

Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb: A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad

By Jean-Pierre Filiu

AL-QA`IDA IN THE Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is not only one of the latest offshoots of Usama bin Ladin's terrorist network, but it is the branch of the global jihad that has most clearly failed to follow its founding guidelines.¹ Launched as a jihadist platform to unify North African militant groups, it has not succeeded in attracting Moroccan and Tunisian cells, and it remains an Algerian-run organization. Hailed as al-Qa`ida's spearhead against Europe, it has proved unable to strike France or Spain. It has had to rely mainly on the internet to recruit north of the Mediterranean Sea.

Conceived as a vanguard to push global jihad north into "the land of the infidels," it instead placed increasing emphasis on its Saharan component to the point that it is now involved in Mali and Niger. This failure makes AQIM a fascinating case to reflect upon the tactical opportunism and the operational reassessment of the global jihad.

The Delusion of the "Islamic Maghreb"

Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) emerged in 1998 after splintering from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Although deeply rooted in the complex history of the "black decade" of the 1990s, the GSPC tried since 2004 to distance itself from the heavy legacy of the Algerian civil war and, under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdel (also known as Abu Mus`ab `Abd al-Wadud), worked hard to join the global arena. The GSPC's 2007 merger into al-Qa`ida was meant to crown this process by assigning to the former GSPC a new horizon, the "Islamic Maghreb." This marked a dramatic challenge to the North African regimes that have failed to push forward the "Arab Maghreb" for the past 20 years.²

1 AQIM was established in January 2007, and it was the result of a merger between the GSPC and al-Qa`ida.

2 The Union for the Arab Maghreb (*Union du Maghreb Arabe*) was established in 1989 among Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Libya.

Three years later, the GSPC's Algerian hierarchy remains forcefully in charge of AQIM. Non-Algerian activists have not been promoted to the top layer of the group. In Morocco³ and Tunisia, the jihadist militants who might have been tempted to join AQIM chose to keep their independence, while some Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) members decided to join the FATA-based al-Qa`ida central instead, turning their back on the "Islamic Maghreb." Non-Algerians were admitted into AQIM on an individual basis, with the exception of a Libyan cell that rose outside of the LIFG and was smuggled into eastern Algeria.⁴ Moreover, this Libyan cell was reined in by AQIM, which did not dare expand its violence into the neighboring Jamahirriya (Libya), probably out of fear of outstretching its already loose chain of command, but also so as not to repeat in Libya the fiasco of the jihadist cell crushed in the suburbs of Tunis in December 2006.⁵

Therefore, the only North African country where AQIM kept a high profile outside of Algeria became Mauritania. Yet Algerian jihadists already had a long record of involvement in Mauritania, where the Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his brigade (*katiba*) had provoked the local security forces as early as 2005.⁶ The "Islamic Maghreb" that al-Qa`ida central envisioned while endorsing the GSPC was certainly not limited to Algeria and Mauritania. As a result, the North African grand design collapsed primarily under the enduring weight of Algerian chauvinism, still vibrant under its jihadist discourse, and potentially repulsive for Moroccan and Tunisian activists.

The Mediterranean Wall

Even before transforming his GSPC into AQIM, Droukdel repeatedly accused France and Spain of waging a

3 Carlos Echeverria Jesus, "The Current State of the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group," *CTC Sentinel* 2:3 (2009).

4 For instance, in August 2007 four Libyan fighters were killed by the security forces south of Tebessa. For details, see Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb* (Pretoria: Institute of Security Studies, 2008), p. 49.

5 Ridha Kéfi, "Le Maghreb face à la pieuvre jihadiste," *Afkar/Idées* n°14, summer 2007, pp. 50-53.

6 This brigade switched from the GIA to the GSPC in 2000.

full-fledged "crusade" in North Africa and threatened to strike back at the European "oppressors."⁷ Al-Qa`ida second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri echoed those threats when he welcomed the GSPC into al-Qa`ida.⁸ The anti-U.S. jihad in Iraq had triggered in 2003-2006 a triangular dynamic between Europe-based activists,⁹ al-Qa`ida operatives in the Middle East, and the GSPC as a regional hub for potential "volunteers." As a result, al-Qa`ida's top leadership bet on AQIM to use this Iraqi trend to launch a new wave of terrorism on European soil. Yet the crisis and decline of al-Qa`ida in Iraq since 2007 jeopardized this triangular momentum, and the nascent AQIM could no longer rely on the clarion call for jihad in Iraq to recruit and plot in Europe.

In his July 2008 interview to the *New York Times*, Droukdel pledged to "liberate the Islamic Maghreb from the sons of France and Spain and from all symbols of treason and employment for the outsiders, and protect it from the foreign greed and the Crusaders' hegemony."¹⁰ This was a defiant way to admit that the focus of anti-Western terror would be in the Maghreb itself, and not in Europe, contrary to what al-Qa`ida central had initially hoped. Therefore, AQIM started to strike "global" targets in its local environment, murdering four French tourists in eastern Mauritania in December 2007, then a French engineer in central Algeria in June 2008.¹¹ Later, when al-Zawahiri warned on August 5, 2009 that "France will pay for all her crimes," AQIM reacted by a suicide attack against the French Embassy in Nouakchott three days later.¹²

7 *Le Monde*, June 26, 2005; *Le Monde*, September 29, 2005.

8 Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Local and Global Jihad: Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal* 63:2 (2009): p. 223.

9 For the case of Spain, see Javier Jordan, "Anatomy of Spain's 28 Disrupted Networks," *CTC Sentinel* 1:11 (2008).

10 "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008.

11 For details on these incidents, see "Travel Warning," U.S. Department of State, December 2, 2009; "Deadly Bombings Hit Algerian Town," BBC, August 20, 2008.

12 For the English transcript of this August 5, 2009 al-Zawahiri speech, see www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_zawahiri0809.pdf.

The inability to strike European targets on European soil is deeply frustrating for Droukdel and his followers, who invested significantly in the internet to get their message across the Mediterranean. Cyber-jihad, enhanced by the global exposure the integration into al-Qa`ida granted to the former GSPC, remains the trump card for AQIM to regain a foothold in Europe. Thus far, however, international cooperation and enhanced security awareness have managed to thwart this move. In December 2008, for example, a Paris court sentenced Kamel Bouchentouf—a longtime resident of the French city of Nancy—to six years in jail after he admitted corresponding with Salah Gasmi, the AQIM's propaganda leader, via e-mail.¹³ Yet the internet, regardless of how nefarious it can become in the hands of jihadist recruiters, is a poor substitute to physical infiltration and individual radicalization on European soil. As a result, instead of projecting its terror northward, AQIM resigned to direct its violence more and more southward.

The Mirages of the Sahara

The southern faction of AQIM was initially a sideshow in the overall planning of the organization, but it steadily gained weight and visibility due to a multi-fold set of inter-related factors: the steady decline of jihadist violence in Algeria and the containment of the bulk of AQIM activity in its stronghold of Kabylie, east of Algiers;¹⁴ the pressing needs of AQIM's leadership, who suffered the shrinking of their extortion outreach and demanded a growing contribution from their Saharan affiliates; and the deepening cooperation between those affiliates and the various smuggling networks, involved in drugs, weapons or illegal immigration.

This cumulating process played in the hands of Belmokhtar, especially when the abduction of Western nationals in the Sahara—and the subsequent ransoms paid for their release—became crucial to financing the whole AQIM apparatus. Droukdel sought to balance Belmokhtar's rising power by promoting

Hamidu Abu Zeid,¹⁵ whose neighboring *katiba* kidnapped two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia in February 2008 and two Canadian UN diplomats in northern Niger in December 2008.¹⁶ While Belmokhtar's focus on Mauritania meant Mali had to be preserved as a safe haven, Abu Zeid spoiled his rival's position by moving aggressively into northern Mali.¹⁷ The violent clashes in the beginning of July

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2009 opened a new period of turmoil in the central Sahara and eventually spilled into Niger. The competition between the two *katiba* also involved their partners in criminal activities; Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid reportedly asked their respective contacts to deliver them Western hostages, which led in a few weeks in late 2009 to the abduction of three Spaniards, two Italians and one French national.¹⁸

Despite these turf wars, Droukdel still manages to maintain authority over AQIM, and he was greatly seconded in that regard by his deputy in southern Algeria, Yahya Djouadi, who oversees Belmokhtar as well as Abu Zeid. Yet the contradiction is now open between al-Qa`ida central and AQIM on the issue of kidnapping Western nationals. In only one instance, al-Qa`ida central managed to pressure AQIM into executing one

of the hostages, a British tourist, in May 2009, and even in that case AQIM did not give the killing Zaraqawi-like publicity.¹⁹ AQIM prefers to trade its captives for undisclosed ransoms or the release of jailed operatives. Now that kidnapping has become the most visible sign of jihadist activity in the Sahara, AQIM is striving to maximize its local benefits even at the cost of clashing with al-Qa`ida central's global agenda.

Conclusion

In the course of its first three years of existence, AQIM has turned away from al-Qa`ida central's main expectations of the group. AQIM has failed to integrate non-Algerian factions into a truly Maghrebi organization and it has contained its terror to the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Al-Qa`ida as a whole is working hard to live up to its “global” commitment to fight the “far enemy,” but its violence mostly targets fellow Muslims killed on Muslim lands. Furthermore, AQIM, unable to regain the initiative against the Algerian security forces, was forced to enhance its profile in the open spaces of the Sahara.

The sad irony, however, is that AQIM's frustrating move southward is opening for al-Qa`ida new opportunities that were not taken into consideration when the GSPC joined the global jihad. The competition between the two AQIM field commanders in the Sahara has led to the recent recruiting of new members originating from countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and even Nigeria. The numbers are too limited to speak about a significant breakthrough, but al-Qa`ida central could ultimately benefit from this development that none of its leaders foresaw when deciding to launch AQIM. This would then be a puzzling demonstration of the successful opportunism of the global jihad.

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¹³ Isabelle Mandraud, “Frère Abou Zhara, apprenti jihadiste ou infiltré de la DST,” *Le Monde*, December 19, 2008.

¹⁴ Hanna Rogan, “Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).

¹⁵ Hamidu (Abdel Hamid) Abu Zeid, born in 1965, is slightly older than Droukdel and Belmokhtar, but he was only a junior commander until 2004 when he replaced “al-Para” as the GSPC's leader for southeastern Algeria.

¹⁶ “Al-Qaeda Claims Austrian Hostages,” BBC, March 10, 2008; Steven Edwards and Glen McGregor, “Canadian Diplomats Missing, Feared Kidnapped in Niger,” *Canwest News Service*, December 15, 2008.

¹⁷ On June 11, 2009, some of Abu Zeid's followers killed a senior intelligence officer in Timbuktu.

¹⁸ The French national was released in February 2010, and shortly after one of the Spanish detainees was released. The Italian couple was recently set free in April.

¹⁹ Ignacio Cembrero, “Cautivos de Al-Qaeda,” *El Pais*, January 10, 2010.