

## Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11

By Hanna Rogan

AFTER A LETHAL LATE summer in Algeria, with several high-casualty bombings and suicide operations, the month of Ramadan—often a preferred time for attacks by militant Islamists—turned out to be relatively peaceful. In fact, the main Islamist insurgent group in Algeria, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), has so far been less active in 2008 than in recent years. This article presents the preliminary findings of a quantitative analysis of militant Islamist activism in Algeria from 2001 until October 2008. The study includes a sample of 1,580 incidents. It identifies a number of trends in militant Islamist activism in Algeria since 2001. For example, there has been an increase in high-casualty attacks, but also an increase in operations with no casualties, or failed operations. Non-lethal operations pursuing economic aims are on the rise, while bomb explosions have become the most common means of attack. There are now fewer operations targeting civilians, although this group remains vulnerable. Geographically, the area of operations has been significantly reduced inside Algeria, but there is emerging activity in neighboring countries. These findings will be examined in detail.

### A Quantitative Study

The period of 2001 to October 2008 covers the activity of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was established in 1998 by Hassan Hattab. In October 2006, under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukhal, the GSPC officially joined al-Qa`ida, and in January 2007 the group adopted the name al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. This study suggests that certain, although not all, changes in operational patterns can be traced to and probably explained by this alliance between a mainly nationally-oriented Islamist group and Usama bin Ladin's global al-Qa`ida network.

The study is based on open source accounts of militant activity attributed to armed Islamist groups in Algeria and elsewhere in the region. The author has used the online archives of French and

Arabic language Algerian newspapers, as well as collections of press reports compiled through private initiatives.<sup>1</sup> Although there are 1,580 incidents included in the study, it does not claim to present a comprehensive overview of all violent operations in Algeria in the selected period. It should also be noted that press reports sometimes present an incomplete narrative or even contradictory information about incidents. For instance, numbers of reported casualties tend to diverge, and in these cases this study has chosen to register the most modest estimates. Furthermore, many press reports do not adequately identify the perpetrators of attacks, particularly for the first few years in the sample when remnants of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) were still active. It should also be noted that the Algerian Security Services have been accused of being behind a number of massacres that took place in the name of militant Islamism in the 1990s and early 2000s. Despite certain elements of uncertainty, and even if not comprehensive, the study suggests certain trends in the use of violence by Islamist militants in Algeria during the period 2001-2008.<sup>2</sup>

### Number of Incidents

At the beginning of the current millennium, Algeria emerged from a decade of violent civil war that claimed the lives of between 100,000 and 250,000 people. Compared to such numbers, the levels of violence and numbers of attacks that have taken place during the last eight years have been limited and relatively constant. Yet, certain variations must be considered significant. This study indicates that the decrease in incidents since the late 1990s was a trend that continued until 2004. With 324 reported incidents in 2001, the curve fell gradually to 141 in 2004. From 2005, the number of reported incidents rose slightly, reaching 203 incidents last year. The figures for 2008, however, do not seem consistent with this trend, with 106 incidents so far through September 30.

<sup>1</sup> This information was drawn from the online archives of *Liberté*, *El-Watan* and *El-Khabar*, in addition to press collections by Algeria-Watch and TROUBLES.

<sup>2</sup> The last date for which figures were collected is September 30, 2008.

Explaining such numbers requires in-depth analysis of the armed group in question and the context in which it operates. In brief, possible explanatory factors include: the amnesty programs initiated by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika since 1999 that at least temporarily reduced the strength of the armed Islamists; the split between remnant groups of the GIA at the beginning of the 2000s and infighting over control of the Islamist scene; the ideological conviction of Hassan Hattab, who by 2001 led the largest militant Islamist group in Algeria, fervently opposing the civilian massacres of the GIA; the "new generation" that took over the leadership of the GSPC in 2004 and that sought alignment with the global jihad; and finally, the recent increased military offensive against militant Islamist activity in Algeria.

### Number of Casualties

With fewer incidents during the last eight years, there has also been a general decrease in the number of casualties. There is no correlation between the two factors, however, and the efficiency rate regarding the number of killed per incident has declined. On the other hand, the number of wounded per incident has increased. Yet, this relationship does not tell the whole story. The material in the database suggests that the 2005-2008 period, as compared to 2001-2004, experienced both an elevated number of high-casualty incidents and an elevated number of incidents without casualties. There are several possible explanations. First, suicide operations that have been carried out during the last two years have inflicted large numbers of dead and wounded. The same goes for some of the bomb explosions, which have been increasingly popular since 2005. At the same time, a striking number of bomb explosions have been failed operations—in the view of the Islamists—resulting in only injuries, or no casualties at all. Reportedly, Algeria's first incident of a cell phone remotely-detonated bomb explosion took place in 2005.<sup>3</sup> While one would assume that such a technique would increase the precision of the attack and thereby increase casualties per incident, it seems that this has not been the overall result. Secondly, one cannot take for granted that the

<sup>3</sup> "Ould Abbès échappe à un attentat," *Le Soir d'Algérie Online*, November 16, 2005.

sample is complete, and it should be assumed that the first four years also included operations with no casualties. It is likely that, at times with high numbers of violent incidents, the press does not prioritize reporting on “failed operations.”

**Target Selection**

The targets of the militant Islamists can be classified into two main categories, separating civilians from the combined security forces (including the military, police, gendarme, municipal guard and local militia).

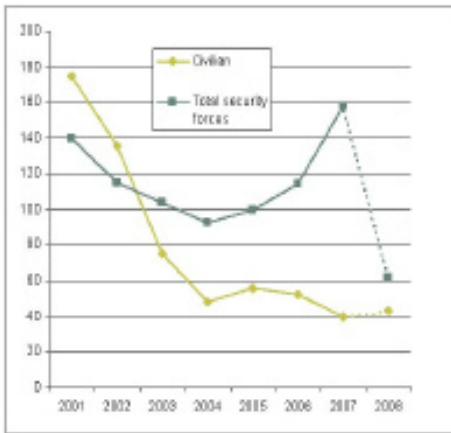


Figure 1. Targets: Civilian and Security Forces.

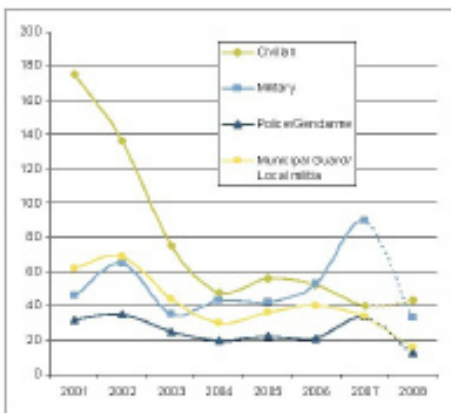


Figure 2. Targets: Civilian and Security Force Components.

Figure 1 indicates GSPC founder Hassan Hattab’s vow not to target civilians (as opposed to the GIA’s massacres of civilians) and to focus on the security forces coincided with a decrease in attacks on civilians. Since 2003, the number of incidents targeting civilians has indeed been lower than the number of incidents targeting security forces. Breaking down the numbers further in Figure 2, however, it is revealed that the number of incidents targeting civilians has remained higher than the number of incidents targeting the

military—with the notable exception of 2007. Moreover, the number of incidents targeting municipal guards and local militia (both form armed citizens’ units that supplement police in rural areas) has overall been higher than the number of incidents targeting police and gendarme. This suggests that civilians and armed citizens’ units, which are probably less well-equipped than the military and police, remain highly vulnerable groups.

**Operational Variety**

As shown in Figure 3, the main types of operations that the militant Islamists have conducted include ambush, fake roadblock, clash (often during military security operations), raid for economic purposes, abduction (also often with economic aim), bomb explosion and suicide operation, and what has been labeled “killing.” The “killing” category includes assassination, most commonly by firearm or knife, but also other operations in which people are reported dead without further details. It is important to note that one incident may include several of the above-mentioned techniques.<sup>4</sup> In such cases, both techniques have been registered in the database under one incident, in order to document the widest operational capacity of the militant Islamists.

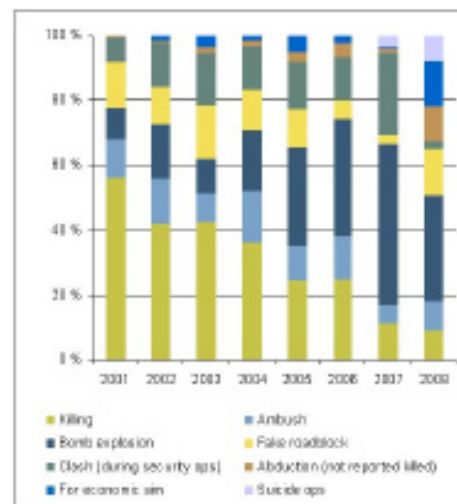


Figure 3. Operational Variety.

For some types of operations there is little variation over time, yet four trends appear to be significant. First, the number of “killings” has decreased noticeably. This may be due to the halt in

4 For instance, one incident may combine ambush and bomb explosion, or fake roadblock and abduction.

collective massacres that were common around the turn of the millennium and to the adoption of more sophisticated means of attack. This tendency is possibly linked to the second trend, the manifest increase in the use of bomb explosions. From 2005 onward, this technique was the single most used in operations by militant Islamists in Algeria. Third, suicide operations emerged as a new tactic in Algeria in 2007. There has been an increase in the use of suicide operations in 2008. This operational technique has been attributed to the GSPC’s merger with al-Qa`ida in late 2006. Likewise, the use of bomb explosions in general has been linked to the practices of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, a front for which the GSPC/AQIM has recruited heavily.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, and perhaps more interestingly, there has been an increase in the reporting of violent incidents pursuing economic objectives in 2008. Such operations include raids on villages, attacks on commercial institutions, fake roadblocks with robberies of motorists, and abductions (where those abducted are not reported killed). Such incidents coincide with press reports about the difficult financial and material situation of AQIM, and may indeed support the media’s claim about poor economic conditions for Algeria’s militants.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, it is also worth noting that the GSPC was known to finance itself through illegal businesses, such as the smuggling of drugs, cigarettes and weapons across the Sahara. The joining of the GSPC with al-Qa`ida, however, allegedly created a split between the northern cells, which supported the alliance, and the southern cells which opposed it, and thus possibly caused a halt in financial support from the Sahara region.

**Geographical Dispersion**

One of the clearest trends in militant Islamist activity in Algeria during the last eight years is less geographic dispersion. In 2001, violent operations were reported in 36 out of 48 *wilayat* (provinces). In 2008, there have been

5 Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qaida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008). Also see “Ces bombes humaines qui reviennent d’Irak,” *L’Expression*, August 21, 2008.

6 “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb...Requests Money and Men,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 10, 2008.

incidents in only 18 *wilayat*. Overall, as shown in Figure 4, the main region of activity is the populated north, comprising cities, mountains and plains. The vast south has seen few incidents on the whole. The *wilaya* of Algiers, including the capital Algiers, also has relatively few reported incidents overall. In addition to a reduced area of operation during the period under study, one can observe a distinction between the northeast (NE) and northwest (NW) of the country. In 2001, there was an approximate 50/50 ratio of operations in the NE and NW. From 2003 onward, more than 60% of total incidents happened in the NE. Since 2006, around 80% of militant activity has taken place in the NE.

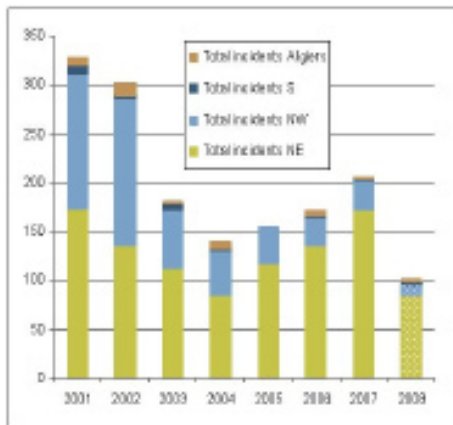


Figure 4. Geographical Dispersion.

Within the northeastern region, one area stands out with disproportionately high activity. The area has been nicknamed the “triangle of death” and is composed of the three *wilayat* of Tizi Ouzou, Boumerdes and Bouira. Interestingly, these three *wilayat* also form Zone 2 of AQIM, which essentially constitutes the central command of the group. The area has traditionally been a stronghold of insurgents in Algeria, mostly due to its mountains and *maquis*, which make it difficult for the security forces to access. The recent 2008 development, in which the so-called “triangle of death” represents approximately 70% (2008) of all militant Islamist activity in Algeria, suggests that AQIM has been forced into one of its traditional strongholds and is seriously weakened in other areas. The number of incidents carried out outside Algeria is very low.<sup>7</sup> The database includes none before 2004, and only

<sup>7</sup> Operations abroad that were registered in the database are only ones claimed by the GSPC/AQIM.

slightly more than a handful altogether, including the three reported so far this year. Although it may be too early to speak of a trend, the reported incidents may indicate ambitions to extend AQIM’s area of operations to include the Maghreb region and more specifically Mauritania, Mali and Tunisia.

### Conclusion

There has been little variation in the timing of attacks, and only the months of April, June and October (2001-2007) stand out by being a subtle two percentage points higher than average activity. As for October, it should be noted that it coincided partly with Ramadan from 2003-2007. Yet during this year’s Ramadan, Algeria did not experience heightened militant Islamist activity. Overall, 2008 has experienced slightly less violence by militant Islamists than previous years. Nevertheless, there is a steady increase in activities that include new operational techniques, such as suicide operations and large-scale bomb explosions, which target indiscriminately and may inflict high casualties. The increase in such operations, well known from Iraq and Afghanistan, can probably be explained as an effect of the GSPC’s alliance with al-Qa`ida. Likewise, the emerging pattern of militant activism in the Maghreb region may be attributed to this global alliance. The geographical area of activity within Algeria, however, has been drastically reduced over the years, possibly a sign of a weakened movement.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The findings presented here are preliminary conclusions based on a collection of press reports about militant Islamist activity in Algeria. This study points out some tendencies and trends, but the material in the database is suitable for further analysis. Likewise, the study has not provided any in-depth examination of the reasons for certain developments, which also should be undertaken in the future.