

Report

Attacks on Hotels in Africa

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Deadly siege is claimed by an Al-Qaeda affiliate in Burkina Faso hotel attack earlier this year, same group whose attack on a Mali hotel in November killed 20 [AP]

Abstract

This report surveys four recent 'terrorist' attacks on luxury hotels in Africa. It argues that although the presence of Westerners is an important factor in the targeting of hotels, such attribution fails to account for the growth in the frequency and lethality of latest incidents. It explains the increase in 'terrorist' attacks on hotels in Africa within the context of the emerging symbiotism of 'glocal' terrorism. It further highlights the impacts of such attacks as well as suggested measures that could help minimise successful attacks on hotels.

Introduction

'Terrorist' groups, whether local or international in posture, have a penchant to target high capacity venues such as upscale shopping malls, transport hubs, tourist sites and hotels to achieve maximum impact. In the last one year, 'terrorist' groups have carried out audacious attacks on luxury hotels or resorts in Africa, resulting in the death of several persons and destruction of valuable property. Burkina Faso, Egypt, Libya, Mali and Tunisia, among other countries, have witnessed deadly 'terrorist' attacks targeting hotels.

This evolving threat is now a source of growing security concern to Western governments, African states, travellers, tourists and hotel management, among others. Why are hotels in Africa becoming high value 'terrorist' targets? What are the impacts of these attacks? And are we likely to see this trend persist in the near future? This report attempts to discuss these pertinent questions, with a view to suggesting measures that could help minimise successful attacks on hotels?

Recent 'Terrorist' Attacks on Hotels in Africa

Hotels have a unique place in the economic anatomy of any state. Apart from hosting tourists, business men and investors, they provide conducive ambience and facilities for meetings, conferences and other vital engagements. Thus, luxury hotels that attract people of diverse background are considered high value 'soft' targets for terrorists around the world. Since January 2015, deadly attacks on luxury hotels have been recorded, especially in North and West Africa. A survey of four recent incidents summarised in table 1, reveals the trend and lethality of attacks.

The Corinthia Hotel Attack in Libya: In the early morning of 27 January 2015, some gunmen shouting "Allahu Akbar" stormed the Corinthia hotel in Tripoli. The hotel, one of the most luxurious in the city, is a hub for foreign tourists and business people visiting Libya. It also houses Omar al-Hassi, Prime Minister of Tripoli's self-proclaimed government, as well as the offices of several foreign embassies. The attackers opened fire on guests at the lobby and engaged hotel guards in gun duel. They killed at least 9 people, including one US, one French and 3 Tajiks citizens. At least two of the attackers were reportedly killed by security forces while one was suspected to have killed himself with a grenade or a suicide vest. The Tripoli Province of the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, as retaliation for the abduction in 2014 by American commandos of a Libyan Qaeda operative, Nazih Abdul-Hamed al-Ruqai (aka Abu Anas al-Libi). It later released the names and pictures of at least two fighters it claimed had been killed during the attack, one Tunisian and one Sudanese.(1)

The Beach Resort Attack in Tunisia: On 26 June 2015, a 'terrorist' gunman attacked the popular beach resort of Sousse in Tunisia. Sousse is one of Tunisia's most popular beach resorts frequented by tourists from Europe and neighbouring North African countries. A witness reported that the attacker opened fire on the beach between the Soviva and Imperial Marhaba hotels before shooting his way through the pool and in the hotel lobby. He was later killed by security forces in the hotel's parking lot in a siege that lasted for about five minutes. At least 38 people were killed in the attack and more than 39 wounded. The dead included Belgian, British, German, Irish and Tunisians tourists. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) claimed responsibility for the attack, posting a photo of the alleged attacker whom Tunisian authorities identified as 24-year-old Saif Al-Deen Al Rezgui from the town of Gaafour.(2)

The Radisson Blu Hotel Attack in Mali: On 20 November 2015, heavily armed gunmen hollering "Allahu Akbar" stormed the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako around 7.a.m when guests were taking their breakfast. They opened fire at security guards, detonated grenades within the compound and then allegedly took about 170 people hostage.(3) At least 21 people were killed in the attack and several others wounded. Three Chinese, one American and one Belgian were among the dead. Hours later, Malian special forces

assisted by counterparts from the US and France took control of the hotel after killing at least two of the gunmen. The Al-Mourabitoun, claimed it carried out the attack with Al Qaeda's affiliated group, the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in retribution for government aggression in northern Mali. The group also demanded the release of prisoners in France.(4) Al-Mourabitoun is an African jihadist group led by former al Qaeda fighter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar. The group was responsible for the deadly attack on an Algerian gas plant in January 2013 that killed 39 workers.

The Splendid Hotel Attack in Burkina Faso: The siege on 15 January 2016 at the Splendid hotel was the latest in a string of recent high-profile terror attacks targeting hotels in Africa. Around 8:30 pm, heavily armed militants attacked the four-star Hotel and the nearby Cappuccino café in the capital city of Ouagadougou, setting off several explosions. In a siege that lasted several hours, Burkina Faso and French Special Forces were able to kill three of the militants and free over 126 people held inside the hotel. The fourth militant was killed when security forces were clearing out another hotel. The attack was the first carried out by a 'terrorist' group in Burkina Faso's capital city. About 29 foreigners from 18 countries, including Canada, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the US were killed in the attacks.(5) AQIM issued claimed responsibility for the attack. It published photographs of three men wearing military uniforms and holding guns, who it stated carried out the attack.

Table 1: Recent 'Terrorist' Attacks on Hotels in North and West Africa

	Date	Target	Location	Perpetrators	Casualty	Nationality Affected	Motivation
1	27 January 2015	Corinthia Hotel	Tripoli (Libya)	5 gunmen belonging to Tripoli Province	At least 9 people were killed and many more injured	One American, one French and three Tajiks were among the dead	A retaliation for the abduction in 2014 by American commandos of a Libyan Qaeda operative, Nazih Abdul-Hamed al-Ruqai, also known as Abu Anas al-Libi.
2	26 June 2015	A beach between the Soviva and Imperial Marhaba hotels	Sousse (Tunisia)	24-year-old Saif Al-Deen Al Rezgui	At least 38 people were killed and 39 injured	Mostly British, German, Irish and French were among the dead	A lone attacker inspired by ISIL
3	20 November 2015	Raddison Blu hotel	Bamako (Mali)	3 gunmen belonging to Al-Mourabitoun	At least 21 people including 2 militants were killed, and over 7 wounded	Three Chinese, one American and one Belgian were among the dead	Al-Mourabitoun claimed it teamed up with AQIM to carry out the attack, in retaliation for government aggression in northern Mali
4	15 January 2016	Splendid Hotel	Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)	3 militants belonging to Al-Mourabitoun	At least 29 people were killed and more than 33 injured	Citizens of Canada, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the US were among those killed	AQIM claimed the attack was "to punish the cross-worshippers for their crimes against our people in Central Africa, Mali, and other lands of the Muslims."

Understanding Growing 'Terrorist' Attacks on Hotels

These recent attacks have prompted concerns over why hotels have become key target in 'terrorist' hit list. To be sure, attacks on hotels in Africa are not new. Security analysts often attribute this development to the presence of westerners in such hotels. Although the presence of westerners is an important factor in the targeting of hotels, such attribution fails to account for the growth in the frequency and lethality of latest incidents.

The growing attack on hotels is not unconnected to the effect of international coalition against established global 'terrorist' groups such as Al Qaeda and the ISIL which has made them to expand fronts of 'insecurity' in fragile, conflict or post-conflict states. The successes of international strikes against these global 'terrorist' movements have increased the need for cooperation between them and other local 'terrorist' groups that advocate similar ideology. This is necessitated by the quest to deflate the concentration of coalition campaign on their strongholds.

This threat encapsulates the symbiotism of 'glocal' terrorism. This phenomenon reflects the emerging threat posed by a global 'terrorist' group that establishes alliance with, or accept allegiance from, local 'terrorist' group to enable it provide the local group with enhanced support to carry out attacks in furtherance of the name or objectives of the global terror group. The cooperation is symbiotic because it benefits both parties.

By putting themselves under the banner of the global jihadist movement, the local jihadi group benefits from enhanced external support in terms of funding, recruits, weapons, propaganda, and training, while retaining its own distinctive local agenda and character.⁽⁶⁾ The global 'terrorist' movement in turn also benefits, as it can expand its influence, operational reach and size, while gaining wider credibility to its narrative that it is championing the cause of Islam.

The ISIL increasingly achieves this by accepting pledge of allegiance from local 'terrorist' groups operating in fragile, conflict and post-conflict African states. It equally inspires impressionable youths to carry out 'lone-wolf' attacks in the name of Islam. Although some domestic 'terrorist' groups have long operated in Africa, most of these groups are increasingly pledging allegiance to established global 'terrorist' movements such as Al Qaeda and ISIL.

Hence, soft targets that host huge western interests (nationals, assets or businesses) naturally attract their attention. Luxury hotels in Africa that are frequented by Westerners fit into this calculation. In Egypt and Tunisia, individuals and groups behind deadly attacks on hotels were either inspired by ISIL's ideology or have pledged allegiance to the group. Similarly, groups that have mounted attacks on hotels in Burkina Faso have equally pledge allegiance to Al Qaeda.

It is within this context of hybridisation of terrorism that we can better appreciate the increased frequency and lethality of attacks on hotels in Africa. The presence of several luxury hotels frequented by westerners in many African states will continue to make them prime targets for global terror groups in the near future. The existence of ineffectual national security and intelligence systems would increase the success level of such attacks, often with severe impacts on the society.

Impact of 'Terrorist' Attacks on Hotels

The loss of human lives and valuable property, as well as infliction of bodily injuries, is the most obvious direct impact of any 'terrorist' attack. At least 97 persons from over 20 countries were killed by at most 12 gunmen in the recent four attacks at hotels in Africa. Beyond the tragic loss of life, 'terrorist' attacks on hotels generate at least three other critical impacts worth elaborating upon. These impacts are psychological, propaganda and economic.

Psychological Impact: The psychological impacts of such attacks come in different forms to different people. For the survivors or witnesses, they suffer deep trauma as they repeatedly relive the gruesome experience. For those exposed to the attack through media reportage, fear and anxiety dampens their desire to go on vacation in areas prone to 'terrorist' attacks. Additionally, the death of any family member from such attacks deeply fractures family formation. Many children have been left without parents, husbands without wives, and vice versa. For every person killed or injured by terror attacks, there are many more who must cope with the psychological impact that they endure in its aftermath.

Propaganda Impact: Successful targeting of luxury hotels and resorts located in capital cities or towns add to propaganda value of 'terrorist' violent campaign. This is because the location of such targets would cause such attacks to receive wide media coverage, both locally and internationally. More significantly, it makes it possible for the media to easily access the scene and stream live events, especially as the siege drags into a hostage situation. Thus, its propaganda impact has great relevance for both internal and external audiences. For the 'terrorist' group, such attacks could be used by its ideologues to further evoke visions of martyrdom in radicalising potential recruits. It can also be used to encourage at-risk individuals into 'lone-wolf' attacks. For the external audience, it creates the image of the terror group as having both capacity and reach to spread its violent campaign to new frontiers and sensitive targets.

Economic Impact: Hotels are key elements of the tourism sector that provides revenue for states. Terror attacks on hotels in Africa are already hurting the economy of affected states. For example, Tunisia's tourism industry makes up around 7 percent of the country's

economy. 'Terrorist' attacks on hotels in Tunisia led to decline in patronage, resulting in about 70 of its 600 hotels closing down in 2015 due to falling demand. In the aftermath of the attack on the Splendid Hotel, observers have argued that the tourism sector in Burkina Faso will be the hardest hit. It will lead to low attendance at the famous bi-annual Panafrican Film Festival.(7)

Conclusion

The frequenting of luxury hotels in Africa by Westerners no doubt makes such places prime soft targets for 'terrorist' attacks. The symbiotism of glocal terrorism will likely exacerbate the threat. As noted by Stakelbeck, this new trend is the 'terrorist' blueprint for the short-term; involving small scale, low-tech and inexpensive effective jihadi attacks on soft targets.(8) Therefore, adequately addressing security concerns over hotels in Africa will be a pressing issue in the years ahead. There is the need to increase surveillance within and outside the vicinity of hotels, improve stringent protective security measures for hotels, and expand training for hotel security staff on situation awareness and rapid response, and establishing or strengthening Special Operations Forces for timely and effective response. A more durable response, however, requires staunch global cooperative efforts at defeating 'terrorist' groups both at the battle and ideological spaces; a task that is herculean.

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