

## Leveraging History in AQIM Communications

By Lianne Kennedy Boudali

AL-QA`IDA IN THE Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), is one of the most active al-Qa`ida affiliate organizations. The group's primary goal is to overthrow the Algerian regime in favor of Shari`a-based governance and to end foreign influence in North Africa. Since its declaration of allegiance to Usama bin Ladin in the fall of 2006 and subsequent name change in January 2007, AQIM has largely maintained its prior operational focus on the Algerian state, while simultaneously adopting tactics such as suicide attacks and sophisticated roadside bombs that are reminiscent of al-Qa`ida and its global affiliates.

AQIM's communications have evolved significantly in the last two years in both content and sophistication, undoubtedly due in part to the fact that it has developed a relationship with al-Qa`ida's al-Fajr Media Center. AQIM remains dedicated to the removal of the "apostate" Algerian government, yet its messages increasingly reflect al-Qa`ida's orientation toward transnational jihadist activity, as evidenced by frequent references to the "Zionist-Crusader Alliance" and the need to re-establish a caliphate. In short, AQIM's communications reflect both local and international jihadist concerns.

One of the rhetorical devices by which AQIM bridges local and international grievances is the use of references to historical figures whose military exploits in the North African context resonate on both levels of analysis. This article will explore how AQIM has sought to bolster its legitimacy through repeated references to these well-known historical figures.

### Heroic Figures in North African History

AQIM's communications mention historical figures whose heroic actions on behalf of Islam are known to Muslims in North Africa and elsewhere. Some of these figures—such as Tariq bin Ziyad, Yusuf bin Tashfin, and `Uqba bin Nafi—are military heroes from Islam's seventh

century conquests in North Africa and Europe. Others are revered for their role in resisting colonial influence in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; these figures include `Umar al-Mukhtar, who fought Italian involvement in Libya, and `Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi, who resisted French and Spanish involvement in Northern Morocco. All of these leaders are remembered for their roles in combat, conquest, and the defense of Islam against occupying forces.

AQIM references them for a number of reasons: to link successful historic military campaigns to current terrorist activity, to demonstrate a continuity of opposition to Western forces and interests, to claim an ancestral linkage

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to revered historical figures, and to demonstrate the permanent nature of their struggle. AQIM is not alone in seeking to trade on these figures' appeal: Tariq bin Ziyad in particular has been mentioned in speeches by Usama bin Ladin and Hussayn bin Mahmud, the latter of whom is a popular commentator on jihadist web forums. A brief review of the historical figures in question will illuminate AQIM's reasons for choosing these individuals.

`Uqba bin Nafi was an Arab general of the Umayya Caliphate who led the initial conquest of North Africa in 662 AD. His forces established the city of Kairouan in Tunisia, which was the first new Islamic city in North Africa.<sup>1</sup> According to Arab historians, when he reached the Atlantic Ocean in 682, he rode his horse into the waters, exclaiming, "Oh God, if the sea had not prevented me, I would

have galloped on forever like Alexander the Great, upholding your faith and fighting the unbelievers!" From AQIM's perspective, Bin Nafi is relevant because of his role in securing North Africa as Islamic territory. AQIM argues that it is defending this same territory against infidels and apostates, thus framing its violence as an extension of Bin Nafi's original conquest.

Tariq bin Ziyad was a Berber military commander who landed his forces in Spain in 711 and brought the Iberian Peninsula (al-Andalus) under control of the Umayya Caliphate within several months.<sup>2</sup> Bin Ziyad was eventually defeated in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers, but he is remembered as one of Islam's great military heroes.<sup>3</sup> AQIM references Bin Ziyad because his military conquests remind audiences that Spain was once part of ancient Muslim empires, implying that it is a contemporary duty to reclaim this lost territory.

Yusuf bin Tashfin greatly expanded the Muslim Almoravid dynasty in North Africa between 1074 and 1106. His empire eventually included present-day Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, and parts of Algeria and the Sahel. In 1086, the Muslim rulers of al-Andalus asked Bin Tashfin to bring his forces to Spain to fight encroaching Spanish Christian armies. Bin Tashfin's forces won a key battle at Zalaqa (Sagrajas) and Bin Tashfin later annexed most of al-Andalus to his own empire, displacing the previous Muslim rulers. Bin Tashfin, like Bin Ziyad, was Berber, and he enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law. AQIM refers to Bin Tashfin because he was the ruler of a mighty Islamic empire that included southern Spain, and also because he was a native North African known for his puritanical zeal. He is, therefore, a perfect role model for what AQIM would like to accomplish in North Africa today.

`Umar al-Mukhtar, a Qur'anic instructor by trade, led Libyan resistance to Italian colonization from 1912 to 1931, when he was captured and later executed.<sup>4</sup> Al-Mukhtar was considered a master of

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The name Gibraltar comes from the Arabic *Jebel Tariq*, or Tariq's mountain.

<sup>4</sup> John Wright, *Libya: A Modern History* (Baltimore, M.D.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>1</sup> C.R. Pennell, *Morocco: From Empire to Independence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003).

guerrilla desert warfare, and his nearly 20-year campaign against colonial forces made him a North African folk hero. AQIM includes references to him because he holds particular appeal to Libyans (AQIM seeks to incorporate regional jihadist factions under its umbrella) and because his anti-colonial activity serves as an example for current generations seeking to eliminate foreign influence in North Africa.

`Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi was a Moroccan Islamic judge who resisted French and Spanish colonial forces in the Rif Mountains of Morocco. He inflicted a humiliating defeat on a large contingent of invading Spanish forces in 1921, and later established an independent Islamic emirate that strictly enforced Shari`a.<sup>5</sup> Although he was defeated in

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1926 by combined French and Spanish forces, he was considered an exemplar of resistance to colonial occupation and an early proponent of Salafism in Morocco. Al-Khattabi’s piety, his military success against external forces, and his establishment of an independent emirate make him, like Bin Tashfin, a model for what AQIM would like to achieve in North Africa.

All of these figures are either military heroes who played a key role in expanding the territory of the early caliphates, or contemporary folk heroes honored for their role in fighting colonial European forces. They suit AQIM’s purposes because they are known for military actions in North Africa and Europe against non-Muslim forces, as well as for their role in establishing various forms of Islamic rule in North Africa.

**Leveraging the Appeal of Historical Heroes**

Between January 2007 and January 2009, AQIM communications have mentioned one or more of these historical figures on at least 10 separate occasions. These references have been made by several different AQIM officials, including *amir* Abu Mus`ab `Abd al-Wadud (also known as Abdelmalek Droukdel), Shari`a committee member Abu `Ubayda Yusuf, and media spokesman Salah Abu Muhammad. `Abd al-Wadud has mentioned Yusuf bin Tashfin six times and referred to Tariq bin Ziyad and `Uqba bin Nafi four times each in the past two years. Other AQIM officials frequently refer to all three figures at once, as well as other historical figures such as Musab bin Nusayr, `Abd al-Hamid bin Badis, and al-Mu`iz bin Badis. The AQIM media committee periodically references historical figures in its attack claims, and several of AQIM’s *katibats* (combatant elements) are named after historical military leaders.

AQIM officials are adept at weaving historical references into calls for greater action or commitment on the part of contemporary Muslims, as in this September 2008 audio communiqué from AQIM *amir* `Abd al-Wadud, which included a message directed to the Algerian people:

Grandsons of Uqbah and Tariq and Yusuf bin Tashfin and Al-Mu`iz Bin Badis and `Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi and `Umar al-Mukhtar, rise from your inertia and put your hands in the hands of your brothers, the mujahidin, in the al-Qa`ida Organization in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb who have sacrificed their money, their lives, and their honor for the sake of protecting Islam and the unity and the reverence of the Islamic Maghreb. Gather around the jihad with which Islam started so it becomes the only force and alternative to the regimes of apostasy that are ruling our countries.<sup>6</sup>

By framing AQIM’s actions as a continuation of Islam’s past battles, `Abd al-Wadud seeks to create a direct

linkage between his group’s terrorism and the glories of the past. The statement implies that current generations have a duty to continue fighting what is an ongoing struggle for Islam. Similarly, an October 2008 speech by Abu `Ubayda Yusuf contained the following exhortation to North African Muslims:

I end my message by saluting the steadfast mujahidin in the lands of the Islamic Maghreb, you the grandsons of Uqba, the conqueror of the Maghreb, and Musa Bin Nasir, the conqueror of Andalusia, and Tariq Ibn Ziyad, the vanquisher of the Romans and the Spanish, and [Yusuf] Tashfin, the hero of Zalaqa, and Abd al-Hamid Bin Badis, the leader of the reforms. Today you are the pride of the umma in a time of exploitation; you are the hope in reclaiming its usurped honor in our broken Islamic Maghreb and the appropriated Andalusia, Cordoba, Sicily, and Zalaqa. We will not rest and we will not be content until we regain every inch of our usurped land including the occupied Sebta and Melilla, and let us meet with our beloved people in the land of Palestine.<sup>7</sup>

The preceding passage challenges local Muslims to continue their ancestors’ achievements. It also frames AQIM’s violence as part of a multigenerational effort to restore the caliphate, a goal more traditionally associated with al-Qa`ida’s vision of global jihadism. Abu `Ubayda’s reference to Sebta and Melilla (Spanish enclaves in Morocco), which some Muslims consider to be ongoing colonial occupations of Moroccan territory, links a current regional grievance to a historical foe in support of the argument that North Africa is again “occupied” by foreign forces.

In September 2008, AQIM media official Salah Abu Muhammad’s speech defending AQIM against accusations of killing innocent Muslims contained this fiery passage:

Be glad, Crusaders and apostates, with a generation that loves

5 Pennell.

6 Abu Mus`ab `Abd al-Wadud, “A Message to Our Nation in the Islamic Maghreb,” audio statement, September 21, 2008.

7 Abu `Ubayda Yusuf, “Congratulations on the Occasion of Id to the Nation of Monotheism,” audio statement, October 6, 2008.

death and martyrdom the way you love life, you can expect the battalions of martyrdom and the lions who hold their fingers on the trigger. We will not stop the raids until the Islamic Maghreb is liberated from Sarkozy and Bush's representatives. We will not stop the raids until every open inch is conquered and liberated by virtuous men such as `Uqba bin Nafi and Tariq bin Ziyad and Yusuf bin Tashfin and until the banner of Islam is raised high and you stop your support and collaboration with the Crusaders and stop your corruption and injustice and humiliation of the nation.<sup>8</sup>

Abu Muhammad reiterates the theme of continuity of struggle against the West, neatly conflating AQIM's "raids" with military campaigns orchestrated by Muslim states whose legitimacy was recognized at the time. By identifying AQIM as a modern day extension of these campaigns, Abu Muhammad is attempting to frame AQIM's violence as legitimate acts of war conducted against enemies of Islam. In other words, he is arguing that the Maghreb is in an ongoing state of war and that AQIM's actions are legally sound responses to Western aggression. Abu Muhammad's focus on the "Crusaders" rather than local regimes places his statement squarely in line with al-Qa`ida's focus on the "far enemy."

### Conclusion

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of any form of terrorist propaganda, let alone measure the impact of these particular references to historical figures. Short of a verifiable statement from a terrorist that described the arguments that convinced him or her to join AQIM, the utility of AQIM's historical analogies will likely never be known. Nonetheless, the frequency and consistency with which these references appear suggest that AQIM believes that historical references boost their arguments. If at some point in the future AQIM were to abandon such references, it could indicate that the group determined that they were ineffective.

For the time being, it is clear that AQIM's references to historical figures support both global and local jihadist grievances, allowing the group to leverage historical narratives to support its dual objectives of overthrowing local regimes and participating in al-Qa`ida's vision of transnational jihad against the far enemy. By referencing historical figures closely associated with North Africa, AQIM creates a link between its actions and those of past figures who fought to free the Maghreb from foreign influence and establish Islamic governance. The particular figures who are mentioned include individuals from Morocco, Libya, and Mauritania; all areas where AQIM would like to expand its reach. References to figures associated with Islam's caliphates and its conquest of European territory dovetail with al-Qa`ida's rhetorical interest in restoring a caliphate and focusing jihadist energy on the far enemy. In sum, AQIM's references to historical figures imbue its statements with multiple layers of contextual meaning and support its arguments that its violent actions are merely the latest stage of an ongoing "just" war against the enemies of Islam.

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<sup>8</sup> Salah Abu Muhammad, "Who Are the Killers of the Innocent Ones?" audio statement, September 3, 2008.