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Islamist Terrorism in Algeria: From GIA to AQIM

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In August 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's deputy chief, announced that the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et Combat* (GSPC), had joined his organization, an alliance later confirmed by GSPC who adopted a new name: Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In a speech broadcasted by al-Qaeda's media wing *as-Sahab*, Zawahiri said "we pray to Allah that this [alliance] would be a thorn in the neck of the American and French crusaders and their allies, and an arrow in the heart of the French traitors and apostates".

It is a rather curious and simultaneously enlightening statement as it appears to reference and invert an older proclamation. In 1830, when the French invaded Algeria in the biggest military display since the Napoleonic campaign and conquered Algiers, the expedition's leader, General Louis Ghaïsne de Bourmont, congratulated his troops on the defeat of Ottoman rule in the region, which he described as a 'thorn in the side of Europe'. Hence, the evocation of this historical reference seems to be a reminder of the importance given by Islamists to the past and also explicitly declares their propagandistic strategy: their main purpose is to restore what they perceive as the glory of past Islamic Empires; and, ac-

ording to al-Qaeda's commander, this allusion seems to suggest that the West has been battling and oppressing Islam for centuries. In fact, if Zawahiri's intention was to tap into grievances originated during the colonial period, the reference is quite apt, as the seeds of today's organized Islamist violence date back to the Algerian war of independence against France.

To understand AQIM's motivations and mission, it is necessary to look at its evolution and also to try to grasp its current operational scope. This in turn requires an examination of the context surrounding political relations between Europe and the Sahel region – the latter being the breeding ground and base of AQIM.

From Afghanistan to AQIM

The Afghan war of the 1980's was a fundamental milestone of modern Islamist terrorism. Fighting against the occupation of part of *Dar al-Islam*, the Land or House of Islam, by a global superpower generated a compelling call to arms throughout the entire world and attracted to the region volunteers from places such as Western Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, in order to join the mujahideen in a sacred war against the atheistic So-



viet Union. This had the effect of uniting under a single cause people from very different parts of the world who only shared a religious belief which, in many cases, was characterized by a weak theological structure. Therefore, Afghanistan provided an opportunity for establishing a network of fighters, offering combat training and experience as well as ideological indoctrination. This environment was the cradle of al-Qaeda. The first martyr for the Afghani jihad is said to be a man called Nouradeen, an Algerian who we now know was killed by friendly fire from his own group of mujahideen. Nonetheless, this episode gave enormous *gravitas* to Algerian fighters who had a strong presence in the first training camps established along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

After the Soviet withdrawal, the mujahideen felt one step closer to fulfilling what they perceive as a religious obligation to reinstate Islamic rule in *Dar al-Islam*. Furthermore, if the second biggest world power could be defeated, it was not impossible to prevail over other powerful foes. The war veterans, also known as 'Afghan Arabs' or simply 'Afghans', were forced to abandon the area, returning to their home countries or departing to other places with the purpose of continuing their struggle. One of the main theaters of combat that followed Afghanistan was the Balkans. Algerian nationals' presence in Bosnia was significant and is well documented. They fought in the *El Mujahid* unit – integrated in the Bosnian 3rd Army Corp and formed mainly by Afghan Arabs – notorious for its ruthless methods and zealotry. The most famous and controversial case became known as the 'Algerian Six'. Bensayah Belkacem, Boudella el Hajj, Lakhdar Boumediene, Sabir Mahfouz Lahmar, Mustafa Ait Idr and Mo-

hammad Nechle were arrested on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks and of having international terrorist connections. Five of them had acquired Bosnian nationality based on false information and all worked for

Islamic charities – often used as fronts for Islamist terrorist organizations – later banned by the United Nations. All but one had a criminal record and the six were considered "persons of interest" by the Algerian authorities. At least two of them had been members of what might be considered GSPC's embryo: The Algerian Armed Islamic Group, or *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA).

From the late 1980's until the beginning of the 1990's, it is estimated that close to 1500 veterans of the Afghan war returned to Algeria. These men, who brought to their home country Afghan dress codes and social behaviors unusual by North African standards, were unsatisfied with the frail achievements of Islamist organizations in Algeria. Although many of them joined several Islamist movements already operating on Algerian soil, such as the Islamic Salvation Front, or *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), and its military branch, the Islamic Salvation Army, or *Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS), they advocated a more aggressive strategy – similar to what they saw and did in Afghanistan.

It is important to note that, in these early years of struggle in the name of Islam, nationalism also played into the group's motivations, contradicting the idea that violent Islamism and nationalism are completely incompatible. Internal dissent, police action and the disruption of the 1992 general elections scattered Islamist groups, and it is from this chaotic environ-

ment that the GIA emerged. This new organization was consolidated both politically and militarily over time, making Algeria the stage of violent terrorist attacks and combat with local security forces. Afghan Arabs

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were integral to GIA's identity and growth: they trained recruits, established propaganda strategies based on praising martyrs and worked as middle-men between Osama bin Laden's organization and the GIA. Signs of the al-Qaeda connection at this phase can be found, for example, in the case of Jamal al-Fadl, a former member of al-Qaeda who testified before a U.S. court in 2001, saying that the GIA was considered an affiliate of bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

Algeria's determination to fight this Islamist menace led to short terms in power for GIA leaders – eventually they all ended up incarcerated or dead. The GIA gradually adopted a *takfir* stance, meaning that both non-Muslims as well as Muslims perceived as heretical (the majority, if we consider the type of religious/political deviation defined by the GIA) were deemed impure and marked to die. Hence, Algeria suffered several attacks directed against foreigners and domestic Muslims, and the GIA also displayed a growing interest in attacking foreign oil interests in the Maghreb. Even though the GIA was a group apparently based on local grievances, it also enacted terror beyond Algerian borders. For example, in December 1994, the GIA hijacked an Air France plane in Algiers, with the intention of crashing it over Paris. At the beginning, the GIA terrorists offered to release some passengers in exchange for Omar Abdel Rahman, also known as 'The Blind Sheik'. Rahman, who had been involved along with Ayman al-Zawahiri in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in October 1981, was arrested by the US in June 1993 for planning a number of terrorist attacks, namely the World Trade Center bomb attack in February of that same year. The operation ended up being unsuccessful because when the plane stopped in Marseille for refueling, a French commando unit stormed the aircraft and killed the four air pirates.

Faced with mounting pressure from Algerian authorities and rival Islamist groups, as well as dealing with leadership problems, the GIA started a rampage of violence and of inflammatory communiqués characterized by no strategic planning and a complete absence of political pragmatism. Such a path alienated grassroots support-

ers, as well as Islamist organizations from neighboring countries, and caused the desertion of many militants who in some cases negotiated peace with the Algerian authorities. The GIA then fell into disgrace. The Afghans, with the purpose of restoring the credibility of Algerian jihadists, began to regroup and, according to some accounts, in 1998 Osama bin Laden called Hassan Hattab – one of GSPC's first commanders – and urged him to reorganize and create a credible group to fight Algeria's secular regime, as well as foreign crusaders. Though this event's occurrence is possible, it is highly

improbable that al-Qaeda had any leverage at this point, due to Hattab's singular focus on toppling the Algerian government, a mission publicly stated by the GSPC leader. Nonetheless, the GSPC was officially created in that same year.

Hattab was portrayed as a weak leader by GSPC's hardliners, which eventually led to his resignation in 2003. A year later in an interview with *Al-Faatah Magazine*, Abu Omar Abdul Birr, chief of GSPC's media operations, quoted by Evan Kohlmann in a NEFA Foundation Report, said that the group follows "the Salafist creed and ideology, fighting in jihad the Algerian regime which has abandoned Islam and its masters among the Jews and Christians to restore the rightly guided Caliphate and to implement Shariah". He continues, saying that the GSPC "is not limited by a narrow regional vision. It is important to us to spread the fragrance of jihad in every country and region, and ignite flames under the feet of the Jews, Christians and apostates". The GSPC clearly stated that their actions in Algeria were one of many fronts of

the global jihad aimed at the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate.

In many parts of the world, the 9/11 attacks catalyzed recruitment and overall support for Islamist terrorist organizations and spread the generation of self-radicalized cells. Furthermore, the post-9/11 context led to important changes within the Islamist terrorist community, giving birth to organizations with a lesser degree of centralization, now operating under a 'bottom-up' logic in which the initiative for planning and executing attacks lays primarily with the cells and not necessarily within leadership structures. The GSPC was no exception to these chang-

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es. The Salafist Group rapidly identified itself with the so-called martyrs responsible for the attack on U.S. soil and this was not simply a mere ideological empathy. After 2003, the supply routes of fighters from North Africa (not only Algerian, but also Moroccan and Tunisian) to Iraq were heavily traveled, the jihadists' journeys being mainly organized by GSCP members. Some Algerians even reached important posts within al-Qaeda's structure in Iraq and, according to some estimates, close to 1000 Algerian mujahideen were at the service of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq, who was killed in June 2006. Although it is not an exact number, the U.S. Central Command in Iraq said that 25% of suicide bombers were North African, first and foremost Algerians.

Finally, in January 2007, the GSPC confirmed Zawahiri's message and adopted the name of al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb. With the new banner came striking tactical changes imported from Iraq: while beheading hostages was not innovative for Algerian terrorists either in their own country or even in Bosnia, the release of propaganda videos showing such methods was a novelty. Suicide bombers, both using explosives attached to human bodies and improvised explosive devices placed in vehicles, also inaugurated a new trend of Islamist terrorism in Algeria. Moreover, cells now include more non-Algerian members – from Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya.

Despite being a brief summary of AQIM's past, the aforementioned events show, on one hand, that AQIM's fore-bearers appeared and developed thanks to external influence and, on the other hand, that the links with al-Qaeda – at least among AQIM's members – for all intents and purposes date back to the 1980's. Above all, this path demonstrates that, though in an inconsistent and not exclusive manner, Algerian Islamist terrorism has a global view of jihad in its ethos. It is difficult, if not

impossible, to exactly pinpoint the reasons behind the group's decision to formally affiliate itself with al-Qaeda since communiqués always signal a somewhat holy design as justification. However, considering the path of violent Islamism and the 2006–2007 political context, here are some possible explanations:

Faced with mounting pressure from Algerian authorities and rival Islamist groups, as well as dealing with leadership problems, the GIA started a rampage of violence and of inflammatory communiqués characterized by no strategic planning and a complete absence of political pragmatism. Such a path alienated grassroots supporters, as well as Islamist organizations from neighboring countries, and caused the desertion of many militants who in some cases negotiated peace with the Algerian authorities. The GIA then fell into disgrace.

- *The Media Effect.* One of the strategies found by the Algerian authorities to counter GSCP's terrorism was to prevent bomb attacks from being reported on in the national media. Such gag rules stifled the propagation of fear that all terrorist actions intend to have. Joining al-Qaeda would make it more difficult for Algerian journalists to look away and, even if they did, the Western media certainly would not.
- *Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation.* In September 2005, Algeria passed a bill – to carry out until August 2006 – with the intention of granting amnesty to Islamists willing to reintegrate into society. While this third amnesty plan was far from being as successful as the second in 1999, the GSPC still had to face internal fractures. An alliance with al-Qaeda would provide greater cohesion among militants.
- *Networking.* Formally merging with bin Laden's organization would give a better access to financial and logistic networks held by al-Qaeda throughout the world and would allow the GSPC to further develop their own capabilities.
- *Countering authorities.* After 9/11, the majority of North African governments enhanced their struggle against Islamism. Therefore, groups such as the GSCP, the Morocco Islamic Combatant Group, the Tunisian Combatant Group and even the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group came under increased pressure. An alliance under al-Qaeda's banner would allow cooperation among the groups, providing a common network of resources (human and other) and presenting themselves as a solid front against 'apostate regimes' and 'foreign crusaders'.



- *Doctrine and evolution.* Both the GSPC and al-Qaeda share a salafist understanding of Sunni Islam. It is a communal doctrine that seeks to unite the global *um-mah* (community of believers) under a single Islamic Caliphate. National borders are disregarded for the reason that they are perceived as an illegitimate inheritance left by colonizers and an artificial barrier to the holy purpose of unifying all 'true' Muslims. An alliance of groups who identify themselves as brothers in pursuit of this common cause is a natural corollary to GSPC's evolution, particularly considering growing ties developed throughout time and the structural changes brought by the 9/11 attacks.

Europe as a target

The first Algerian Islamist group to set up in Europe after the country's independence was the FIS. The group's penetration into French soil increased once the 1992 Algerian general elections were interrupted, and its activity basically consisted in creating propaganda denouncing the Algerian government as a French agent in North Africa. Even though Islam was in the background and Islamist vocabulary in their lexicon, grievances were mainly nationalist and expressions of hatred towards a colonial past. In spite of praising violence and episodically inciting jihad, the FIS was never able to establish a solid foothold in France.

Then, the GIA took Islamist violence to a whole different level. Thousands of French and other European citizens were forced to flee Algeria due to the GIA's terror tactics. With regard to attacks in Europe, apart from the aforementioned Air France hijacking in 1994, the GIA executed a bombing campaign from July to November 1995, targeting several places, including the *Saint-Michel* metro station and the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris. One of the important features of GIA

attacks was the group's ability to radicalize and recruit French youth of North African descent, mostly second-generation immigrants.

In comparison to the GIA, the GSPC's first years of operations in Europe were fairly discrete, possibly a reflex of the group's own distress in Algeria. Still, the GSPC was able to take over some of the GIA's cells in France and, although many alleged members were arrested in

countries such as England, Italy, France or Spain, there was not enough evidence to show they were acting on behalf of the GSPC. So what happened afterwards?

In a study published in 2008 in the volume "Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalization Challenge in Europe", Edwin Bakker analyzed 31 cases of accomplished or foiled jihadist terrorist plots in Europe from 2001 to 2006. This study scrutinizes several criteria relating to the 242 individuals implicated in the selected cases. Among other conclusions, Bakker's work reveals that the majority were of North African nationality or origin (primarily Moroccan and Algerian). Recent arrests seem to validate Bakker's data, and many other studies using information from after 2006 also point in this direction.

However, jihadist terrorism is a very diffuse phenomenon at many levels so, despite the evidence of a preponderance of North Africans, it is difficult to effectively tie all cases to AQIM. But some are easier to identify. Spain, France and Italy have all together arrested hundreds of AQIM's militants within their borders. These Euro-

pean cells usually dedicate themselves to drug trafficking, document forgery and theft as a way to finance their operations in Europe and abroad. There are also known cases in which the aim was to recruit and radicalize individuals in order to send them to Iraq, Chechnya or training camps in North Africa. A significant part of European jihadism is made up of individuals radicalized and recruited in Europe, second and third genera-

In many parts of the world, the 9/11 attacks catalyzed recruitment and overall support for Islamist terrorist organizations and spread the generation of self-radicalized cells. Furthermore, the post-9/11 context led to important changes within the Islamist terrorist community, giving birth to organizations with a lesser degree of centralization, now operating under a 'bottom-up' logic in which the initiative for planning and executing attacks lays primarily with the cells and not necessarily within leadership structures. The GSPC was no exception to these changes.



tion immigrants with little or no connection with their national roots. While this new generation often lacks solid links to formal terrorist organizations (and thus are called *self-starter* cells), some of the units operating in Europe took advantage of previous schemes implemented in the 1990's. In Spain, for example, Islamist terrorism dates from the 1980's, although it was permanently established in the following decade. The initial cells were of Syrian and Algerian origin, the latter group with strong connections with the GIA. The Syrian group, known as Abu Dahdah cell, which evolved to a Moroccan-dominated cluster, allegedly had solid contacts with al-Qaeda. Currently, there is a discussion on whether the Abu Dahdah cell spawned the group responsible for the March 11th 2004 Madrid bomb attacks, or if the attackers were a self-starter cell, regularly described as 'leaderless jihad'.

Indeed, Spain (and Portugal) occupies an important place within the salafist narrative, which explains the interest of Islamist terrorist groups in this region of Europe. The conquest of Granada in 1492 and the subsequent demise of the Islamic Al-Andaluz is seen by salafists as a turning point marking the beginning of the end for the Islamic Empires' splendor. As expected, AQIM shares this belief, unmistakably manifested by the name given to their media wing: Al-Andaluz Establishment for Media Production. In the communiqué that announced the creation of its media wing in October 2009, AQIM presents Al-Andaluz as "the lost paradise of Muslims, and the Muslims owned it for eight centuries when they established in the region and raised the

banner of jihad (...). Jihad, then, is a duty of the Muslim nation for almost six centuries since the first city in al-Andaluz fell (...). Not only today, and not only since the Jewish occupation of Palestine or the Crusader invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan and

Somalia or the occupation of the crusaders' agents to the Islamic Maghrib and the rest of the Islamic countries ... but since the collapse of al-Andaluz!". References to Iberia's Islamic Caliphate can likewise be found elsewhere. In Morocco, for example, a group called Conquest of Al-Andaluz (*Fath Al-Andaluz*) operated until national intelligence agencies dismantled it in 2008.

A look into recent official data may offer a comprehensive final picture of the current situation. In Europol's 2009 *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report*, the agency notes that 187 individuals were arrested in 2008 on suspicion of involvement with Islamist terrorism. They were primarily nationals of or were originally from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, trends also verified in 2006 and 2007, and were arrested primarily in France and Spain, but also in other countries, such as Belgium and Austria. In the cases where it was possible to establish or infer connections with organized Islamist terrorism, AQIM appears at the top of the list. In the cases where it was not possible to establish links, the majority were self-starter cells, instigated by jihadist propaganda. The report also indicates that Iraq as a destination for European jihadist recruits has been apparently replaced by Afghanistan. Europol considers both the rise of 'home-grown' Islamist terrorism

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and the use of European cells as logistical and financial support providers to activities outside European Union borders, to be continuous trends.



The Sahel Desert

The Sahel is a strip of land characterized by its arid climate, stretching from Mauritania to the Horn of Africa, just south of the Sahara desert. This region is marked

by acute differences among its peoples (even within a country's borders) that frequently lead to violent clashes; a number of illicit forms of trafficking (cigarettes, drugs, etc.); extreme poverty; authoritarian regimes; corruption; uncontrolled borders; and oil, gas and minerals. In addition, states rarely have effective authority over the full extent of their own territory. As soon as reports of Islamist terrorism in the area surfaced, the Sahel was immediately portrayed as a potential Afghanistan on Europe's doorstep.

In February 2008, two Austrian tourists were kidnapped by AQIM in Tunisia and taken to a location where Algeria's, Mali's and Niger's borders meet. Their captivity ended in November 2008 after the Austrian government allegedly paid a ransom of US\$5 million. In December 2008, two Canadian diplomats working for the United Nations were kidnapped in Niger and released in April of the following year. Three Spanish NGO workers were abducted in Mauritania by AQIM in November 2009 and taken to Mali. According to the Spanish media, a ransom of US\$7 million and the release of AQIM members imprisoned in Spain were asked in exchange for the hostages. As of this writing, an Italian couple abducted in December of the same year is also currently held in Mali. Pierre Camatte, a French citizen, was kidnapped in Mali in November 2009. In order to release him, AQIM demanded the liberation of four of its members incarcerated in the same African country.

These and other AQIM actions in the Sahel were supposedly led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, also known as Khaled Abou al-Abbas or simply Laâouar, an Afghan Arab who had also been involved in GSPC's criminal enterprises.

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These events coincide with a decrease of Islamist violence in Algeria, which seems to indicate that AQIM is moving southward and gradually establishing the Sahel as a refuge and operations base. Furthermore, it confirms kidnappings as a new source of financing, with Westerners as the preferred target. But the situation can be even more complex. In a DEA (U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency) operation, three Malian nationals with ties to the terrorist organization Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), were arrested in Ghana in December 2009 and taken to the U.S. to face trial for drug trafficking with the purpose of financing AQIM. Though groundbreaking, this was not the first time Islamist terrorist groups have been tied to South American drug cartels. The Lebanese Hezbollah also has known interests in the tri-border area.

However, the information available does not provide absolute certainties these actions were all the AQIM's handiwork. On the contrary, data suggests some were carried out by mere criminal groups operating in an anarchical fashion and inspired by AQIM. More than talking about AQIM, attention should focus on cross-fertilization between groups.

Despite all the aforementioned attacks and dynamics, it is difficult to assess the real scope of AQIM's abilities and influence in the Sahel. Due to the region's characteristics, gathering information is a difficult endeavor. Furthermore, local governments generally have a vested interest in exaggerating the threat.



The increase of Islamist terrorism signs in the Sahel has led the U.S. to focus on the region, namely through its Africa Command or AFRICOM,¹ which further increased the attention given by the international media to a strip of land barely known a few years ago. While the current U.S. administration is genuinely concerned – just as the previous was – with fighting terrorism, if the Sahel becomes an indisputable stage for Islamist violence, it will provide the impetus for the U.S. to strengthen its presence on the African continent and perhaps regain some of the influence it has been steadily losing to China.

Conclusion

The change from GSPC to AQIM was neither a publicity stunt nor a passage from local to transnational terrorism. The group's tactics have changed, stronger ties in Europe and Africa have been developed and AQIM has actively contributed to al-Qaeda's current strategy of instigating self-starter cells and homegrown terrorism. However, in spite of the previous primacy given to local objectives, the international ties of Algerian Islamist terrorism date back to the 1980's, and those same ties played an important role throughout the evolution from the GIA to AQIM. Moreover, by professing salafism, the GSPC was already internationalist at its core.

¹ For more on AFRICOM, see Pedro Seabra's "AFRICOM: No place to call home?" (IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin, No. 1, November 2009): 5-8.

Studying the path of Algerian Islamist terrorism is also helpful to understand what al-Qaeda stands for nowadays. It demonstrates that bin Laden's organization functions mainly as an inspiring element, a banner for salafists in the entire world, while at the same time maintaining an effective structure, thus not evaporating into a mere idea as is often argued.

Hence, it is a mistake to portray AQIM as a branch dependent on al-Qaeda. There were and probably still are contacts between North African cells and 'al-Qaeda Central', yet AQIM operates with a high degree of autonomy. In fact, al-Qaeda benefits from this inspirational logic because, when separated and often unrelated groups act on behalf of the same organization, that organization is able to present itself as a structure with tentacles all over the world, a situation no less menacing than when al-Qaeda was more centralized and solidly structured.

Regardless of whether or not AQIM carries out more highly organized operations in the Sahel, the unstable conditions of the region itself make it a serious threat to regional and global security. AQIM appears to have attracted other groups that, even if taking action in an uncoordinated manner and not formally depending on each other, pose a real danger for states and citizens. While it may remain marginal economically, AQIM is ensuring that the Sahel is rising to the forefront of international Islamist terrorist financing and activities.

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