



2014: Trends in Islamist Terrorism

KEY POINTS

- **2014 was a year of unprecedented change in the global jihadist landscape.** ISIL emerged as a leading force; Iraq returned to the forefront of our minds; violence increased again in Nigeria; terrorist attacks continued to spread out across East Africa; and AQ lost its monopoly over the global jihad.
- **Sustaining this pace of activity into 2015 will be challenging for the terrorist groups involved,** not least ISIL.

DETAIL

The Near East: ISIL expanding, contracting, and lashing out

In February, **AQ excommunicated the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant from the AQ fold.** This was an unprecedented development, caused by ISIL's refusal to end its operations in Syria. But it is AQ, not ISIL, who have suffered most as a result of this development. **AQ's authority has been challenged in a very public manner, and its brand of global *jihad* now has direct competition from ISIL.** Aside from challenging AQ, ISIL steadily gained territory in Iraq, allowing it to control roughly a third of the country by July (as well as large parts of Syria). Although its advances into Mosul shocked the world's media in June, it was not unexpected.

In June, ISIL declared an Islamic Caliphate, stretching across swathes of Syria and Iraq. The announcement strengthened ISIL's standing with *jihadi* 'radicals' but alienated those with conservative and moderate views. ISIL's announcement was clearly a direct attempt to further challenge AQ's authority and to present itself as the most powerful Sunni Islamist group in the world. But its brutal activities throughout 2014 showed its true colours: ISIL is an uncompromising and polarising group.

During the second half of 2014, ISIL lost its momentum on the battlefield as a result of a combination of air-strikes, improvements in local security forces in parts of Iraq, the determined defence of Kobane by the Kurds and a balance of forces elsewhere in Syria. ISIL adapted its messaging in response: its propaganda now portrays the group as the underdog fighting against 'US-led' efforts to suppress the Sunni population and it is increasingly promoting lone-actor attacks wherever possible.

Also in the second half of 2014, ISIL gained new 'affiliate' groups in Egypt, Libya, Algeria as well as claiming to have affiliated networks in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. But ISIL's outreach to these groups has been hasty and may be unsustainable.

The risk of lone-actor attacks continues to rise

In May 2014, the first successful Islamist attack plot from Syria was conducted on European soil¹: this followed several other Syria-related attack plot disruptions since January (some of which were conducted by lone actors linked to ISIL). Returning foreign fighters continue to pose a significant risk, with further lone actor attacks taking place across Europe and beyond in late 2014. Given the scale of foreign fighter travel to Syria, security forces continue to face an uphill battle to identify and monitor all high-risk individuals. Estimated numbers of foreign fighters in Syria continue to grow and will be a significant concern for years to come.

South Asia: still a potent threat, but dwarfed in scale by Syria

Al Qaida's fall-out with ISIL led to it losing its dominance in the *jihadi* marketplace. And, to add to its woes, the group lost a number of senior figures in a mid-July drone strike² and was forced out of parts of North Waziristan by the Pakistani Military in June. But despite the problems it is facing, the AQ threat remains potent. It is likely to still be actively plotting. **Despite its 9 year absence on the world stage³, AQ will not feel under pressure to deliver:** it does not engage in tit-for-tat battles with other groups, and will not rush an attack plot as a means of reasserting authority over ISIL. It is patient, it thinks strategically and is highly adept at operating under pressure.

Yemen: sophisticated attack capability, but limited by a lack of operatives

In Yemen, AQAP remain the AQ affiliate with the most sophisticated external attack capability. But the popularity of Syria may be limiting AQAP's direct access to external attack operatives and therefore impacting on its ability to conduct attacks in the West. AQAP has continued to use its media arm to encourage attacks on Western targets, including its 24 December issue of Inspire magazine. But the attractiveness of such publications (in this case, over 70 pages in one issue) may have dwindled: in comparison, ISIL's media outputs and Twitter presence is much more accessible.

Within Yemen, AQAP remains a highly capable group and a potent threat to European interests in the country. In the second half of 2014, AQAP attacks grew in frequency and scale, but remained focused on Government and Huthi security targets. Despite its loss of territory and some successful CT action in recent years, AQAP has not been significantly weakened.

In response to ISIL's rise and its claimed expansion into the Arabian Peninsula (challenging AQAP's authority by establishing 'affiliates' in Saudi Arabia), AQAP has publicly re-affirmed its loyalty to the AQ brand. Political turmoil in Sana'a and growing Huthi influence in the latter half of 2014 has provided AQAP with a recruitment tool amongst Yemen's Sunni population: it is seeking to capitalise on growing sectarian tension.

¹ Mehdi Nemmouche, a French national of Algerian descent, conducted a firearms attack on a Jewish museum in Belgium.

² Six AQ figures were killed by a drone in North Waziristan in mid-July. The deaths were confirmed by AQ figure in Syria, Sanafi al-Nasr. Al-Nasr used his Twitter account to mourn the loss of his "dearest comrades". For more on this strike, see <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-13-31756-Six-top-al-Qaeda-leaders-droned-in-Waziristan>.

³ AQ in Pakistan's last attack plot in the West was the July 7 2005 attacks in London.

East Africa: al Shabaab continues to expand beyond Somalia and Kenya

In East Africa, al Shabaab has expanded its reach into even more of Somalia's neighbouring countries. Following on from its October 2013 attempted attack in Addis Ababa, the group attacked a Western-frequented restaurant in Central Djibouti on 24 May. The attack in Djibouti was the first since 1990. The group clearly prioritises regional attacks against Western targets: it is a tactic that yields media attention; boosts confidence within the group; and perhaps even adds to its funding streams. But it has not given up on its traditional targets: the group's high level of attacks in Kenya and Somalia pose a significant threat to UK interests and threaten regional stability.

In September, the Al Shabaab leader (Godane) was killed in a missile strike. His replacement appears to have adopted the same tactics as his predecessor: prioritising attacks in the region over those further afield. Al Shabaab has continued to demonstrate its ability to operate outside of Somalia, with attacks (or attempted attacks) in Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda. And the threat within Somalia remains high.

North Africa: of increasing concern, and with strong links to the Middle East

The dynamic of weak/failed states in North Africa continues to allow multiple groups to operate, build links across the region and benefit from easy transit of weapons and operatives. There are now well-established networks of groups reaching across North Africa: a number of these networks have well-established links to the Middle East. **A facilitation pipeline has allowed thousands of North Africans to join the *jihād* in Syria, with a number of groups looking to ISIL in particular for guidance.**

Tunisia was the target of several terrorist attacks in the first half of 2014⁴, with other plots disrupted by the security services. In Libya, violence and extremist rhetoric has increased (including new extremist tactics⁵). This has been aided by returnees from Syria and the availability of operating space.

On 24 September, **Algeria**-based Jund al-Khalifa beheaded a French national after having given a 24-hour deadline for French President Francois Hollande to stop airstrikes on ISIL. The group has subsequently become an ISIL affiliate. But it is small (circa 50 people) and has a limited area of operation owing to the capabilities of the Algerian military. Outside of this area of operation, the group has a minimal impact.

As ever, **AQ-M** remain big players in the North Africa threat picture, but the group prefers to operate in the shadows. It has quietly benefitted from the Arab Spring, gaining weapons and more operating space. It continues to reap the benefits of instability in Libya, but has done little in the way of attack plotting. This will continue to be the case.

⁴ On 16 July the Tunisian army was attacked in the Chaambi mountains, resulting in the heaviest loss of life in an attack since independence in 1956. During the night of 27 May, gunmen attacked a house belonging to the Minister of the Interior in Kasserine, killing 4 policemen. On 16 February, an armed group killed four people (including two policemen) at an illegal checkpoint in Jendouba, north west Tunisia.

⁵ Such as beheadings, public executions, suicide attacks and desecration of bodies.

Nigeria: Boko Haram still a significant regional threat

Boko Haram continued its campaign of violence in North East Nigeria, but also conducted attacks in Abuja and Lagos in the first half of 2014. The group achieved notoriety after kidnapping 272 girls from a school in Chibok in April. The pace of Boko Haram's attacks has increased markedly since the Chibok kidnappings, with the death toll for 2014 into the thousands. In late 2014, its attacks intensified in the North East of the country. The group used new methodologies, including female suicide bombers and Vehicle-Bourne Improvised Explosive Devices.

In early August Boko Haram seized the town of Gwoza near the border with Cameroon. In a video released on 24 August, Abubakar Shekau, the group's leader, declared that the town had become "part of the Islamic Caliphate". This does not have formal links to ISIL's Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Boko Haram may attempt to provide governance in the areas it controls, but it does not have much popular support, and is unlikely to win more. As its brutality forces depopulation, as food supplies dwindle, and as recruitment pools dry up, it is likely that the group will maraud ever further from their forest sanctuaries to sustain the movement, abducting people and stealing food.

December 2014