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Mali: Counter-terrorism and the benefits of doing nothing

The best course open to the US, lest Mali become the next Yemen, might well be to continue to watch, wait - do nothing.

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Among the Tuaregs there generally is scant natural support for the draconian social policies currently being visited by Ansar al-Dine in Timbuktu and Gao, writes former director of the CIA counter-terrorism centre [AP]
 It is strange, really, how the destruction of buildings and inanimate objects can sometimes capture the world's attention in ways that ordinary, simple human suffering does not. Northern Mali, like much of Saharan and Sahelian Africa, has long been home to endemic hunger, poverty and civil strife.

All have been greatly exacerbated over the past three months, as a late-March coup in Bamako has facilitated a Tuareg revolt, which in turn has provided an opportunity to Islamic extremists to seize significant swaths of territory and to impose their obscurantist norms on an unwilling Muslim population.

Thousands have fled the depredations of the Salafi adherents of Ansar al-Dine, the self-proclaimed "defenders of the faith", leading to a large refugee outflow into neighbouring countries.

It is fair to say that none of this has been much remarked in the outside world. It was the destruction in recent days of Timbuktu's medieval mosques, declared "World Heritage Sites" by the UN cultural agency UNESCO that has drawn far greater expressions of concern and outrage around the globe. Suddenly, Ansar al-Dine, which despite its brutality was virtually unknown to the wider world only days ago, is now the focus of worldwide calumny.

But as was the case when Afghanistan's Taliban destroyed the monumental rock-carved Buddhas of Bamiyan, there is nothing to be done about these remote depredations, and the world's outrage will soon fade. The question is: Concern about architectural and religious heritage aside, should the doings of obscure Malian Islamists be of more than local concern?

US military action?

There are some in the US military who clearly think so. A recent series of articles appearing in the Washington Post have highlighted the active presence of US Special Operations forces across northern Africa, in some of the poorest and most primitive places on earth, from Mauritania in the west to Somalia in the east.

With the prominent exception of Somalia, their activities, we are told, have largely been confined thus far to

surveillance of militant groups and “capacity building” of local military forces. But the rise and further expansion of radical Islamist groups in the region makes it seem possible, and perhaps likely, that they could become the targets of direct US military action, as has been the case with al-Shabab in Somalia and Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen.

Much is made, in US national security circles, of the Saharan presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is led by the vestiges of Algeria’s Salafist Group for Call and Combat, largely defeated in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s.

Regional experts estimate that AQIM’s southern *katiba* (battalion) numbers no more than 300 fighters from throughout the region, and AQIM has not demonstrated any appreciable extra-regional threat since its formal creation in 2007. In recent years, its activities have largely been confined to kidnapping-for-ransom and other local criminal pursuits.

But as an al-Qaeda “franchisee”, it is according considerable attention by al-Qaeda’s main enemy, the United States. And in the logic of post-9/11 America, the friend of my enemy is also my enemy. It thus becomes significant that Ansar al-Dine is alleged, indeed asserted by many supposed experts, to be an “affiliate” of AQIM. But what that should mean as a practical matter is not at all clear.

The perspective of regional US military officials on this question should not automatically be taken as dispositive. After 2001, when counter-terrorism became the main preoccupation of the US government, the generals of the US European Command - responsible, at the time, for Africa as well as for Europe - were nearly beside themselves in their efforts to find relevant work which would gain them at least some measure of relevance and recognition.

To a professional soldier, there is nothing worse than to be left out of an ongoing fight, and the fights of the time - Afghanistan and Iraq - belonged to the US Central Command. Unsurprisingly, it did not take long for “EUCOM” to find nascent terrorist threats all across northern Africa, and to engage with local militaries, who themselves were not unaware of the opportunities afforded by the global war on terrorism, to combat it.

With the subsequent formation of AFRICOM as a separate “combatant command” in the US military, the rise of AQIM has been, to those of an aggressive turn of mind, something of a godsend.

Terrorist safe haven

Whatever one might say of Ansar al-Dine’s “affiliations”, it is clear that its preoccupations, for the moment at least, are entirely local. That said, operating in a region in which the rule of local governments is tenuous at best, and given its sympathetic ties with an AQIM whose rhetoric and whose aspirations - if not its current capabilities - are global, it is not surprising that the US would have some concerns about the possibility that territories controlled by Ansar al-Dine could in fact become a terrorist safe haven.

But those who feel a natural and irresistible urge to do something - anything - about a potential threat are perhaps not the ones to make definitive judgments about what, precisely, ought to be done.

This is a lesson which is likely to be learned too late in Yemen, where a legitimate concern about the far-flung threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is leading the US both to ally itself more closely with a government in Sana deemed repressive and illegitimate in much of that country, and to engage in aggressive air strikes against the local extremists of Ansar al-Sharia in a fashion practically designed to drive it, and the collateral victims of such strikes, more fully into global jihad.

In northern Mali, all politics revolves around the Tuaregs and their desire for independence from governments controlled by hostile ethnic groups. If there is a need to counter Ansar al-Dine, that end would best be accomplished by leveraging the desires of the Tuaregs who, before being usurped by Ansar al-Dine, had taken the opportunity afforded by a coup in Bamako to seize much of the north and to declare an independent “Azawad”.

Among the Tuaregs there generally is scant natural support for the draconian social policies currently being visited by Ansar al-Dine in Timbuktu and Gao. All things considered, any outside power trying to counter extremists would be best advised to support Tuareg aspirations. Given the regional political implications, however, and despite the recent precedent-setting creation of South Sudan, the US is unlikely to move in that direction.

The natural alternative of supporting regional governments deemed repressive by the Tuaregs, to include a government in Bamako which, in addition to its other defects, is deemed illegitimate by the global community, is likely to be

strongly counter-productive.

Under the circumstances, the best course open to the US, lest Mali become the next Yemen, might well be to continue to watch, wait - and do nothing.

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