

Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

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Abstract: This article details how prior to the establishment of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Meghrebis—that is, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and others—made up a significant percentage of the foreign fighters in the al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq, thus helping to build the trust networks between al Qaeda central and the Maghreb-based groups, culminating in the the 2007 formal affiliation of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) with al Qaeda. Since then, an emboldened AQIM has evolved significantly, both strategically and operationally.

In a video produced for the fifth anniversary of al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the American homeland, the group's deputy head, Ayman al-Zawahiri, declared that Osama bin Laden had instructed him to announce that "the GSPC [*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat] has joined al Qaeda." The Egyptian terrorist leader went on to hail the "blessed union" between the GSPC and al Qaeda, pledging that it would "be a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous sons of [former colonial power] France." Urging the group to become "a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders" in the region and beyond, he prayed that "our brothers from the GSPC [would] succeed in causing harm to the top members of the crusader coalition, and particularly their leader, the vicious America."¹

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¹ "Al-Qaeda "Issue France Threat," BBC News, September 14, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5345202.stm> (accessed December 10, 2010).

Since then, the meaning of this change on both a regional and global level has been the subject of considerable debate among policymakers, analysts, and scholars. For some, this was merely the rebranding of a failed organization—one still largely focused on Algeria. Others saw “the culmination of a multiyear evolution toward the current structure from the Algerian Islamist insurgency of the 1990s toward full integration with the contemporary al-Qaeda.”² In any event, the formal linkage with al Qaeda was certainly not the group’s first contact with foreign jihadist elements—quite to the contrary, the affiliation was the result of prior interaction with combatant groups abroad and not the other way around. Moreover, it can be shown that the ongoing evolution of the group was very much driven by such contacts.

As it turned out, “al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM, *Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami*) has distinguished itself from its predecessors in its political objectives, tactics, and organizational structure. This is the case, even as it has had to confront significant challenges from local governments with increasingly effective counterterrorism capabilities, a civilian population that is generally indifferent—if not always entirely unsympathetic—to its newfound pan-Islamist ideology, and increased involvement in the region by the United States and its European allies. To better assess the threat that this phenomenon currently poses, it is necessary to review the origins and development of AQIM, including those of its antecedents, before surveying the strategic and operation evolution of the group as it has adapted itself since its al Qaeda affiliation.

Islamism in the Maghreb

While political Islamism and the associated manifestations of violent extremism are not new to the Maghreb, the objectives pursued by its adherents have varied considerably.³ During their anti-colonial struggle, the vocabulary of “jihad” and “martyrdom” was appropriated by Algerian nationalists to good effect in consolidating their support among the populace. The emergence of a secular socialist state after independence, thus, came as a disappointment to those who had sought the establishment of an Islamist regime, and the political and economic malaise of the late 1980s attracted others to their cause.

The same period saw the return of an estimated 1,000 Algerians who had gone to join the Afghan mujahedin in the fight against the Soviet invasion of their country. Overall, it is believed that between 3,000 and 4,000 Algerians had gone through the training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan; in addition to the 1,000 who returned home, another 1,000 drifted to the conflicts in Bosnia

² David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror,” *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, December 2008, p. 91.

³ See Carlos Echevarría Jesús, “Radical Islam in the Maghreb,” *Orbis*, Spring 2004, pp. 351-364.

and Chechnya. Some have noted that on their return, *les Afghanis*, as they became known, continued wearing Afghan-style clothing, beards, and turbans.⁴ These Algerian “Afghans” had been among the most numerous of the Arab contingents in the Pakistan-based jihadist community and, once returned home, often equated the “infidel” regime in Moscow that, at least according to their narrative, they had defeated with the “infidel” regime in Algiers which still ruled their homeland.⁵

At this time, in 1989, the Algerian government decided to legalize *al-Jabba al-Islamiya li' l-Inqadb* or *Front Islamique du Salut*, (FIS, “Islamic Salvation Front”) as an opposition party, deeming it more prudent to at least keep Islamist activities out in the open where they could be better monitored and controlled. The FIS garnered goodwill for itself and, thus, popular support for its platform of an Algerian state based on Islamic principles by providing, through a burgeoning network of mosques, a variety of welfare and other social services largely neglected by the government. When, in an effort to shore up its rapidly declining legitimacy, the government called elections in 1991, the FIS swept many local races as well as the first round of the parliamentary poll, bringing it to the threshold of power. At this point, the military intervened and, nullifying the election results, seized power.

The subsequent imprisonment of many FIS leaders and the banning of the group itself removed the possibility of incorporating Islamists within the political system and vindicated those radicals among them who held that the violent overthrow of the secular regime in the tradition of the Afghan jihad would be the only way to obtain the establishment of a government based on Islamic principles.

The GIA and GSPC Precursors

When civil war broke out following the assassination, in June 1992, of Mohammed Boudiaf, the nationalist recalled from exile by the military junta to serve as titular head of the Algerian state, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA, “Armed Islamic Group”) quickly acquired predominance among the factions opposing the regime. Heavily influenced by returning veterans of the Afghan jihad, the GIA aimed at more than reforming the state along the lines of the Islamist agenda. Rather, it sought the wholesale transformation of society, viewing those who did not share its convictions as apostates from Islam who could be legitimately killed (the doctrine of the “collective excommunication of Muslims,” *takfir al-Mujtama*). As “its bloody massacres of civilians caused public support for the group to dwindle, and persistent rumors of the group

⁴ See Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series 144 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2008), p. 32.

⁵ See Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Middle East Journal*, Spring 2009, pp. 215-216.

being manipulated by the Algerian intelligence agencies further discredited it,”⁶ various splinter groups emerged.

Created in 1998 by a former GIA regional commander, Hassan Hattab, as a corrective to the strategic and tactical mistakes of the organization, the GSPC became the numerically strongest of the breakaway groups. Repudiating the GIA doctrine of the apostasy of society, the GSPC directed its attacks at government and military targets. In this respect, Hattab was influenced by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who by then was the chief ideological influence on al Qaeda. In contrast to those adhering to the GIA’s more extreme position, al-Zawahiri was more conventional in his thought and “considered that *al-takfir* applied only to the state and refused to declare the whole society apostate.”⁷

At the same time, albeit somewhat ironically, the various attempts by the Algerian government to achieve national reconciliation—including the 1999 referendum on “Civil Concord,” the amnesties repeatedly offered Presidents Liamine Zéroual and Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and the 2005 referendum on the “Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation”—actually helped the GSPC to expand. GSPC’s national emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, who eventually acceded to the leadership after Hattab, was displaced for trying to make his peace with the regime. He was reported to have even created four units with the specialized mission of recruiting newly released militants, indicating that the group had “made a particular utilitarian and rational reading of amnesty and that it has gone through a methodic process of recruitment.”⁸

While it organized zones of command throughout Algeria, the GSPC focused its energies and operations in two key areas in particular: the Kabylie region in the north, which gave ready access to the major cities along the Mediterranean coast while still providing in its forests and mountains considerable sanctuary for bases, and the vast southern region along Algeria’s border with Mali and Niger, which offered access to long-established smuggling routes.⁹

While it emphasized a nationalist rather than an internationalist agenda, concentrating its efforts on toppling the Algerian government and replacing it with an Islamist regime, the GSPC nonetheless had relationships with other *salafi-jihadi* groups in the Maghreb, built on the convergence of interests and facilitated by both ties developed in battle fronts like Afghanistan after the U.S.-led invasion in late 2001, and the tangle of logistical support

⁶ Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (November 2007), p. 408.

⁷ International Crisis Group, *Islamism, Violence, and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page*, ICG Middle East Report 29, July 30, 2004, p. 14.

⁸ Jean-Luc Marret, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A ‘Glocal’ Organization,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, June 2008, p. 544.

⁹ See Gregory A. Smith, “Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 2, May 2009, pp. 65-66.

networks in the diaspora.¹⁰ These included the *Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain* (GICM, “Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group”); the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (*al-Jama’at al-Islamiyya al-Muqatilah fil-Libya*), led by Abu Abdallah Al-Sadek, some of whose members were reportedly trained in Tunisia by Algerian militants; and various Tunisian groups like the nebulous *Jeunesse de l’Unification et du Jihad (Tawhid wal-Jihad)*, for which the GSPC provided training support, and infiltration.¹¹

The GSPC also proactively recruited and sent Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian volunteers to join in the al Qaeda-led insurgency in Iraq following the American invasion and the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. This active support resulted in a significant number of Maghrebis in the ranks of the foreign fighters there. In June 2006, the U.S. military even announced that approximately 20 percent of suicide bombers in Iraq were Algerian, while another five percent were Moroccan or Tunisian.¹² In July 2005, Algerian authorities arrested an Egyptian named Yasir al-Misri, who had been using a travel agency in Algiers as a front for moving GSPC fighters to Iraq. A year later, in September 2006, an al Qaeda suspect name Abu al-Ham was also arrested in the same capital on charges of helping the GSPC funnel fighter to Iraq through Syria, where he had lived until he moved to Algeria to pick up where the Egyptians left off.¹³

Al Qaeda’s Franchise in Northwest Africa

The sending of its recruits to be foreign fighters in Iraq would ultimately lead to the GSPC’s transformation into al Qaeda’s recognized affiliate in North Africa. It is often forgotten that the GSPC reached out to al Qaeda as early as 2003, but the latter’s leadership was reluctant to embrace it. First there was the question of whether the GSPC brought anything to the broader jihadist network since the combination of crackdowns and amnesty programs had severely weakened it, causing its membership to plummet from about 4,000 in 2002 to less than 500 in 2006.¹⁴ Then there were doubts about the GSPC’s commitment to the global agenda given its prioritization of the

¹⁰ See Kathryn Haar, “Emerging Terrorist Trends in Spain’s Moroccan Communities,” *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 9 (May 4, 2006), http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=758&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=181&no_cache=1 (accessed December 10, 2010).

¹¹ See Marret, pp. 542-543.

¹² Ibid., p. 545.

¹³ See Emily Hunt, *Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa: A ‘Thorn in the Neck’ of the United States?* Policy Focus 65 (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2007), pp. 7-8.

¹⁴ Alex Grynkewich and Chris Reifel, “Modeling Jihad: A System Dynamics Model of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat Financial Subsystem,” *Strategic Insights* 5, November 2006, <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2006/Nov/grynkewichNov06.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2010).

struggle in Algeria. The sending of fighters to Iraq addressed the concerns about the Algerian group's loyalties, while its reduction in numbers "formed an evolutionary bottleneck" through which members emerged "convinced of the merit of their internationalist cause and were ready to capitalize on the lessons learned from interaction with the global jihadist movement."¹⁵

The association made sense for both sides. The expansion into a new theater of operations was consistent both with al Qaeda's global ideology and with its operational interest potentially gaining access to an extensive network among the North African immigrant communities in France, Spain, and other Western European countries which the GSPC had inherited from its precursors. The Algerian group gained the prestige of the al Qaeda "brand name" which, within the year, had actually brought to it "a considerable number of Mauritians, Libyans, Moroccans, Tunisians, Malians, and Nigerians," according to the statements made by its emir in a wide-ranging interview he gave the *New York Times*, published in July 2008.¹⁶

Unlike its precursor organizations, especially the GIA, AQIM has not managed to control large areas within Algeria for any sustained period of time. However, it has compensated by the adaption of terrorist tactics imported from other fronts in the global *salafi-jihadi* struggle—like the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) in repeated attacks against high-profile public targets, resulting if not in a significant increase in the number of operations, certainly a spectacular increase in the casualties resulting from each. This is especially the case where they deployed near-simultaneous or otherwise coordinated bomb attacks,¹⁷ such as the spectacular December 11, 2007, suicide truck bombings in Algiers of the Constitutional Council and the United Nations building, which left 41 people dead and more than 170 others wounded. It ought to be noted that suicide attacks were very rare in North Africa, even during the height of the Algerian civil war which left hundreds of thousands dead or wounded, until more recent years when "legitimized by ideologues close to al-Qaeda, it became increasingly commonplace."¹⁸

The diffusion of videos highlighting the attacks to radical websites on the Internet is another practice imported from other al Qaeda-linked terrorist networks. In fact, one of the first ones of this genre, a video claiming responsibility for a December 2006 attack on a bus in Bouchaoui, Algeria,

¹⁵ David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2, December 2008, p. 94.

¹⁶ "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

¹⁷ See Hanna Rogan, "Violent Patterns: A Quantitative Study of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb" (paper, Conference on "Understanding Jihadism: Origins, Evolution and Future Perspectives," Oslo, Norway, March 19-21, 2009).

¹⁸ Mohamed Sifaoui, *Al-Qaïda Maghreb Islamique. Le groupe terroriste qui menace la France* (Paris: Éditions Encre d'Orient, 2010), p. 189.

which left one person dead and many more wounded, including one American and one Briton, featured an introductory speech by Ayman al-Zawahiri. In fact, a cable sent by the U.S. embassy following the December 2007 Algiers bombings, and recently published by WikiLeaks, focused on the how the attacks “demonstrated the influence of Iraqi jihadis,” citing how “AQIM videos strongly resemble videos from Iraq in terms of the music, Quranic citations and filming of hits on enemy targets they show.”¹⁹

While kidnapping for ransom by AQIM is not a new tactic—recall the mass abduction of 32 German, Austrian, and Dutch tourists by the GSPC in 2003, to say nothing of the fairly routine taking of Algerians—the focus on Western prisoners and extraction of spectacular ransom payments and concessions can certainly be said to represent a qualitative jump that was facilitated by both the “rebranding” of the organization and the ideological influence which accompanied it. The group definitely received a fillip from the affiliation and, with the benefit of hindsight, Droukdel’s concluding statement in his *New York Times* interview seems less braggadocio than a strategic plan for consolidation and expansion:

We believe that our greatest achievement is that the jihad is still continuing in the Islamic Maghreb for sixteen years. And today it is developing and climbing. By the generosity of God we were able to transfer our jihad from the country to regional, and we were able to expand our activity to the Maghreb states and the African coast, and we could participate in the regional awakening jihad. Based on their sacrifices and their blood, our mujahedeen could keep the jihad reason and carry the flag generation after generation, and revive the absent duty in the hearts of the Muslims. Today, we receive a lot of requests from some Muslims who want to do martyrdom operations. In Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia we see Muslim youths who support our matter, they are ready to sacrifice themselves and their money for the sake of supporting Islam. We consider this as one of our greatest achievements. Among our greatest achievements is that we realized unity with our brothers as an important step towards the adult succession. Also, we did not weaken and we remained on the road, we developed our jihad and we revived the jihad matter in the heart of our nation after it was absent for a long time. This is a big change in the region and we thank God that he enabled us to participate in its achievement.²⁰

Mohktar Belmoktar, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, and AQIM’s New Horizons

Perhaps the most interesting—and, potentially, most dangerous—developments in the ongoing evolution of AQIM are taking place with respect to the group’s southern command, what was formerly its Zone 9, covering most of southern Algeria (the *wilayas* of El Oued, Ouargla, Illizi, Tamanghas-

¹⁹ “U.S. Embassy Cables: Al-Qaida in the Maghreb’s Deadly Blows,” *The Guardian*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/135155> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁰ “An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdal,” *op. cit.*

set, and Adrar). Under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a.k.a. Khaled Abou al-Abbas, a.k.a. Laâouar (“one-eyed”), an acquaintance of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi from the year-and-a-half he had spent in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, receiving military training in the Khaldin and Jihadwal camps, as well as at al Qaeda camps in Jalalabad,²¹ AQIM has spread its operations across the Sahel into Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and elsewhere.

In many respects, the Sahel, the belt connecting North Africa and West Africa and straddling ancient trade and migration routes, was the ideal next step for AQIM. The region is strategically important for several reasons, including its role as a bridge between the Arab Maghreb and black Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as its important natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable. Moreover, the Sahel belt touches several countries—including Algeria, Nigeria, and Sudan—with serious security challenges of their own that could easily spill over their borders. Despite all this, the borders there are virtually unguarded, permitting ease of movement, as well as access to populations which, if not exactly clamoring for AQIM’s message, are at least somewhat receptive to it due to both their social, economic, and political marginalization and historical memories of jihad out of the desert. In fact, it was not long before training camps were operating in Mauritania, for example,²² and the country saw its first suicide bombing, an August 2009 attack in Nouakchott on the street between the French and Libyan embassies that killed the native militant who carried it out and injured three others.²³

That Belmokhtar has been able to emerge in such a pivotal role of presiding over this geopolitical shift in the terrorist groups operations despite his “being at odds with AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel,” including “even going so far as to criticize Droukdel’s leadership of the organization,”²⁴ is due to the increasingly decentralized nature of the extremist group as a whole. For it has sought to adapt itself to the changing conditions in its Algerian base where robust anti-terrorism measures and better counterinsurgency efforts have led to large numbers of the militants being killed or captured while amnesty programs have whittled away even more of the group’s strength. More recently, Belmokhtar is thought to be in direct command of one of the two main units (*katibats*)²⁵ operational in AQIM’s southern flank.

²¹ See Botha, p. 50.

²² Nicholas Schmidle, “The Saharan Conundrum,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²³ Daniel Magnowski, “France Condemns Mauritania Suicide Attack,” Reuters, August 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5780LZ20090809> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁴ Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, May 8, 2009, p. 9.

²⁵ AQIM is thought to be organized into geographical zones, each of which has one or more operational battalions (*katibats*), which are further subdivided into several companies (*fassilas*). A *fassila* is made up of two “platoons” (*sarayas*), each with twelve to eighteen members, who may be further organized into smaller cells.

The links that Belmokhtar has forged with local communities in the harsh desert environment, including the fabled nomadic “blue men” of the Tuareg, a people native to the region whose members have had a contentious history with the national governments, have been the key to his success. According to one senior Malian military commander, following his intermediary role in resolving the 2003 kidnapping of the European tourists, Belmokhtar was granted *de facto* asylum in Mali: “We promised him we would leave him alone under the condition that he did not carry out hostile actions on our soil.”²⁶ Belmokhtar used the opportunity to get married, taking as his first bride a young Malian woman from an Arab family in Timbuktu. He subsequently also took additional wives from Tuareg and Brabiche Arab tribes.²⁷ The marital alliances helped gain him entrée into smuggling and other extralegal activities for which the region is infamous. While Belmokhtar clearly profited personally from these criminal enterprises—one regional newspaper described him as “controlling the majority of the traffic in arms, cigarette, drug, and stolen car in southern Algeria and the Sahel,” as well as having a hand in human trafficking—he also used the desert routes and smuggling networks to funnel arms to AQIM in northern Algeria.²⁸

Evidence has also emerged of AQIM’s involvement in the burgeoning drug traffic transiting Belmokhtar’s operational area.²⁹ In October 2010, Moroccan authorities broke up an international drug trafficking ring, with links to South American cartels, that was transporting cocaine and marijuana between Latin America and Europe, via North Africa. The Moroccan interior minister claimed that with the arrests there was established, what he called, “an apparent coordination and confirmed collaboration” between drug traffickers and AQIM, noting that the terrorist group was making money by using its members’ knowledge of desert routes, weapons, and means of transportation to protect the traffickers.³⁰ The potential for the region being the setting for an explosive mix of Islamist terrorism, secular grievances, and criminality was underscored barely a month later when authorities in Mali arrested six major

²⁶ Colonel El Hadj Gamou, quoted in “Sur les traces des djihadistes du Sahara,” *Le Figaro*, March 19, 2007, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/20070319.FIG000000262_sur_les_traces_des_djihadistes_du_sahara.html (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁷ See Sambou Diarra, “Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar: Profession, preneur d’otages,” *L’Aube* (Bamako), April 9, 2009, <http://www.afribone.com/spip.php?article18583> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁸ See J. Peter Pham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Ongoing Evolution of Jihadist Terrorism in North Africa,” *World Defense Review* (May 14, 2009), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham051409.shtml> (accessed December 10, 2010).

²⁹ See Christophe Champin, *Afrique noire, poudre blanche. L’Afrique sous la coupe des cartels de la drogue* (Brussels: André Versaille Éditeur, 2010), pp. 136-140.

³⁰ Taieb Cherqaoui, quoted in Anne Look, “Morocco says Dismantled International Drug Trafficking Ring Linked to Terrorists,” *Voice of America*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/north/Morocco-says-Dismantled-International-Drug-Trafficking-Ring-Linked-to-Terrorists-105188824.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

drug traffickers whom they linked with a criminal gang that had aligned itself with AQIM and whose leader had been detained just earlier in the week next door in Mauritania. The Malians identified the six as “coming from the ranks of the Polisario Front,” the Algerian-sponsored group that has unsuccessfully sought for nearly four decades to wrest control of the Western Sahara from Morocco,³¹ and were “one of the three major networks of traffickers who pass through the Sahara and sell the drugs to Europe.”³²

While the question of whether or not AQIM itself has taken on a direct role in illicit trafficking is still subject to often fierce debate, but a substantial body of evidence seems to indicate that it has worked with traffickers of cocaine and other contraband, offering them protection. And certainly AQIM is well positioned to benefit financially from the lucrative illicit trade networks that cross the Sahara. With the group’s members familiar with the areas in which they operate, they are able to offer protection to the traffickers and tax the trade, especially in the absence of effective countervailing governmental structures.

The safe haven Belmokhtar acquired in the Sahel has enabled AQIM to establish “mobile training camps, in particular those in northern Mali [which] provided training to nationals as far south as Nigeria, nationals from neighboring countries, other countries in West Africa, as well as individuals recruited in Europe.” As a result, “GSPC/AQIM migrated from a domestic to a transnational terror group.”³³

Belmokhtar’s style has been characterized by a remarkable pragmatism. His apparently all-but-independent branch of AQIM is increasingly willing to make common cause with criminal elements in the interest of both augmenting its tactical and operational capabilities and extending its strategic reach. In the case of the three Spanish aid workers from the Catalan non-governmental organization Barcelona Acció Sòlidària who were abducted in November 2009 when their convoy, which was carrying humanitarian relief materiel, was ambushed by armed men in northwestern Mauritania, approximately 170 kilometers from the capital of Nouakchott, while AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack, an investigation by Mauritanian security services led them to one Omar Sid’Ahmed Ould Hamma, a.k.a. Omar le Sahraoui (“Omar the Sahrawi”), who was arrested in Mali in February 2010 and extradited to stand trial in Mauritania. Subsequently nearly two dozen accomplices were rounded up by Mauritanian officials.

³¹ See J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Toward a Realistic Solution of the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, Spring 2010, pp. 1-24.

³² “Six ‘Major’ Drug Traffickers Arrested in Mali,” AFP, December 9, 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hkrHwHj7tdxQRWZLlbi0R5gWs2NA?docId=CNG.62a22137f469f072689fa6696afc6142.c31> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³³ Anneli Botha, “Islamist Terrorist Threat in the Maghreb: Recent Developments in Algeria,” *Circunstancia* 7, no. 18 (January 2009), http://www.ortegaygasset.edu/contenidos.aspx?id_d=802 (accessed December 10, 2010).

What is interesting, as the Spanish daily *ABC* reported last year, is that Omar le Sahraoui was never a member of AQIM. Rather he is, as the newspaper's headline noted, a mercenary working for the regional al Qaeda franchise. In fact, Omar le Sahraoui, as his *nom de guerre* suggests, "was part of the hierarchy of the Polisario Front." A source quoted by the Spanish newspaper described him as "a man of the desert," who "placed his expert knowledge of the territory gained over the decades at the service of terrorists and traffickers of drugs and other contraband."³⁴ At his subsequent trial, it was further revealed that he had been paid by Belmokhtar to organize and carry out the attack. According to European analysts, those rounded up with Omar le Sahraoui represented a veritable cross-section of Saharan and Sahelian rogue outfits. They included at least three other Polisario veterans, Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali Ould Rguibi, Mohamed Salem Hamoud, and Nafii Ould Mohamed M'Barek.³⁵ In July, after an exhaustive trial, Omar le Sahraoui was convicted by a Mauritanian court for his role in organizing the abduction of the three Spaniards and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor.

Regrettably, less than a fortnight after the terrorist mercenary's conviction was confirmed on appeal by the Mauritanian judiciary in early August, he was a free man. His release was part of the price that AQIM demanded in exchange for the two Spanish men they still held (the third hostage, a woman, was released in March).³⁶ Although Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero will neither confirm nor deny it, Spain's Socialist government apparently also forked over a significant ransom to the terrorists, estimated between five and ten million euros.³⁷ If true, this would make the kidnapping of the three Spaniards the most profitable operation of its kind that AQIM has ever orchestrated, possibly topping even the \$8 million it reportedly collected in early 2009 in exchange for freeing Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay and several German and Swiss civilians. Worse, it seems that AQIM does not waste any time in putting new resources it acquires to work, as evidenced by the ratchet upwards of activity since the latest ransom was collected, including the September 16, 2010, raid on Airlit in northern Niger and the kidnapping of seven expatriates, among whom were five French citizens, connected with the French nuclear group AREVA. According to

³⁴ See Luís de Vega, "Mercenario de Al Qaida," *ABC*, April 12, 2010, http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-12-04-2010/abc/Nacional/mercenario-de-al-qaida_14043335259.html (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁵ See Claude Moniquet (ed.), *Le Front Polisario et le développement du terrorisme au Sabel* (Brussels: European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, 2010), pp. 17-19.

³⁶ See "Omar le Sahraoui, monnaie d'échange des ex-otages espagnols," *Radio France Internationale*, August, 24, 2010, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20100824-omar-le-sahraoui-monnaie-echange-ex-otages-espagnols> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁷ See Albert Vilalta and Roque Pascual, "Liberados los dos cooperantes catalanes secuestrados en Mauritania desde noviembre," *El Mundo*, August 23, 2010, <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2010/08/22/barcelona/1282490182.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

Algerian intelligence sources, the raid was led by an Algerian extremist, Abid Hammadou, (a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abou Zeid), head of the same AQIM cell that had abducted another French citizen, Michel Germaneau, last year. Nigerien sources add that the raiders were assisted by guides speaking Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg.³⁸

Abou Zeid, who leads AQIM's other main far southern *katibat*, is a native of Ourgla in southern Algeria. An early FIS militant, he joined the GIA with his brother Bachir, who was killed in a fight with the military in the mid-1990s. Abou Zeid has been accused of involvement in the abduction dozens of Western hostages and was said to have ordered—or carried out—the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyers in 2009, after London refused his demand for ransom, but also the release of jailed militant Abu Qutada al-Filistini. He placed his “Tarek Ibn Ziad” unit (named in honor of the eighth century Muslim conqueror of Visigothic Spain) under the command of Belmokhtar when the latter was head of Zone 9 in 1998,³⁹ although some analysts have recently seen him as assuming greater prominence not only in the terrorist network,⁴⁰ but beyond.⁴¹

The September 2010 abduction of the hostages seized from Niger actually raises a number of questions. First, from their delayed reaction to the raid, it is not altogether known to what extent that the central leadership of AQIM had a hand in or even foreknowledge of the operation, despite the appointment by the group's council of Yahia Djouadi, (a.k.a. Yahia Abu Amar), as the nominal head of its southern zone.⁴² Second, there was the al-Jazeera broadcast of a videotape message from AQIM's emir, Droukdel, with the claim that Osama bin Laden alone could negotiate the release of the prisoners⁴³—which, if proven true, would represent a far closer link between al Qaeda and its North African franchise than previously thought.

In any event, AQIM's southern commanders have shown themselves to be pragmatic in using the resources which come their way to “professionalize” operations, that is, employing mercenaries like Omar le Sahraoui and others willing to work for hire for the terrorist organization irrespective of their

³⁸ See J. Peter Pham, “When Crime Does Pay: The Threat of an Emboldened al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *World Defense Review* (September 23, 2010), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham092310.shtml> (accessed December 10, 2010).

³⁹ See Sifaoui, pp. 143-144.

⁴⁰ Adlène Meddi and Mélanie Matarese, “Sahel: Abou Zeid, l'irrésistible ascension,” *El Watan*, October 1, 2010, http://www.elwatan.com/weekend/contrechamps/sahel-abou-zeid-l-irresistible-ascension-01-10-2010-92611_184.php (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴¹ See Alfred de Montesquiou, “Abou Zeid veut être le Ben Laden di Sahara,” *Paris Match*, September 30, 2010, <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu-Match/Monde/Actu/Abou-Zeid-veut-etre-le-Ben-Laden-du-Sahara-215426/> (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴² Interview with senior North African intelligence official, November 16, 2010.

⁴³ “France Told to Deal with bin Laden over Hostages, AFP, November 18, 2010, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g95mrzGMy_DF435jBpgtWcNNnSMg?docId=CNG.b87c37c112754e2733d81dcedf9dafdd.ce1 (accessed December 10, 2010).

ideological commitments. The six killed in the failed French raid to free Germaneau in July, for example, included three Tuareg, an Algerian, a Mauritanian, and a Moroccan. Tuareg guides were said to have assisted in the abduction of the AREVA personnel. By using personnel who are either trained or who have superior knowledge of the geographic or social space in which operations are to take place, AQIM's terrorist activities not only stand a greater chance of success, but in case of failure and capture, authorities do not gain much by way of entry into or leverage with the terrorist group itself.

AQIM and the Future

Much has been made of the alleged differences within the leadership of AQIM's most dynamic branch, the southernmost *katibats* led by Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. The former is said to be "focused less on jihad than on raising cash by protecting cigarette and cocaine smuggling that has traditionally flourished in the area," while the latter is described as more "hard line."⁴⁴ However, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive as the wealth gained from the criminal activity can be used to fuel what had been a weakened, but still active, jihad (some analysts question the extent to which the organization's capacity for violence has been diminished, pointing out that as more North African fighters return home from Iraq—presumably with improved combat and bomb-making skills—the intensity of the conflict might actually increase in the near term).

In fact, the hybrid structure that AQIM has adopted by combining the old (e.g., the grievances against the incumbent Maghrebi regime, the support networks among the North African diaspora in Europe) with the new (e.g., ideological structures, strategic planning, the local (e.g., the remoteness of the Sahara, the informal political economies of the Sahel) and the global (e.g., VBIEDs, al Qaeda "branding"), may well prove to be the model for similar regional groups—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Southeast Asia come to mind—around the globe and an even greater security challenge. One veteran intelligence analyst with extensive Africa experience has sketched out a frightening scenario:

Rebel, warlord, terrorist, and criminal organizations are complex and highly fungible structures that tend to have multiple identities. Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether a political agenda (for rebels and terrorists) or an economic agenda (for warlords and criminals) is the driving force, because groups tend to disguise and cloud their true motivations. . . The AQIM of the future may come to consist of only a few hundred hardcore terrorists waging international jihad against the

⁴⁴ Edward Cody, "'Emir of the South' Abu Zeid Poised to Take over al-Qaeda N.W. Africa," *Washington Post*, December 10, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102005252.html> (accessed December 10, 2010).

West and its allies, while being supported by an affiliated criminal organization of several hundred. . .

A smaller, more close-knit AQIM terrorist network will prove increasingly difficult to penetrate and collect intelligence against. A leaner organization may also mean fewer terrorist incidents, but those that do occur will likely be more high profile and extremely violent to achieve maximum impact. Counter-terrorism strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds almost certainly will prove ineffective against these hard core terrorists; a strategy of containment may be the most realistic option.⁴⁵

Of course, the notoriously porous borders of the Maghrebi and Sahelian countries require that any effective effort to counter AQIM must be regional. And while tremendous progress has been achieved in recent years thanks in part to external efforts to encourage coordination like the U.S.-sponsored Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which brings together Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia,⁴⁶ rivalries between states in the region have proven an obstinate obstacle to greater integration. Last year, a senior U.S. counter-terrorism official observed that “while the Maghreb governments have had some success in combating AQIM and terrorism, there remains much to be done.” “Unfortunately,” he noted, focusing on the perennial conflict between the two most powerful states, Morocco and Algeria, over the latter’s support of the Polisario Front, “the lack of resolution of the Western Sahara question block[s] the cooperation and integration the region needs. For the region to achieve real success, the key differences must be resolved or at least bridged.”⁴⁷

While facilitating greater cooperation between the states of the region is a highly desirable objective—both in itself as political goal and for the sake of more effective operations against AQIM—to really eradicate the challenge which the group presents, one must eventually confront “the current condition of political stasis, economic stagnation, social atrophy, and cultural discontinuity”⁴⁸ which has fanned the flames of political Islamism in the region. That would require a longer-term commitment both to opening up the political systems of the region and creating economic opportunities for the growing youth population.

⁴⁵ Stephen A. Emerson, *The Metamorphosis of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Occasional Paper 03/2010 (Pretoria: International Institute of Islamic Studies, 2010), p. 2.

⁴⁶ See J. Peter Pham, “U.S. Interests in Promoting Security across the Sahara,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, July-August 2010, pp. 242-252.

⁴⁷ Robert Godec, “Opportunities and Challenges for U.S.-Maghreb Cooperation” (keynote address, Conference on “The Dynamics of North African Terror,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, February 16, 2010), <http://csis.org/event/conference-dynamics-north-african-terror> (accessed December 10, 2010).

⁴⁸ John P. Entelis, “The Democratic Imperative vs. the Authoritarian Impulse: The Maghrib State Between Transition and Terrorism,” *Middle East Journal*, 59, Autumn 2005, p. 555.

Conclusion

While political Islamism in the Maghreb has its origins in grievances against the governments of the states of the region, its organized groups have been open to influence by broader transnational ideological currents and, certainly, the local variant of the “foreign fighter” challenge—that is, locals who have gone for training and combat experience on various battle fronts. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the FIS was inspired by *les Afghanis*, while the GIA eventually was heavily influenced by them. The GSPC itself was born of a more serious reflection on Islamist strategy, especially al-Zawahiri’s rejection of the more extremist notion of apostasy of Muslim societies as a whole. The group’s role in facilitating the movement of Magrebis seeking “martyrdom” in Iraq following the United States-led invasion in 2003 paved the way for its formal affiliation with al Qaeda and its “rebranding” as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

In turn, AQIM has proven itself to be adept at transforming itself to cope with changing conditions in the Maghreb. Indeed the surviving active units of the group appear to have grasped that the decentralization of their organization—to say nothing of the centrifugal forces affecting al Qaeda in general—necessitate regional groups assuming responsibility for their own recruitment, operations, and sustainment. This progress on AQIM’s part was itself, however, accelerated by the group’s forced march into another foreign entanglement. In this case, its shift in focus is to a new theater of operations in the Sahel. Unlike a guerrilla army, AQIM in its current incarnation cannot be effectively combated by military means alone, even with the benefit of the counterinsurgency experience recaptured in recent years. An even broader approach will be required, one that does justice to the growing nexus between extremism, terrorism, and organized criminality. Moreover, AQIM’s increasing pragmatism—both in the operators it employs and in the partnerships it forms to garner resources—will lead to the terrorist group to continue shifting its horizons, in the process rendering it an even greater challenge, both to states in the region and those well beyond.

