

Isis and al-Qaida turf wars in Africa may push fragile states to breaking point

Power struggles and shifting allegiances between Islamist militant groups pose a formidable threat to the region's security

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It is a war within a war, fought across thousands of miles of desert, scrub and forest, from the Atlantic seaboard to the Indian Ocean coastline.

It pits the Islamic State (Isis), the Iraq and Syria-based group that has expanded deep into Africa since surging to international attention in 2014, against al-Qaida, the veteran extremist group, which has maintained a significant presence in much of the continent in recent years.

Both groups and their affiliates are also fighting an array of armies and counter-terrorist agencies: French soldiers, US special forces, British military trainers, as well as the local armies of a dozen states. Last week, it was revealed the US was building a \$50m base for drones in Niger, which is at the very centre of the conflict zone.

But at the same time, the extremist groups are fighting each other. Such internecine struggles between militant groups may seem esoteric to casual observers. But the eventual result will have an enormous impact on the security of dozens of often fragile states in Africa and, more broadly, on the future of Islamic militancy.

Though they share many aims, al-Qaida and Isis have divergent strategic visions and favour dramatically different tactics. Al-Qaida has largely avoided attacks on other Muslims, including Shias, and has sought to build support from local communities. Though still committed to strikes in the west, it does not appear to see a terrorist campaign in Europe or the US as a priority. Isis, also known as Isil, has made other Muslims who do not share its beliefs a key target, often used violence to keep local communities in line, and launched bloody attacks in the west.

In recent months Isis has been forced on to the defensive in Iraq and Syria, losing between a quarter and a third of the territory of its self-declared "caliphate". In Libya, the group was recently forced out of the city of Sirte. Such defeats mean that Isis's success in other parts of the Islamic world may become crucial to its survival.

This month, a faction calling itself Islamic State in the Greater Sahara claimed its first strike in the landlocked country of Burkina Faso. The intensifying insurgency there and in neighbouring Mali has been dominated by al-Qaida in the Maghreb (Aqim).

Experts have downplayed the significance of the recent attack in Burkina Faso. "It's looking very difficult for Isil to get to the point where it could challenge al-Qaida for pre-eminence in Africa. I don't think that large-scale clash is going to happen. Isil will never be completely

dislodged but is facing decline into obscurity,” said Ryan Cummings, director of Signal Risk, a South Africa-based security consultancy.

In Somalia, only one minor commander, now based in the remote mountains in Puntland, has resisted the bloody purge of dissidents within al-Shabaab, the local militant movement and al-Qaida affiliate.

Though Boko Haram, the extremist movement that has waged a brutal seven-year campaign in the north-east of Nigeria, remains nominally loyal to Isis, a recent change in leadership has opened up the possibility that the group might soon swing back towards al-Qaida.

The violence within the ranks of Boko Haram was prompted by the replacement of Abubakar Shekau, leader since 2009, by Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the son of the late founder of the movement. The change appears to have been made on the orders of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Isis.

Senior US officials have suggested al-Baghdadi was unhappy at Shekau’s systematic use of children as suicide bombers. Forty-four such attacks were launched last year, killing hundreds of people. Four out of five bombers in these strikes were girls. Others say Shekau’s erratic behaviour and disobedience may have been more important.

Boko Haram, which was rebranded as the Islamic State in West Africa after Shekau swore an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi, has also been under significant pressure, as militaries from Nigeria and neighbouring countries have ramped up their campaign.

“Boko Haram is not in a good position overall. It has suffered quite significant losses of territory, fighters and resources,” said Virginia Comolli, senior fellow at the IISS, the International Institute for Strategic Studies and author of a book on the group.

Figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University show the group was responsible for 244 killings during the second quarter of 2016, the lowest level in nearly five years.

Though the rainy season usually sees less activity, experts agree that Boko Haram is weaker than it has ever been. Nigerian military officials and policymakers, as well as many local people, hope the new split will fatally weaken the group.

“We welcome the development and we pray they would continue fighting and fragmenting,” said Jibrin Gunda, a leader of one of the many “home guard” militia set up to counter Boko Haram.

“The emergence of [a] crack in any group signified the end of it, no matter how strong such a group was,” Gunda told the local Daily Trust newspaper.

But Boko Haram has always been fragmented, with two main factions manoeuvring for influence over several years. Currently, Shekau, infamous for the abduction of nearly 300 schoolgirls from the town of Chibok in 2014, appears to have lost the power struggle. Holed up in the vast Sambisa forest, dozens of his followers have been killed in a series of recent attacks by rivals.

Al-Barnawi looks stronger. However, despite his oath to Isis leader al-Baghdadi, he comes from the faction within Boko Haram that has historically had personal ties and ideological affinities to al-Qaida. Al-Barnawi favours major strikes on high-profile military or governmental targets or Christians, but not against other Muslims, for example. Close associates are also believed to have fought with al-Qaida militants in Mali in 2012.

Al-Barnawi is unlikely to break his oath and defect from Isis, but other leaders could emerge to lead Boko Haram into the embrace of al-Qaida, said Cummings. Others suggest Boko Haram is experiencing “buyers’ remorse” after joining Isis.

“Al-Qaida is on a trajectory to be by far the most powerful jihadist movement in Africa ... Material circumstances favour an al-Qaida alignment. If you are looking for safe havens, different types of material assistance such as weapons, money and manpower, then there are multiple incentives ... It’s an obvious decision,” said Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, an expert at the US-based Foundation for the Defence of Democracies.

At the UN general assembly in New York last month, the Nigerian president, Muhammadu Bukhari, spoke of “remarkable progress [against] Boko Haram, whose capacity to launch orchestrated attacks as a formed group has been severely degraded”.

But repeated campaigns against groups across Africa and beyond have rarely achieved a definitive victory. Even if they have surged over the past 15 years and particularly since the Arab uprisings of 2011, many groups currently active have antecedents reaching back decades.

“It is frustrating. A lot of resources, including from western donors, are going into the fight but new factions and groups are always emerging,” said Comolli.

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