

Douglas Farah and Richard Shultz

Al Qaeda's Growing Sanctuary

With the end of the brutal conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, West Africa is seldom in the news or on the policy agenda these days. Yet the region is quietly gaining recognition as what it has long been: a haven for al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Weak and corrupt governments, vast, virtually stateless stretches awash in weapons, and impoverished, largely Muslim populations make the region an ideal sanctuary.

U.S. Gen. Charles Wald, deputy commander of the European Central Command, has been warning Congress and the Pentagon for months that al Qaeda-affiliated groups are active in Mauritania, Mali, Chad and Niger. The trade in diamonds used by terrorist groups, begun under the protection of former Liberian strongman Charles Taylor, continues despite international efforts to curb it. "The terrorist activity in this area is not going to go away," Wald warned recently. "This could affect your kids and your grandchildren in a huge way. If we don't do something about it, we are going to have a real problem on our hands."

Wald has had success in bolstering regional efforts to face the terrorist challenge, but the problem is real. Despite Wald's warnings and other reporting on al Qaeda's regional activities and ties to the diamond trade, the intelligence community (particularly the CIA) has dismissed the reporting as inaccurate or irrelevant.

This attitude reflects the Cold War, state-centric culture that prevails in the intelligence community. As the national debate over intelligence reform expands, one key focus must be changing that culture. This entails recognizing and confronting the national security threat posed by armed groups, operating beyond state control, that are now the de facto rulers of growing swaths of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The ties of former Liberian president Charles Taylor to al Qaeda have been corroborated by the FBI and the U.N.-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone, which is charged with investigating crimes against humanity in that nation's brutal civil war. The now-identifiable presence of al Qaeda in other countries shows that these once-marginal wars and regions matter. We ignore the warnings at our peril.

Several lessons that have a direct bearing on intelligence reform can be drawn from the activities of al Qaeda and Hezbollah in West Africa. One is that terrorist and other armed groups are sophisticated in their exploitation of "gray areas" where governments are weak, corruption is rampant and the rule of law is nonexistent. They use areas such as West Africa to finance their activities, correctly betting that Western intelligence services do not have the capacity, resources or interest to track their activities there.

Another lesson is that terrorists are adaptable and learn from each other and their own mistakes. Hezbollah has been using diamonds from West Africa to finance its activities since its inception, successfully embedding its financial structure in the diamond trade. Al Qaeda operatives plugged into the same network, bridging the divide between Shiite and Sunni Muslims.

Al Qaeda demonstrated its adaptability in the aftermath of the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. The United States froze some \$220 million in Taliban and



BY BARRIE MAGUIRE

al Qaeda gold deposited in the Federal Reserve system. To ensure that future finances could not be attacked in a similar way, the group began to systematically move its money out of banking systems and into commodity markets.

A third lesson is that terrorist networks and criminal networks can take over failed states such as Liberia and Afghanistan, turning them into multifaceted international threats.

In 2000, among those operating simultaneously in Liberia under Taylor were: senior al Qaeda operatives; Hezbollah financiers; Victor Bout, an arms merchant who was supplying weapons across Africa and to both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan; Leonid Minin, a Ukrainian-Israeli drug dealer and arms merchant; and Aziz Nassour, the onetime bagman for Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire and middleman for al Qaeda and Hezbollah.

A final lesson is that the intelligence community reacts poorly to information that was not on its radar screen. For example, the assumption was that the initial diamond story made the CIA look bad, and it therefore had to be attacked and discredited.

Collecting, analyzing and acting on intelligence in lawless areas and rogue regimes are difficult, complex tasks that will take time and resources. As Wald noted, "We have to . . . have the ability to get our intelligence into that area and infiltrate there so we can get into their environment. And that is when we will stop it." A first step is recognizing the threats posed by armed groups in parts of the world we often ignore. To meet the challenge, the culture of the intelligence community must change beyond the shifting of organization boxes in the name of reform that occurs when outside criticism mounts.

Douglas Farah, a journalist on leave from The Post, is a senior fellow at the Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, a Washington-based research center. Richard Shultz is director of security studies at the Fletcher School, Tufts University.