

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?

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CARNEGIE PAPERS

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb:

Algerian Challenge
or Global Threat?

Jean-Pierre Filiu

*The threat of al-Qaeda in
the Islamic Maghreb must
be addressed through
increased regional and
international cooperation.*

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

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Summary

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, established in January 2007, is the latest in a long line of Algerian jihadi groups. Like many terrorist organizations, AQIM enjoys global media exposure on activist Internet sites, but unlike other al-Qaeda franchises, it has managed to maintain its indigenous leadership. The group has become known for fearsome suicide attacks, which were previously unheard of in Algeria, but has failed to incorporate the jihadi outfits from neighboring Morocco and Tunisia. AQIM has therefore focused on the northern Sahara, carving out safe havens and threatening weak government forces, first in Mauritania, and now increasingly in Mali.

At the outset, AQIM's global strategy was based on the triangular dynamic of the Middle East (where Iraq serves as a magnet for potential recruits), North Africa (where the group functions as a regional jihadi recruiting hub), and Europe (where it pursues aggressive propaganda against the French and Spanish "Crusaders"). The demise of al-Qaeda in Iraq jeopardized this grand design, undermining AQIM's capabilities on both sides of the Mediterranean, but although it primarily targets Western "Crusaders" in its own Algerian and Saharan environment, AQIM remains wedded to a global agenda.

The threat of AQIM must be contained, and hopefully, ultimately eradicated. Algeria and the other targeted states have a long record of fighting similar jihadi networks, but they cannot confront transnational movements without international cooperation. To address this threat, regional security organizations can enhance much-needed bilateral exchanges among law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Additionally, the countries implementing the UN global strategy against terrorism should focus considerable attention on North Africa and the Sahel, where the threat is on the rise, but not yet out of control.

Introduction

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), launched in January 2007, is the most recently established franchise of Osama bin Laden's jihadi network, and it is also the only one to have so far escaped the decline and crisis of the other branches of al-Qaeda in the Arab world. AQIM has enhanced its global profile through its aggressive propaganda against Western "Crusaders," with a special focus against France and Spain, where parts of the jihadi networks dismantled in 2005–2007 had Algerian connections. But the grand design of a North African integration of jihadi groups has largely failed, because AQIM's recruitment and planning remain strongly Algerian. AQIM nurtures its most lethal potential of expansion via its Sahara networks. The jihadi focus against Mauritania has recently shifted toward Mali. International support for the targeted states remains critical, but any direct Western involvement would be highly counterproductive.

The Legacy of the Civil War

AQIM is deeply rooted in Algeria's recent history of violence and strife, but the organization's heavy legacy limits its global potential. During the 1980s, hundreds of militant Algerians defied the Moscow-backed National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) by volunteering for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. Even though most of them never left the training camps in Pakistan, they were nicknamed "Afghans" on their return in Algeria. The FLN one-party system had collapsed in 1988, but many Algerian "Afghans" refused to support the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) and its "political jihad." They instead advocated military insurgency against the "apostate" regime and fueled the dynamics leading toward a full-fledged civil war, especially after the Algerian authorities canceled the second round of parliamentary elections in January 1992. In October 1992, various jihadi guerrillas coalesced into the Islamic Armed Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA), which initiated a terror campaign against the government forces, civil servants, secular intellectuals—but also the rival FIS. (See the timeline of key events.)

The 1990s are still known today in Algeria as the "black decade," with overall estimates of the casualties ranging from 100,000 to 200,000 dead, most of them civilians. The hard core of the insurgency was based on 2,000 to 3,000 fighters for the GIA, compared with 4,000 for the FIS. The GIA and the FIS mobilized international networks in the United Kingdom, and the jihadi propaganda in the British capital was so intense that it became called "Londonistan." In 1995 the GIA, plagued with internal purges, also tried to outflank the FIS by launching a bombing campaign in France. In Algeria, the civilian population was increasingly targeted by the GIA, and dozens of mass

Timeline of Key Events in the North African Jihad

1991	November 28	Attack of the Guemmar border station by "Afghan" Algerian insurgents
1992	October	Launching of the Islamic Armed Group (GIA) in Algeria
1993	July	First issue of GIA newsletter <i>Al-Ansar</i> , published in London
1994	December 24	GIA hijacking of an Air France plane from Algiers to Marseille
1995	July 25	GIA bombing of a Métro station in Paris
1996	January	Declaration of war by GIA against the rival Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)
1997	September	Cease-fire between the army and the FIS armed wing
1998	September	Founding of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) by a former GIA commander, Hassan Hattab
2001	September 9	Ahmed Shah Mas'ud, the leader of the anti-Taliban alliance, killed by two Tunisian jihadis sent by Osama bin Laden
2002	April 11	Al-Qaeda suicide attack against the Ghriba synagogue, on the Tunisian island of Djerba; 21 dead
2003	May 16	Suicide attacks in Casablanca; 45 dead, including 12 terrorists
2003	August	Hattab replaced by Nabil Sahrawi as the GSPC's leader (emir)
2004	June	Sahrawi killed in a clash with the Algerian army; Abdelmalek Drukdal becomes GSPC's leader
2005	July	Abduction and execution of two Algerian diplomats by al-Qaeda in Baghdad
2006	September 13	Drukdal's pledge of allegiance to bin Laden
2006	December 11	GSPC's attack against a bus carrying employees from an American contractor; 1 dead
2007	January 24	GSPC's name changed to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)
2007	April 11	AQIM triple-suicide attack in Algiers; 30 dead
2007	December 11	AQIM double-suicide attack in Algiers; 41 dead, including 17 UN employees
2007	December 24	Four French tourists killed in Mauritania by AQIM
2008	August 19	AQIM suicide attack in the Algerian city of Boumerdes; 45 dead
2008	October 8	Death in Mosul of Al-Qaeda in Iraq's deputy, the Moroccan Mohammed Moumou (Abu Quswara)
2008	December 14	AQIM's abduction of the UN special envoy in Niger; released April 22, 2009
2009	May 31	AQIM's execution of a British hostage
2009	June 30	AQIM's verbal attacks against France, the "mother of all evils"
2009	July	Offensive of Mali's army against AQIM in the North of the country
2009	August 8	Foiled AQIM suicide attack against the French Embassy in Nouakchott

slaughters were perpetrated in 1997, while the FIS reached a formal truce with the government. Divided and defeated, the GIA crumbled into local outfits, each one with its own commander or emir.

In 1998, one of these GIA commanders, Hassan Hattab, launched his own splinter organization, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC). He pledged to refocus his military jihad against the security forces and to respect the civilian population. The truth is that the GSPC went on extorting money from the local peasantry in its mountainous stronghold in Kabylia, east of Algiers, but it stopped the random killings of whole “hostile” villages. Hattab attracted many dissatisfied GIA followers, like Abdelmalik Drukdal and Nabil Sahrawi, who had both joined the jihadi guerrillas in their early twenties. The GSPC even incorporated the GIA’s Saharan branch, which kept its operational autonomy but opened new windows of opportunity for the GSPC in neighboring countries. The highly mobile jihadi commandos roamed along smuggling routes in the desert and engaged in various kinds of illegal activities. The most profitable of these became the abduction of Western tourists, who were quickly moved across international borders before being traded for undisclosed ransoms.

The Iraqi Dynamics

The GSPC emerged from Algeria’s “black decade” as the only serious jihadi challenger to the security forces. However, whereas Hattab opted for a relatively low profile, the younger commanders like Drukdal and Sahrawi pursued a more aggressive strategy. Having been raised and drilled in the Algerian killing fields, these seasoned leaders had survived numerous purges and ambushes and had grown attuned to global rhetoric. Thus they saw in the U.S. invasion of Iraq the possibility of exporting their own jihad. In August 2003, Hattab was forced to step down in favor of Sahrawi and Drukdal. A few months later, after Sahrawi was shot in a clash with security forces, Drukdal became the GSPC’s undisputed leader. Drukdal chose Abu Mus’ab Abdel Wadud as his moniker and began to cooperate with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s network in Iraq, recruiting and channeling “volunteers” from all over North Africa.

The GIA had always kept its distance from al-Qaeda and consistently defended its full independence. Although it echoed al-Qaeda’s rhetoric against “the Jews and the Crusaders,” it rejected the involvement of foreigners in the Algerian jihad, while focusing its terror against France rather than the United States. The bombing campaign that the GIA waged on French soil in 1995 did not involve al-Qaeda and relied heavily on the facilities enjoyed by the various jihadi groups in so-called Londonistan. But when Drukdal took over the GSPC eight years later, he feared the downward spiral of the Algerian

jihadi and strove to replenish his organization by plugging it into the global realm. This is why he deliberately sought a closer link to al-Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's deputy, commissioned Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the Iraqi branch of the organization to manage this growing interaction with the GSPC. This jihadi pact was sealed with the blood of two Algerian diplomats who were abducted by al-Qaeda in Iraq in July 2005 and executed with the GSPC's public endorsement.

Drukdal energized a regional web of smuggling routes and training facilities, with the rallying call to fight the American "Crusaders" in Iraq. The GSPC managed to reach out to a new generation of activists, in both Algeria and its neighboring countries, evolving into the North African jihadi recruiting hub for al-Qaeda in Iraq. American sources reckoned that in Iraq in 2005, one suicide bomber out of four was North African. This dramatic partnership between the western (Maghreb) and eastern (Mashreq) branches of the jihadi community was very profitable for Drukdal, who gained an exposure unknown to any previous Algerian guerrilla leader in the global echo chamber of militant Internet sites. The GSPC leader found that the Iraqi mantra gave him privileged access to a pool of potential recruits, who were too disillusioned by the bloodbath of the "black decade" to join a purely Algerian jihad. This passionate commitment to an anti-United States jihad also served to reduce the appeal of the amnesty the new Algerian government offered to combatants who laid down their weapons, even though this call for reconciliation had convinced hundreds of former insurgents, including some GSPC militants, to return to some kind of normal life.

The deepening cooperation between the GSPC and al-Qaeda in Iraq was not affected by the killing in June 2006 of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the organization's leader. But Zawahiri was now ready to consider Drukdal's offers to merge into the global jihad, because al-Qaeda central, based in the Pakistani tribal areas, planned on expanding its own networks westward. After months of protracted negotiations, Drukdal pledged public allegiance to bin Laden in September 2006 (in this way celebrating the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States), and, a few months later, his GSPC officially became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Yet despite this name change, the GSPC's apparatus was left in place, though the Algerian leadership was expected to incorporate the other North African organizations and generate a truly regional dynamic, with Iraq as bait for new followers. The attempt to broaden AQIM into a Maghreb-wide organization was facilitated by the fact that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, as well as the similar Moroccan and Tunisian groups, had lost their local base, and potential North African recruits had already been relying on the GSPC's facilities to join the jihad inspired by al-Qaeda.

The Campaign of Terror

AQIM's opening strike occurred on April 11, 2007, with three simultaneous suicide bombings in Algiers, targeting the Government Palace, a police station, and a gendarmerie post. The date was chosen to commemorate the fifth anniversary of al-Qaeda's first attack in North Africa, the bombing of the Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba. The continuity with al-Qaeda—proclaiming jihad against “the Jews, the Crusaders,” and their “apostate” allies (the Muslim regimes)—was therefore emphasized. Suicide attacks, which had been unknown in Algeria even during the “black decade,” became AQIM's signature, with a string of devastating bombings following the three initial ones. A presidential motorcade was targeted in Batna on September 6, but President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was unhurt. The combination of local and global terror culminated in the simultaneous suicide attacks in Algiers on December 11, which struck both the Algerian Constitutional Court and the regional seat of the United Nations.

However, this escalation of violence was not sustained in 2008, even though the number of suicide operations increased in Algeria. But these attacks proved less deadly, and there was a drop in overall jihadi military activity (the number of violent incidents involving AQIM fell from about 200 in 2007 to fewer than 150 in 2008). In retrospect, 2007 appears to have been an exceptional year, during which the GSPC/AQIM managed to stem the downward spiral of violence, but only temporarily. More than half of the forty-eight Algerian provinces were spared any jihadi violence in 2008; two-thirds of AQIM-related incidents occurred in the three provinces of Boumerdes, Bouira and Tizi Ouzou, east of Algiers, which came to be known as the “death triangle.”

Two factors contributed to this decrease in violence and its geographical containment. First, the Algerian government developed a more effective military strategy for dealing with the renewed threat, focusing on mopping up the pockets of jihadi activism outside AQIM's strongholds. Second, al-Qaeda in Iraq escalated its conflict with the Sunni nationalist insurgency, and this badly tarnished the aura of al-Qaeda as a whole, thus decreasing AQIM's ability to reach out to fresh recruits.

AQIM also failed in its attempt to transform itself into a North Africa-wide organization. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group merged directly into al-Qaeda central rather than into AQIM, while the Moroccan and Tunisian networks kept operating on an independent basis. The attraction of the fight in Iraq had opened up new grounds for regional cooperation in 2005–2006, but the crisis of al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was engulfed in a war with the local jihadis, forced AQIM to focus on a narrower Algerian agenda with limited appeal for neighboring partners. And in Algeria, AQIM grew increasingly associated with the worst of the old GIA's terrorism, while the civilian toll

of the suicide attacks generated a popular backlash. In an attempt to overcome this rejection, AQIM's propaganda is now playing down the number of local casualties and exaggerating the "infidel" ones. For instance, AQIM claimed that the August 20, 2008 bombing of the bus transporting employees of a Canadian company had killed only Canadian expatriates, whereas all the casualties were Algerian.

The Saharan Perspective

AQIM's failure to turn into a truly pan-Maghreb organization and to capture Islamist groups in neighboring countries did not put an end to its activities across the Algerian border in the Sahara. Such activities could build on the GSPC's networks in the Sahara Desert, where it had long been engaged in smuggling a mix of drugs, weapons, and illegal immigrants, along with jihadi hit-and-run attacks against local security forces.

This transnational threat was taken into account as early as 2003 by the United States, which launched the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI). The PSI aimed to boost the rapid-reaction capacities of Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger by training and equipping at least one specialized company of about 150 soldiers in each of these four partner countries. In 2005, the PSI evolved into the more ambitious Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which included the four Sahel countries that had been part of the PSI as well as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia in the Maghreb, and Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa. Libya was invited to join, but so far has declined the invitation. The TSCTP is officially a U.S. interagency program, but its main bureaucratic player remains the Pentagon, through the U.S. African Command, with a focus on joint exercises and communications interoperability between the member states' armed forces.

The GSPC's early operations in the Sahara included its abduction of three dozen European tourists in Southern Algeria in 2003 and their release after months of tough bargaining. Its most serious military clash occurred in Mauritania, where it felt bold enough to attack an isolated military outpost in 2005. This Mauritanian dimension was enhanced with the launching of AQIM. Though the Algerian branch kept hunting for "infidel" targets, a jihadi commando killed four French tourists in Eastern Mauritania, on the eve of Christmas 2007 (the murderers were eventually arrested in Bissau, showing the plasticity of the regional network). This attack led to the cancellation of the Paris-Dakar car race, and this deprived AQIM of high-visibility soft targets and the subsequent media exposure. But in 2008 Mauritania remained the focus of AQIM's operations in the Sahara, with a drive-by shooting against the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott on February 1 and an ambush against a military patrol on September 15.

The abduction of Western travelers also continued, but on a random basis. Even though AQIM publicly demanded the release of jihadi prisoners, its local cells responsible for the kidnappings would not do so without being paid a ransom. This was the case with the two Austrian tourists kidnapped in Southern Tunisia in February 2008, who were released in Northern Mali eight months later. The same logic prevailed with the abduction of two Canadian UN diplomats in Northern Niger, who were released in Mali in April 2009. Financial compensation, never admitted in public, probably ensured the safety of all these kidnapping victims. The only exception was the killing of a British tourist in May 2009, which apparently was the result of direct pressure by AQIM's leadership on the local commando, who was more interested in demanding ransom. However, AQIM released the three other European tourists who had been abducted along with the murdered Briton.

AQIM's stronghold in the Sahara is buried inside the Tanezrouft Range, on the border between Algeria and Mali, while highly mobile jihadi commandos roam from Mauritania to Chad. The recent increase in AQIM activity in Northern Mali has led to a very strong reply from Bamako, with a successful offensive launched in July 2009. But containment and deterrence are more attainable than a clear-cut military solution to this jihadi challenge.

"Global" Outreach

Even before its formal merger into al-Qaeda, the GSPC had endorsed the global jihadi rhetoric, and the newly founded AQIM was quick to target U.S. and Russian contractors in Algeria. In December 2007, AQIM bombed the UN headquarters in Algiers, echoing Zarqawi's attack on the UN offices in Baghdad in July 2003. But AQIM's leader, Drukdal, focused most of his threats against "Crusader France," accusing Paris of supporting the "apostate" regimes of North Africa, and against Spain, pledging to "purify" Ceuta and Melilla, the two Spanish enclaves in North Africa, as a first step toward reconquering Andalusia (or al-Andalus). In the same way that Zarqawi's anti-Shi'a sectarianism had eventually contaminated the whole jihadi propaganda machine, Drukdal's obsessions induced an escalation in al-Qaeda's public hostility against France and Spain. The Arab leaders of the global jihad hope that violent resentment against the former colonial powers can appeal to potential recruits, now that the struggle against the "Crusaders" in the Middle East is running out of steam.

AQIM never managed to implement the grand strategy it envisaged, which centered on the anti-United States jihad in Iraq. In this strategy, AQIM, as the North African recruiting hub for the Middle East "battlefield," expected to mobilize solidarity networks in Europe, mustering volunteers to be trained in

Algeria and sent on to Iraq. Indeed, a great proportion of the jihadi cells that were uncovered and dismantled in 2005–2007 in France and Spain had been working to send volunteers to either Iraq or training camps in Algeria—and the most dangerous ones did both. But the collapse of al-Qaeda in Iraq had a devastating impact on this triangular strategy. With the pull of participating in the jihad in Iraq gone, it became much more difficult for AQIM to recruit partners and militants in either Europe or North Africa. And the British crackdown that followed the July 2005 bombings in London meant the end of the jihadi support networks there; AQIM could no longer rely on the facilities of “Londonistan” that had contributed to the GIA terror campaign against France in 1995.

With its triangular strategy frustrated by the demise of al-Qaeda in Iraq and its ability to conduct operations in Europe weakened, AQIM instead resorted to frantic attempts to hit “global” targets in its own environment. After several foiled attempts against French expatriates, it finally succeeded in killing a French engineer in Lakhdaria, on June 8, 2008, in the explosion of two booby-trapped cars—and eleven Algerian civilians were also murdered. On June 23, 2009, AQIM gunned down an American humanitarian worker in Nouakchott. To enhance this sinister record, AQIM departed from its standard practice of bargaining for the release of Western tourists abducted in the Sahara and executed a British citizen, on May 31, 2009, as mentioned above. Despite this record, AQIM has so far been less violent than the other jihadi franchises, and especially al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, which has killed more than a dozen foreign tourists in Yemen since 2007.

The gap is therefore growing between AQIM’s global rhetoric and its terror record. During the January 2009 Israeli offensive on Gaza, Drukdal echoed bin Laden’s calls for global revenge against America and the West, but no operation was staged. Similarly, after the July 2009 repression of the Muslim riots in Chinese Xinjiang, AQIM pledged to retaliate against the growing Chinese community in Algeria, but no one followed suit. Drukdal’s recent denunciation of France as the “mother of all evils” has not triggered direct violence, and it took an extremely anti-French speech by Zawahiri, on August 5, 2009, to finally prompt AQIM into action with a suicide attack three days later against the French Embassy in Nouakchott, which was foiled.

Dealing with AQIM

The security paradox posed by AQIM is that its inability to project its “global” terror beyond Africa intensifies the pressures from al-Qaeda central to achieve such a breakthrough and to force the Algerian jihadi leadership to live up to this commitment. This jihadi challenge must therefore be taken very seriously,

because AQIM is longing to reconcile its violent record with its global agenda. But jihadi propaganda must be systematically deflated by stressing the fact that AQIM basically kills Algerian Muslims, most of them civilians.

The Internet has become the most vibrant vector of recruitment and mobilization for al-Qaeda inspired terror. The AQIM leader, Drukdal, gained enormous and dangerous prestige through his exposure on global jihadi web sites, so just monitoring those sites is clearly not enough; they must be actively disrupted. AQIM is only part of a worldwide picture, but it depends heavily on this access to the militant Internet, and therefore any achievement in even partially neutralizing e-jihad will be very damaging for AQIM.

Law-enforcement agencies in North Africa must cooperate more intensively to deter the terrorist threat. Bilateral exchanges have led to mutually profitable information sharing and even the extradition of terror suspects. But border management is a common concern and must be comprehensively addressed. The Union of the Arab Maghreb—composed of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia—would be the ideal framework, but it has no operational dimension. Therefore, two other forums need to be considered: the Arab League’s Council of Interior Ministers, with its secretariat in Tunis (with the risk of diluting the North African focus in a wider approach); and the African Union’s Center for Studies and Research on Terrorism, based in Algiers, with a network of focal points and an alert system (even though Morocco is not a member). This antiterrorist cooperation should be optimized in a pragmatic way, using bilateral channels whenever possible and opting for regional organizations when necessary.

The long-term, yet indirect, U.S. commitment through the TSCTP has proved beneficial to the states involved, but it is essential that it remains indirect and keeps a low profile. Otherwise, it would give an incredible boost to the jihadi propaganda, which could pinpoint the interference of “Crusaders” on “Muslim lands,” and this must consistently be avoided. More generally, the Western powers should keep this self-imposed restraint in mind while extending the much-needed and protracted support for Mali and its neighboring states that have been targeted by AQIM.

The Euro-Mediterranean antiterrorism code of conduct adopted in 2005 constitutes a welcome framework, shared by governments on both sides of the Mediterranean, for targeting al-Qaeda as a common threat with regional implications. It is very relevant to the fight against AQIM and must be reasserted. The United Nations’ global counterterrorism strategy, endorsed by the General Assembly in 2006, also provides a precious instrument through its comprehensive approach and its criminalization of “incitement to commit a terrorist act,” while ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law. These multilateral documents can prove mostly helpful in mobilizing the international community against the jihadi threat in North Africa and the Sahel.

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