a surge in radicalism was seen in response to the foreign intervention aimed at ridding Somalia of Islamic extremism. International intervention resulted in a more radical and violent al Shabaab which understood itself as a nationalist movement. The lack of governance during this period, particularly in southern Somalia aided al Shabaab in recruiting fighters from communities where it filled local needs by distributing food, non-food items and basic services including communications. “The Transformation” phase is referred to by the author as the period when al Shabaab transitioned from a nationalist local movement to an international al Qaeda aligned terrorist group. According to the report this new phase was in response to the presence of Ethiopian troops and seen as a tactical shift. Roland Marchal, Senior Research Fellow at CNRS SciencesPo Paris, suggests that there is a worrisome [new trend](#) of East African citizens joining al Shabaab that could produce jihadi movements in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa in the future. The UN Security Council [Monitoring Group](#) on Somalia and Eritrea has [identified indigenous networks](#) engaged in recruitment, radicalisation and resource mobilisation on behalf of al Shabaab in Kenya. The Muslim Youth Centre has been identified as the largest support network for al Shabaab in Kenya.

Currently, al Shabaab is led by Sheikh Mohamed Mukhtar Abdirahman “Abu Zubeyr”, although [leadership is shared](#) amongst independent regional groups of leaders in Bay and Bokool, south-central Somalia and Mogadishu, and Puntland and Somaliland. Al Shabaab is also affiliated with a militant group in the Juba Valley led by Hassan Adillahi Hersi “Turki”. CFR suggests that organisationally, regional groups do not necessarily work in concert with one another and there is some evidence of friction. Analysts say it is difficult to know how many fighters agree with the al Shabaab’s ideology and approach, as many are victims of forced recruitment. However, experts estimate that there are likely 300-800 hard-line Islamists. In February 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released a [report](#) titled “No Place for Children”, which cites the [recruitment of child soldiers](#) by al Shabaab and the TFG, with al Shabaab also abducting children for forced marriage and rape. HRW says children as young as 10 years old are being recruited by al Shabaab as suicide bombers. In one instance, the *Shabelle Media Network* of Mogadishu reported the [abduction of 200 boys](#) from Afgoye, 30 kilometres from Mogadishu.

The UN Security Council Monitoring Group Report on Somalia and Eritrea from July 2011 found that al Shabaab earns an estimated USD 70 - 100 million annually in [taxation and extortion](#) operations within their regions of control, especially from the export of charcoal and cross-border contraband into Kenya. The Monitoring Group lists revenue streams by order of importance: taxation and extortion; commerce, trade and contraband; diaspora support; external assistance. However, [tracking remittances](#) from Somalia diaspora communities is difficult due to the heavy use of informal money transfer systems.



<sup>14</sup> The majority of Somalis are Sufi Muslims, says [CFR](#), and have moderate religious views in a clan oriented culture that rejects foreign presence including Arab *jihadi* organisations.

<sup>15</sup> Al Shabaab was [designated a terrorist group](#) by the United States in February 2008.



In a December 2011 interview with *Somalia Report*, the head of an al Shabaab *mukhabaraat*, or intelligence unit, provided an [“inside” perspective](#), on condition of anonymity, on how the group operates in Somalia. According to the article, nearly 45 mukhabaraat intelligence units are tasked with collecting information from Somali cities as well as from al Shabaab fighters throughout the country regarding TFG officials, banned relief agencies and AMISOM forces.

*Foreign Affairs* suggests that al Shabaab is weakened by having to [fight on three fronts](#) against Ethiopian and Kenyan forces; AMISOM; and TFG forces. Kenyan forces launched their offensive against al Shabaab in October 2011, citing national security threats posed by the group. The incursion was not coordinated in advance with AMISOM or the United States and timed with the rainy season, but Ethiopian forces later joined Kenya’s efforts against al Shabaab in December 2011. According to *Somalia Report*, al Shabaab’s [forces have decreased](#) from between 12,000 and 14,000 fighters to 8,000 since fighting began late last year.

## Recent Al Shabaab Developments

### *Piracy*

The rise of piracy attacks of the coast of Somalia in 2008 has led some experts to question the relationship of pirate gangs with al Shabaab. Discussion of the possible links between piracy and al Shabaab centre around one key point, pirates and al Shabaab have [ideological differences](#) and may only possibly cooperate for “business purposes”. Further, there is a lack of evidence to confirm if such a relationship exists.<sup>16</sup> Some research suggest that pirate gangs are forced to [pay a portion](#) of their ransom earnings to al Shabaab for protection and this percentage varies depending on how involved al Shabaab is in the pirate attempt (5-10% protection, 20% weapons training, 50% financing). According to the US Department of State, there may not be clear evidence of a pirate-al Shabaab link but that it “would not be uncommon for criminal gangs working in the same ungoverned space to [share resources or pay kickbacks](#) to one another.” A *NATO Review* article from 2009 further suggests that, though there may not be formal links, the two groups act as [destabilising multipliers](#) and benefit from each other’s presence.

### *Security*

In January 2012 *Reuters* reported that AMISOM troops [took control](#) of Mogadishu University and Barakaat cemetery from al Shabaab. This was hailed as a historic gain, marking the first time the force has been able to secure an area on the outskirts of Mogadishu. Al Shabaab spokesman Aduaziz Abu Muscab told journalists at a press conference held outside of Mogadishu on 27 January 2012 that the group was shifting or modifying [fighting tactics](#) from “hit and run” to a “face to face” offensive. He said that al Shabaab fighters had received training to prepare them for the new offensive. However, Kenyan troops made [further gains](#) against al Shabaab with the capture of Badhadhe, located 180 kms (110 miles) south of port town Kismayo. This strategic move cuts off al Shabaab from its main coastal supply town. On 22 February, Ethiopian and Somali [troops captured](#) the central town of Baidoa from al Shabaab. Baidoa is an [al Shabaab stronghold](#) and the main town in Bay region where its fighters originate. The main road connecting Mogadishu to south-western Somalia and parts of Kenya and Ethiopia passes through the Baidoa and it is considered a major business route, according to *BBC*. Additionally, on 16 March, *BBC* reported that AMISOM and TFG troops forced al Shabaab [from the town](#) of Galgalato, 20 miles northeast of Mogadishu. On 05 April, the *Pan-African News Agency (PANA)* reports that AMISOM and the TFG announced the formation of a Joint Fusion and Liaison Unit (UFL) to improve information sharing on terrorist threats, particularly al Shabaab, in Somalia. Authorities it has already proved successful with the defeat of militants in the Dynile area.



### *Puntland*

<sup>16</sup> January 2012 saw the first self-stated link of pirates with al Shabaab, with the pirate [“purchase” of two MSF Spanish aid workers](#) (originally kidnapped by al Shabaab from northern Kenya) for the price of USD 100,000 each, or a total of USD200,000. The pirates told *Somalia Report* it was purely a business transaction because al Shabaab needed money and had no way to organise a ransom negotiation.





As al Shabaab faces [increased pressure](#) from AMISOM, Ethiopian and Kenyan forces in southern Somalia may now also be attempting to reach into the semi-autonomous region of Puntland in northern Somalia, reports *Associated Press*. Al Shabaab and a Puntland militia led by Mohamed Said “Atom” recently announced their merger in what analysts believe is a move for the group to fight against the three-front offensive. Security experts believe the militants will [attempt to hide](#) in the Golis mountains, between Puntland and Somaliland, due to the extensive network of caves. The destabilisation of Puntland, analysts say, could jeopardise recent gains made by forces fighting al Shabaab and threaten the newly launched oil drilling project in northern Somalia. Further, the African Union has announced that Ethiopian [troops will withdraw](#) from Somalia by the end of April 2012.

### *International Response*

The February 2012, UN Security Council [Resolution 2036](#) on the situation in Somalia describes al Shabaab as a continued terrorist threat to the country with established links to al Qaeda. International conferences, such as the 23 February [London Conference](#) and the forthcoming Istanbul Conference, aim to prepare the country for the end of the transitional period on 20 August 2012. The UN has authorised<sup>17</sup> AMISOM to take all necessary measures as appropriate with Somali security forces to reduce the threat posed by al Shabaab and other armed opposition groups. However, experts warn that, even if al Shabaab is defeated, the various clans and nationalist factions will commit to ousting the TFG and [compete for power](#). *Foreign Affairs* also supports the notion that al Shabaab is susceptible to fragmentation and also suggests there are now two distinct movements within the group, nationalists and radicals.

### **Cross Sahel Links between AQIM, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab**

In December 2011, the African Union’s Peace and Security Council (PSC) listed Boko Haram, AQIM and al Shabaab as [African terrorist groups](#). The AU cited worrying trends of increased violence by the groups in 2011 as well as growing links among them. There is also an observed trend in the [kidnapping of foreigners](#)<sup>18</sup> in the Sahel region with 13 Europeans currently held by militant Islamists groups in the region.



This map depicts the Sahel region, Tuareg areas (darker brown) and AQIM areas (lighter brown). Source: [The Economist](#) 2012

CFR suggests that al Qaeda [attempted to join](#) with AIAI (al Shabaab’s precursor) in the 1990s in Somalia but were unable to integrate and gain acceptance by clan leadership. Following the Ethiopian intervention al Qaeda renewed efforts to link with al Shabaab. Al Shabaab leaders have [claimed an affiliation](#) with al Qaeda since 2007; however, some analysts believe this link has been weak. Al Shabaab carried out its first transnational attack in July 2010 at the Soccer World Cup final in Uganda, a country supporting the AMISOM peacekeeping mission in Somalia. Other analysts, such as CSIS’s Wise, suggest [closer linkages](#), explaining that al Qaeda has taken key leadership positions within al Shabaab as a way for ‘Abu Zubair’ to exert control over the regional factions of al Shabaab. The increasing use of suicide bombs is also attributed to closer ties with al Qaeda. During the ‘Transformation’ period, beginning in early 2008, al Shabaab has attempted to utilise information and communications technologies to attract foreign fighters including various video campaigns and internet messages.

On 30 January 2012, al Shabaab made its first official statement [confirming its link](#) with al Qaeda. Recently, al Shabaab joined with a smaller anti-government militia called Kamboni – previously allied to Hizbul Islam. The move is seen by experts as a unification effort of extremist groups operating in Somali, led by al Shabaab. Others suggest that this is a [publicity stunt](#) for al Qaeda, as they have been weakened by drone strikes in Pakistan, and the merger with al Shabaab and AQIM is a means to project its credibility. Within the African continent, Nigeria’s

<sup>17</sup> Additionally, the UN approved the request for a troop increase of 5,731 or a total of 17,731 troops and police units.

<sup>18</sup> six French, two Italians, two Spaniards, a Swede, a Dutch and a Briton



*The Nation* notes the possibility of links between al Shabaab and AQIM, citing the rapidly [changing tactics](#) of al Shabaab towards a more violent approach possibly learned at AQIM training camps.

Evidence of close connections between the three groups is still limited; however, according to VOA, some analysts suggest that Boko Haram and elements of al Shabaab have participated in [joint trainings](#). Additionally, the Algerian deputy foreign minister, Abdelkader Messahel, reported in November 2011 that intelligence reports showed evidence of [coordination](#) between Boko Haram and AQIM.<sup>19</sup> The following month, EU counter – terrorism coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, warned about the dangers regarding AQIM’s efforts to expand its [power base](#) through its alliance with Boko Haram in the region. Recent findings from a US House of Representatives Homeland Security<sup>20</sup> report, caution that Boko Haram’s “[evolving tactics](#) and targeting may be the result of ties between AQIM in North Africa and al Shabaab in Somalia. Such cross-pollination of weapons, tactics, and bomb-making expertise can quickly increase the capabilities of terrorist groups”.<sup>21</sup> Nigerian officials claim that the [attack on the UN building](#) in August 2011 in Abuja by Boko Haram was conducted by a Nigerian man returning from Somalia.

Other analysts are not convinced of Boko Haram’s links to other groups. A 12 March 2012 article from the *Independent* suggests that [linkages between](#) Boko Haram and other groups such as AQIM and al Shabaab are perhaps limited to some training but does not include foreign fighters. “Boko Haram is everywhere, or you could say it’s nowhere: both would be correct”, according to a security expert interviewed, making the point that the group is not necessarily cohesive and is often blamed for violence initiated by unrelated criminal gangs. Further, the group is said to have its own sophisticated bomb making unit and domestic sources of weapons, thereby negating the need for external resources. However, on 22 March, Nigerian police disrupted the first verifiable [AQIM terrorist cell](#) operating in the country according to *Magharebia*. Five AQIM operatives were arrested in Kano for the 26 January kidnapping of a German engineer. Nigerian officials worry their presence demonstrates the potential for cooperation with Boko Haram.

Analysts say that al Qaeda is now [relying on AQIM](#) to support the greater organisation; however, the Maghreb division is facing its own challenges following increased and coordinated security measures by Sahel states. The groups have also lost some support from local populations following the success of the Arab Spring countries; which demonstrated change through peaceful struggle, not the violent tactics used by al Qaeda and its affiliates. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) further suggests that al Qaeda is seeking to seize on [local unrest](#) and discontent to further its foothold in the continent through regional militant Islamist movements. Within the extremist groups themselves, a lack of cohesion could lead to a greater possibility for more dangerous splinter groups to develop. ICT states that “we may see a greater [threat of kidnappings](#) in the Sahel region from other splinter groups but it may also indicate that the main leaders of groups such as AQIM will have less power.” However the concern is that young operatives may [rashly kill](#) their victims rather than wait for the outcome of lengthy hostage negotiations, reports *Magharebia*. Additionally, in an effort to make a name for themselves, they may commit horrific acts. According to CSIS, al Shabaab may also [undermine itself](#) by turning away from its early nationalistic messages and forcing the recruitment of teenage boys. Wise predicts a splintering of the group as more foreigners gain leadership positions, upsetting Somali fighters and creating rifts among various regional groups. Additionally, they could lose clan support if al Shabaab pushes a purely al Qaeda-driven ideology.

## Regional Response<sup>22</sup>

Commander of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), General Carter Ham, warns that al Qaeda-linked groups, including al Shabaab, Boko Haram and AQIM, are attempting to “[synchronise](#)” activities across North Africa and the Sahel region, as reported by the *Telegraph*. Countries in the Sahel are now refocusing efforts to secure the region.

<sup>19</sup> This announcement is [taken seriously](#) by international security experts due to the fact that the Algerian government conducts the largest intelligence gathering operation on AQIM of any country in Africa.

<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

<sup>21</sup> United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security [report](#), “Boko Haram: Emerging Threat to the US Homeland”.

<sup>22</sup> The below listed information on regional meetings and initiatives is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but to provide a general understanding.



According to Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci, “effective and [multi-faceted co-operation](#) among the regional countries is [...] vital for responding to the challenges facing security and development in the region,” reports *Magharebia*. In April 2010, at the conclusion of a Sahel-Saharan security summit, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania established a new military command in the Algerian city of Tamanrasset. The command was established to co-ordinate intelligence-gathering in efforts to combat terrorism, organised crime, arms smuggling and kidnapping. Additionally, military patrols along shared border areas were established in order to monitor and control the movement of terrorist groups. All four of the above countries met for two days in Washington DC in mid-November 2011 to further their [multilateral approach](#) to Sahel security, reports *Magharebia*. Also in mid-November, the country of [Burkina Faso](#) joined the regional command unit in Tamanrasset. *AFP* reports that in November 2011, some 150 anti-terrorism experts from about 30 countries met at an international [security conference](#) focused on the threat of armed militant groups in the Sahel. Major concerns discussed at the conference included the inability to control large porous borders and also the need to counter terrorist financing.

The 5 + 5 group<sup>23</sup>, begun in 1990, is a forum for [political dialogue](#) that holds meetings regularly at the ministerial level. The group met for the [first time](#) in December 2011, since regime changes occurred across much of North Africa in 2011. According to *AFP*, the objective of the December meeting was to bring together defence ministers from each of the 10 countries in order to address security issues in the region, with AQIM activities and the influx of weapons from Libya receiving special focus. The meeting resulted in the adoption of an action plan for 2012 on training and exchanges and joint drills and exercises amongst the countries.

Libya hosted a two-day ministerial level [conference on border security](#) from 11 to 12 March as part of efforts to increase regional cooperation to address the escalation of “cross-border criminal activities”, reports *Tripoli Post*. The nine northern African countries attending the conference have [adopted the “Tripoli Plan”](#) to enhance information sharing and to develop strategic border communities, reports *Reuters*. This conference was the first time in more than a year that interior ministers met to discuss regional security concerns. Arms and human smuggling have escalated in recent months due to inadequate border security.

## Conclusion

The Sahel region is afflicted by a [myriad of challenges](#) which include militant Islamist insurgencies in Nigeria and Mali, the growth of extremist groups, and the kidnappings of foreigners by AQIM and splinter groups. As AQIM, Boko Haram and al Shabaab continue to wage attacks in the Sahel region and Horn of Africa, those most affected are the civilian populations who live in fear of suicide bombs, raids and threats. In Nigeria, as many as 1,000 people have been killed as a result of recent Boko Haram violence, with Maiduguri [particularly devastated](#), reports *VOA*. Local Nigerian women are demonstrating and calling for an end to violence, meanwhile *Daily Trust* reports that the Northern [Governors Forum](#) has called on Boko Haram and Nigerian authorities to forge a [meaningful dialogue](#). Elsewhere, AMISOM and TFG forces are gaining ground against al Shabaab; however, the terrorist group continues to adapt and pose a serious threat to Somalia and neighbouring countries. Finally, AQIM remains a concern as reports surface about their activities in the Sahel including the acquisition of weapons and recruitment tactics. Although the full extent of relationships among these terrorist and insurgent groups is difficult to document, the danger posed by these groups remains a real threat to the people and governments of the Sahel region.

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<sup>23</sup> The “5 + 5” Mediterranean Dialogue Group includes the five southern European countries of Spain, France, Italy, Malta and Portugal and the five North African countries of Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania.