Could Al-Qaida turn African in the Sahel?

Jean-Pierre Filiu

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Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?

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Algeria's push for regional cooperation and discreet aid from the West are crucial to help the Sahel countries regain control of their territory from al-Qaeda forces and prevent the terror group from taking hold in Africa.

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Summary

Since its founding in January 2007, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has continued the jihadi fight begun by its predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), against the Algerian government. Algeria's ability to contain the jihadis has forced AQIM to develop networks in the Sahara and to cooperate with smuggling rings there. Its mobile commandos, already active in Mauritania, now represent a serious security threat in northern parts of Mali and Niger, where they have abducted Westerners and frequently clashed with government forces.

   Osama bin Laden appears to have no grand plans for Africa. But the Algerian-run AQIM could help al-Qaeda central incorporate a new generation of recruits from the Sahel. This jihadi progression south of the Sahara is limited, but troublesome, especially given a recent offer by AQIM's leader to train Muslim militias in Nigeria.

   However, the ethno-racial divide within al-Qaeda has kept African recruits out of leadership roles. AQIM cannot prove its commitment to "Africanized" jihad without Africanizing at least some of its leadership. Also, AQIM has partnered throughout the Sahel with criminals, not local salafi movements, limiting its appeal and preventing it from becoming a revolutionary challenger. This does not mean deterring AQIM will be easy: Mauritania, Mali, and Niger are among the world's poorest states and will require international support to defuse AQIM's momentum. Algeria is right to push for regional cooperation to address the threat, and discreet aid from the West is crucial to help the Sahel countries regain control of their territory from al-Qaeda forces and prevent the terror group from taking hold in Africa.

Introduction

Recent terrorist activity across the Sahel raises the question of whether that region is a new theater for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and a land of opportunity for al-Qaeda central. Might the terror group transcend the Arab world, as it did in Afghanistan, and influence African Muslims? The sparsely populated and loosely patrolled borders of the Sahara are fertile ground for jihadi movements to grow unchecked. It is therefore feared that the Sahel could become an al-Qaeda safe haven and, more ominously, a launch pad for

attacks throughout Africa, home to roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. But, no matter how troubling the scene in the Sahel is now, those long-term projections seem groundless so far. Terrorist networks linked to al-Qaeda operate in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, but their roots are shallow; AQIM itself is weakened by deep internal rivalries. It is highly unlikely that al-Qaeda's future in the Sahel will mirror its past in Afghanistan, mainly because a strong ethnic divide persists inside jihadi networks.

The history of AQIM is important in understanding the challenges it faces in the Sahel. The organization was launched in January 2007 as the globally upgraded version of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the most resilient jihadi faction in Algeria. The GSPC had an active branch in the Sahara, focusing mainly on Mauritania, but AQIM developed new networks by creatively cooperating with smuggling rings in the desert. Today highly mobile AQIM commandos seriously threaten security in northern Mali and northern Niger, where in recent years they have staged dramatic abductions of Western nationals and clashed frequently with government forces. The number of activists is small, but their actions are fueling international concern that al-Qaeda is breaking through in sub-Saharan Africa. Any assessment of this threat's likelihood must consider the African record of Osama bin Laden and his associates.

Al-Qaeda's African Experiences

A homogenous nucleus of Arab jihadis secretly founded al-Qaeda in Pakistan in August 1988. At first the group took little notice of Africa, focusing on Afghanistan and the Arabian peninsula. Osama bin Laden, the group's founder, grew incensed in August 1990 when the Saudis requested a massive U.S. military deployment to deter the Iraqi threat in Kuwait. He was even angrier when American troops stayed in his country after Kuwait was liberated.

This decision by the Saudi ruling family caused an irreconcilable rift between it and bin Laden. He was expelled to Pakistan in the spring of 1991, before moving to Sudan at the invitation of its Islamist dictatorship. Bin Laden settled in Khartoum in December 1991, where his main focus remained the Arabian peninsula; he reached out to Arab activists in Algeria, Egypt, or Yemen—not Somalia.

That changed in the last weeks of 1992 as the United States launched Operation Restore Hope. That mission—a United Nations–sanctioned effort to protect international famine relief workers in Somalia—was portrayed by bin Laden as the U.S. equivalent of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, al-Qaeda's first attack against U.S. interests in the region targeted a luxury hotel in Aden, Yemen, where U.S. soldiers were staying en route to Somalia. This opening salvo was an operational disaster: No Americans were killed, and the only casualties were an Australian tourist, a local employee,

and the terrorists themselves. This attack showed that al-Qaeda had no interest in Somalia itself, but was looking for a convenient pretext to strike at the "infidels" on Arab soil—in this case, in Yemen. When al-Qaeda military commander Muhammad Atef moved into Somalia in 1993 to test training facilities, he faced considerable logistical problems, exacerbated by the local guerrillas' xenophobia.

Al-Qaeda's propaganda greatly exaggerated its contribution to the humiliation of U.S. troops in Mogadishu, epitomized by the "Black Hawk down" episode—the killing of eighteen American soldiers after a warlord's militia shot down their helicopters in October 1993. Bin Laden's aides were never truly welcome in Somalia. They were much more successful in establishing underground networks of support and intelligence in neighboring countries—mainly Kenya, where African nationals such as the Comorian Fazul were first promoted as ringleaders. Nevertheless, when Sudan expelled bin Laden in May 1996 as a result of U.S. and Egyptian pressure, he did not opt for another African location. Instead he returned to Afghanistan, where his scant interest in African issues grew dimmer. His now-famous "declaration of jihad against America" broadcast in August 1996 mentioned fourteen battle fronts all over the world, but only three were in Africa: Somalia; Ogaden, the ethnically Somali and perennially rebellious eastern province of Ethiopia; and Eritrea, since al-Qaeda had built an enduring relationship with the Eritrean Islamic Jihad during bin Laden's exile in Khartoum. Kenya and Tanzania were not mentioned, although they were the sites of major attacks on U.S. embassies in August 1998. The bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were not part of a strategic decision to move al-Qaeda into Africa; they occurred because Kenya and Tanzania were home to solid terror networks built over several years.

What remained of those networks struck again in Mombasa, Kenya, in November 2002, again acting more out of opportunism than a desire to establish al-Qaeda in Africa. The targets—a resort and a charter jet—were Israeli, but most of the casualties were Kenyan. This was the last straw for al-Qaeda in Kenya; the surviving operatives, a minority of them African, withdrew to southern Somalia. They developed a close relationship with the Shabab, a local salafi-jihadi militia that helped the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in its fight against the internationally backed transitional government.

The ICU guerrillas took control of Mogadishu in the summer of 2006, provoking much alarm in the United States and at the United Nations. Washington supported an Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in December 2006, hoping to oust the ICU from the capital and surrounding region. In the ensuing conflict, the Shabab fought alongside the ICU against the "infidel" aggression. Ethiopia withdrew its troops in January 2009, and ICU leader Sharif Sheikh Ahmed became the new Somali president. However, the Shabab turned against this "apostate" and "traitor"; bin Laden echoed these accusations, comparing Sharif Sheikh Ahmed to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and calling

for a full-fledged "jihad" against his regime. The Shabab reciprocated by pledging allegiance to bin Laden in October 2009. Despite bin Laden's public support for the Shabab, the militia was not incorporated into al-Qaeda. The terror organization's three affiliates—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in Iraq, and in the Islamic Maghreb—remain essentially Arab.

The Focus on Mauritania

Mauritania is the only Arab country that is officially an Islamic Republic, but that is not the reason for al-Qaeda's interest in it; rather, several influential figures had ties to the country. During al-Qaeda's "golden age" in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan (1996–2001), Mauritanian cleric Mahfouz Ould Walid (aka Abu Hafs al-Mauritani) was in charge of teaching classical Arabic to jihadi recruits in Kandahar, as well as imparting the usual ideological indoctrination. Abu Yahya al-Libi, a Libyan believed to have studied sharia and Islamic law in Nouakchott, Mauritania, is today the only top al-Qaeda leader with a theological background.

The most important link between al-Qaeda and Mauritania, however, was provided not by religious figures, but by Algerian activist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, sometimes called Belaouar (the "one-eyed"). Belmokhtar, born in 1972, claims to have fought in Afghanistan from 1991 to 1993, long after the end of Soviet occupation but amid the civil strife pitting the rival mujahidin factions against one another. Bin Laden was then living in Sudan, so it is hard to believe that Belmokhtar had significant contact with the top al-Qaeda leadership in that period. His ties to al-Qaeda probably were established after he returned to Algeria as a 21-year-old "Afghan" veteran, joined the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in its all-out war against the Algerian regime, and rose steadily through its ranks, surviving military raids and internal purges to become the GIA commander for the Sahara.

In 2000, Belmokhtar switched allegiance from the decaying GIA to the more promising GSPC, preserving most of his operational autonomy. He nurtured his relations with the desert tribes through marriage alliances and avoided extorting money from the local population, contrary to what the GSPC does in its Kabylia stronghold. To compensate for the loss of this revenue, Belmokhtar increasingly engaged in smuggling, earning the popular nickname "Mr. Marlboro." But tobacco was certainly not his only trade; he also was involved in the smuggling of drugs, weapons, and illegal immigrants. The web of his criminal partnerships grew tighter in the vast area covering eastern Mauritania, northern Mali, and southwestern Algeria. Belmokhtar, a gifted survivor in the highly volatile world of jihadi guerrillas, consolidated safe havens in Mali and Algeria. He found it convenient to focus his violence against Mauritania, where President Ould Taya had established diplomatic relations with Israel

and supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In June 2005, Belmokhtar's "brigade," or *katîba,* attacked a military outpost in the Mauritanian desert. He hailed the ensuing killing of a dozen soldiers as his own "Badr," a reference to the Prophet Mohammed's first victory. (Jihadi propaganda described the April 2007 AQIM triple suicide bombing in Algiers as "the Badr of the Maghreb.")

Belmokhtar benefited greatly by leaving the GIA to join the GSPC. He endorsed Abdelmalik Drukdal as emir, or commander, of the GSPC and Belmokhtar's influence rose in the Sahara under this new leadership. Belmokhtar also supported Drukdal's pledge of allegiance to bin Laden, which helped launch AQIM and led to propaganda targeting France and other "Crusaders." As a tribute to this new global agenda, some of Belmokhtar's followers murdered four French tourists near Aleg, Mauritania, in December 2007. They used their trans-Saharan connections to escape to Bissau, where they were arrested. The violence did not end there: Belmokhtar ordered the drive-by shooting in front of the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania, in February 2008. When General Abdel Aziz toppled Mauritania's democratic regime in August 2008, AQIM declared jihad against the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, which it labeled "apostate." Belmokhtar's followers and the Mauritanian security forces skirmished in the Sahara several times.

AQIM's aggression was not stemmed when the rule of law was restored following the July 2009 elections. Mauritania remained the safest ground for Belmokhtar to try to earn "global jihadi" credentials. During the summer of 2009, AQIM murdered a U.S. citizen in Nouakchott, and a suicide bomber died in a failed attack on the French embassy there.

Turf Wars in Mali

Belmokhtar supported Drukdal as emir of the GSPC and endorsed Drukdal's ties to al-Qaeda, but relations between the two have been strained, leading to a veritable turf war in Mali. Both Drukdal, born in 1970, and Belmokhtar are talented survivors in the extremely brutal underworld of Algerian jihadism. Each wrongly has been reported dead several times; each returned with renewed stamina. Drukdal is based in distant Kabylia, east of Algiers on the Mediterranean coast; he is challenged to assert his leadership over Belmokhtar and his *katîba*. Belmokhtar has gained notoriety and international visibility through his ties to AQIM; he contributes large sums of ransom money to AQIM's overall budget. His growing reputation has escalated tensions between himself and Drukdal.

Drukdal feared Belmokhtar was becoming too powerful and promoted another field commander in the Sahara, Abdelhamid (Hamidu) Abu Zeid, whose *katîba* roamed the desert east of Belmokhtar's turf. The two *katîba* commanders were formally placed under the control of Yahya Djouadi, a Drukdal

representative in southern Algeria. This clarified the AQIM chain of command, but tensions kept brewing between Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid.

The showdown occurred in Mali, which Belmokhtar considered a safe haven for his attacks on Mauritania. AQIM hostages often were released in Mali after protracted negotiations—a process that had become practically routine. But that routine was violated on May 31, 2009, when Abu Zeid ordered the execution of a British tourist captured four months before. Malian authorities reacted by capturing some AQIM operatives and Abu Zeid retaliated on June 11, 2009, sending a hit squad to kill a senior Malian intelligence officer in his Timbuktu home.

This killing came as an unprecedented blow to President Amadou Toumani Touré, who was first elected in a democratic contest in 2002 and re-elected in 2007 with more than two-thirds of the vote. In 2006 he had placated the Touareg insurgency through an Algerian-sponsored peace process; now he faced a new threat in AQIM. Touré responded forcefully, sending his army after the jihadi commandos in northern Mali. Heavy clashes in July 2009 killed dozens of fighters.

Belmokhtar's *katîba* withdrew into the Tanezrouft range, on Algerian soil, subduing him and strengthening Drukdal. But the AQIM emir could not go too far in weakening Belmokhtar; after all, Drukdal wanted to keep open the option, no matter how remote, to leave his besieged stronghold in Kabylia to relocate to the Sahara. Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid grew more competitive, each exhorting his network to deliver new Western hostages and triggering a wave of kidnappings during the last months of 2009. Three Spaniards were caught on the Mauritanian coastal road. An Italian couple was captured in Mauritania near the Malian border. A French national, and longtime humanitarian worker in northern Mali was kidnapped in the eastern town of Menaka. He was freed in February 2010, and the Italian couple was released two months later. But the incident marred Mali's reputation for stability and effectively closed the region of Timbuktu and its historical sites to international visitors. AQIM's actions dealt a similar blow to desert-trekking tourism in Mauritania. The area's nascent tourism industry suffered a deep crisis, and a key source of much-needed hard currencies dried up.

Niger Much More Than Nigeria

Until recently, the major threat to stability in Niger has come from Touareg movements, not from al-Qaeda. President Mamadou Tandja, in charge since 1999, dealt with the Touareg rebels first through military repression, then through a political dialogue sponsored by Libya. AQIM became a major security threat in December 2008 when Abu Zeid's *katîba*, eager to carve up a territory of its own and challenge Belmokhtar's "global" credentials, abducted two Canadian nationals: the UN special envoy to Niger and his aide. Both were

released four months later, but the kidnappings opened an era of confrontation between AQIM and Niger's security forces.

The situation in Niger worsened during the winter of 2009–2010, as Tandja resolved to stay in power beyond the end of his term despite international consensus. A military junta took power in February 2010 and appointed Mahamadou Danda to lead a transitional government that vows to restore the democratic process in the near future. Military units continue to clash with AQIM commandos in northern Niger, where a French national was abducted in April 2010 (his Algerian driver was detained only a week before being released).

Although Mauritania, Mali, and Niger have so far been the main, though limited, areas of operations for AQIM in the Sahel, Drukdal has made one prominent attempt to open one more theater in Africa. By doing so, he has only added to his record of "global" provocations, with few operational consequences. For example, in January 2009 during the Israeli offensive on Gaza, he had echoed bin Laden's call for retaliation against "the Jews and the Crusaders" worldwide. In July 2009, after the repression of the Muslim riots in Xinjiang, he pledged to take revenge on Chinese workers in Algeria, even though none of them was subsequently hurt. In January 2010, he chose at last an African cause, offering to "train" Nigerian volunteers against the "Crusade" waged by their Christian compatriots and to arm them in a Somali-style "jihad." This bombastic call triggered no reaction in Nigeria. But it struck a chord in the international media, because Umar Faruk Abdulmutalab, a young Nigerian trained by al-Qaeda, had tried to blow up an airliner near Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Abdulmutalab had been recruited in Yemen, not Nigeria, and sectarian violence in the central Nigerian province of Jos is fueled locally, not imported. But Drukdal's offer nurtured the perception that Nigeria had moved to the top of al-Qaeda's agenda. The fear that AQIM could achieve substantial inroads in Nigeria and, more generally, around the Gulf of Guinea, grew. This is why the regional threat must be assessed carefully.

Assessing the Threat

Any measurement of the threat AQIM poses to the countries of the Sahel must weigh its capacity to use force, appeal to the population, and ability to establish deep political roots. By and large, AQIM poses more of a security threat than a political one.

Although AQIM has only few hundred members scattered across the Sahara (reasonable estimates put both Belmokhtar's *katîba* and that of Abu Zeid at 200 to 300 men), that low number is misleading. These forces are taking advantage of a relative security vacuum in the Sahel. As the table below indicates, the military budgets of Mali, Niger, and Mauritania are a fraction of those of Algeria and Libya. In 2009 Mali's military budget was the largest in the Sahel at $180 million; Algeria's military budget was $5.3 billion. Countries

north of the Sahara also yield soft power, with Algeria and Libya sponsoring peace processes with local insurgencies in Mali and Niger, respectively. But in the Sahel countries the security forces, no matter how strongly motivated, are ill-equipped to chase and fight AQIM commandos in vast and scarcely populated areas. The priority should be to enable the armed forces in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger to regain control over the large parts of their territory now off-limits for foreigners, because of the risk of AQIM kidnappings and attacks.

AQIM is challenging the armed forces of the Sahel countries, but its isolation saps its political potential. In the Islamic Republic of Mauritania—as

Government Forces in the Sahel Region

Country	Military budget (in million $)		Military Forces
	2008	2009	
ALGERIA	5,170	5,300	Army: 127,000 (1,082 tanks) Navy: 6,000 Air Force: 14,000 (197 planes) **Total: 147,000 (18-month draft)**
BURKINA FASO	111	123	Army: 6,400 Gendarmerie: 4,200 Air Force: 600 **Total: 11,200**
CHAD	145	151	Army: 20,000 (60 tanks) Republican Guard: 5,000 Air Force: 350 (6 planes) **Total: 25,350**
LIBYA	800		Army: 50,000 (2,205 tanks) Navy: 8,000 Air Force: 18,000 (374 planes) **Total: 76,000**
MALI	156	180	Army: 7,350 (33 tanks) Air Force: 400 (13 planes) **Total: 7,750**
MAURITANIA	20		Army: 15,000 (35 tanks) Navy: 620 Air Force: 250 **Total: 15,870**
NIGER	58	67	Army: 5,200 Air Force: 100 **Total: 5,300 (24-month draft)**

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2010* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies)

well as in Mali or Niger, where more than 90 percent of the population is Muslim—AQIM does not cooperate with local salafi movements, which are themselves isolated in an Islamic environment deeply influenced by Sufism. Nor does AQIM work with the local insurgents, who turned against it in Chad in 2004 and in Mali in 2006. In the Sahara AQIM basically cooperates only with delinquent smuggling networks. Criminal exchanges—hostages for cash, drugs for weapons, and intelligence-sharing—are crucial to its survival and operation. This generates an image problem for a self-proclaimed jihadi organization; Belmokhtar's 2008 decision to declare jihad against the Mauritanian regime was in part an effort to live down his reputation as simply being "Mr. Marlboro." In the same spirit, Drukdal decided to up the ante in January 2010, while celebrating the third anniversary of AQIM and offering his support to the Nigerian "brothers."

AQIM's criminal dimension hurts it in winning political support, particularly with religiously inclined groups, but it is important to the organization's operations. The Sahel countries are among the poorest on the planet. Annual GDP per capita is $1,042 in Mauritania, $657 in Mali, and $390 in Niger, which ranks last among the 182 states in the United Nations Development Programme's classification of human development. (Neither Mauritania nor Mali fare dramatically better; Mauritania ranks 154th and Mali 178th.) AQIM can afford low-intensity guerrilla activity in such an environment only because the partnership in crime provides a steady flow of recruits, no matter how low their jihadi commitment.

AQIM typically releases its hostages through tribal leaders with "business" connections, not through political go-betweens. The notable exception came in March 2010, when a Mauritanian dissident who became an adviser to Burkina-Faso's president arranged the release of a Spanish detainee in Ouagadougou, where the adviser now lives. Even that case, however, was far from political: AQIM covered up the deal by pretending that the hostage had converted to Islam.

These examples show that AQIM is a security threat, not a political threat. Drukdal's organization did hijack the nascent tourism industry in Mali, a country often praised for its democratic record, but AQIM has intensified its violence in Mauritania and Niger after military coups. Clearly a country's political structure is unrelated to al-Qaeda's use of violence there. AQIM is at the end of the day an opportunistic network, whose aggressiveness is largely fuelled by the rivalry between its two field commanders in the Sahara, Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid.

Government forces must be empowered to contain and eventually roll back the jihadi commandos. Regional cooperation between neighboring countries is key to disrupting AQIM's mobility and Algeria has long been pushing for such trans-Saharan cooperation. Algeria's military maintains pressure on Drukdal and the AQIM leadership in their Kabylian stronghold. The

possibility of Drukdal and the AQIM leadership escaping southward further raises the stakes for Algeria. This is why the Algerian city of Tamanrasset recently became the seat of a regional military command, where Mali, Mauritania, and Niger cooperate with Algeria.

An assessment of the threat could not be complete without taking into consideration the vision of al-Qaeda central. Bin Laden and his associates have been deeply frustrated by AQIM's handling of the abductions, which have resulted in only one hostage execution. Al-Qaeda central is very interested in the enrollment of sub-Saharan Africans in the two desert *katîba*. The figures are still very limited: a handful of individuals, perhaps a few groups of men, but nothing anyone could call an organized cell. Very little is known about what those trained jihadis will do when they are smuggled back home. This is where the long-term threat could be the strongest: Al-Qaeda central probably will refuse to incorporate a Somali militia such as the Shabab, but would accept the partial "Africanization" of AQIM's rank-and-file so long as Algerians remain in charge.

Both al-Qaeda central and AQIM have a vested interest in reviving the jihadi dialectics of the "far enemy" and the "near enemy" in the Sahara. Western countries are the "far enemy," tactically targeted for harder and deeper strikes than the "near enemy," the local regimes and the populations who support them. AQIM has long lost the dream of defeating, or even weakening, Algerian state power; even the much more vulnerable regimes in the Sahel are far from its reach. Provoking the "far enemy" and stirring direct U.S. or European intervention could create an environment that enables AQIM to endure and expand.

Western powers must consider this jihadi gamble when planning the counterterrorism support that Saharan states desperately need, because any public display of Western might plays into the hands of AQIM. Drukdal's networks are bound to continue provoking the international community by kidnapping Western nationals and striking high-visibility targets. The governments of the Sahel can prevent al-Qaeda from taking hold in their region as it did in Afghanistan—if they cooperate and are the core actors while receiving discreet international support.

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