

A Wake Up Call in the Saharan Desert?

By U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers (R-MI)

If you want to see what lack of American leadership in the world looks like, turn on the television. The latest hot spot conspicuously absent of strong American leadership is North Africa.

For years now North and West Africa has been a simmering caldron of Islamist militant activity with the September 11, 2012 terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, the Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) takeover of an area the size of Texas in Northern Mali and now the terrorist attack at a natural gas plant in Algeria.

In a bold and brazen attack earlier this month, Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists who split off from AQIM swarmed a British Petroleum natural gas facility in Amenas, Algeria and held hundreds of people hostage including ten American citizens 60 miles from the Libyan border. This type of successful, large-scale attack will surely lead to more recruits and more resources for this Mokhtar Belmokhtar-led group, who call themselves the “Signed in Blood” battalion.

Without one iota of American assistance, the Algerian security services then responded with a series of operations to retake control of the natural gas facility, bring more than two dozen terrorists to justice and free the hostages. Current reports indicate that at least 37 hostages lost their lives including three American citizens.

This is not the first we have heard from AQIM, who claimed responsibility for killing an American missionary in Mauritania in 2009, conducted several recent IED attacks against convoys of foreign nationals working in the energy industry and have evolved to seek to strike western targets in North Africa. Also, ABC News reported that the Algerian government thwarted an AQIM plot to ram Western ships in the Mediterranean Sea with an explosive-laden boat, similar to the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000.

The threat from Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists is continuously evolving as they seek new safe-haven areas from which to recruit, train and conduct operations against Americans and our interests. They are attracted to areas of weak governance like the tribal areas of Pakistan, Yemen and now North and West Africa. From these areas, terrorists tell us they want to strike American and other western targets and have aspirations of expanding their reach into Europe and beyond.

After 9/11 we dedicated ourselves to revamp the intelligence community to be agile enough to adapt to these changing threats from terrorists. We created and poured resources into the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to coordinate America’s counterterrorism strategy around the world in a unified way. It is clear to me that we still have a great deal of work to do in this effort.

For months I have been calling for the United States to adopt a more realistic, comprehensive counterterrorism strategy for North Africa in order to meet this threat emanating from the desert region. We should beef up collection efforts on the continent, exert significantly greater high-level diplomatic pressure on the governments in the region to improve cooperation and coordination while

working to improve and expand their capabilities. We also should reorient U.S. Africa Command's resources to be able to more effectively respond to the threats on the continent. And we should take this opportunity to offer unique American capabilities to the French in their fight with the Malian government to remove the AQIM safe haven from Northern Mali.

Despite calls from me and several others, we also clearly made a grave mistake by not more aggressively securing the weapons we watched pour out of Libya following the fall of the Gadhafi regime in 2011. In a sense, Mali is the first victim of that failed policy and we must work to ensure Mauritania, Niger and other nearby nations are not next by supporting their governments and better preparing their security services to address the threat from AQIM and other Islamic radicals.

In an audio recording that emerged on Algerian television, one of the terrorist leaders in the attack in Amenas stated "The Americans that are here, we will kill them. We will slaughter them."

The U.S. government needs a more aggressive, comprehensive strategy to deal with the threat to America's national security interests currently emanating from North and West Africa. And we should treat this problem with the urgency it demands.

Surely we owe nothing less to those three American citizens who lost their lives in the desert of Algeria and those four killed in Benghazi, Libya.