

Terror in the Maghreb

Written by Paul Knight

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PAUL KNIGHT, AUG 26 2009

Terrorism in the Islamic Maghreb (lit. “the West”) has been given relatively little attention in the post-9/11 era, in spite of a new journalistic and academic obsession with terrorism spanning nearly a decade. Terrorism in North Africa has been relegated to secondary importance, overshadowed by terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Occupied Territories. Terror in the Maghreb is nonetheless on the rise, and has been shown to have intimate links with violence in other regions of the Islamic world such as Iraq. Terrorism in this region is increasingly taking on *aregional* or even *pan-Islamist* character, moving away from its roots in armed anti-colonialist or nationalist struggles (e.g. FLN and later the GIA in Algeria). This trend may bode poorly for Western interests in the region, as disparate groups find cohesion and a coherent message in the form of a global struggle for Islamist objectives. A new and widespread pan-Maghreb militancy may be on the rise,^[1] given form and impetus by the intrastate conflicts of North Africa. Al-Qaeda, which has been badly damaged by the invasion of Afghanistan and the new Iraqi “Awakening Council” movement, has sought to open up a new North African front in its campaign against Western governments and their Muslim allies. This paper will attempt to address terrorism in the Maghreb, focusing on Algeria and its Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a case study for new trends in North African terrorism. Algeria’s place as the foremost military power in North Africa (assuming Egypt is discluded), its rich endowment of fossil fuels, rising Western FDI dollars, increasing EU trade linkages, and role as a regional bread basket all contribute to its strategic centrality. Algeria will likely serve as a barometer for the stability of Western interests in the region. The Algeria campaign against its newly resurgent Islamic extremism will have powerful and long-lasting ramifications for other states, including Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, and even distant Iraq.

Contemporary terrorism in Algeria has its roots in the brutal civil war fought during the 1990s, when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was democratically elected and immediately rejected by the existing military apparatus. This sparked a nearly decade-long conflict between the new armed wing of FIS, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the secular Algerian military. During this period, the GIA — with as many as 28,000 militants^[2] — took up extremely vicious tactics, including the indiscriminate massacre of women, men, intellectuals, children, and the elderly, sometimes culminating in the destruction of entire villages.^[3] Some estimates claim over 200,000 lives lost during the Algerian period of civil strife.^[4] This fomented widespread popular resentment towards the GIA cause. Added to this was the Algerian Department of Intelligence and Security’s (DRS) successful infiltration of the GIA,^[5] which sparked internal division in the GIA leadership. All of this culminated in the creation of a GIA splinter group led by Hassan Hattab, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which disavowed violent attacks on non-military targets. Yet the struggle of the GSPC remained essentially regional, since its targets were the North African “colonial” presence’s of Europe (especially France) and the United States, along with the North African regimes that lent them support. In 2003, the GSPC kidnapped 32 German tourists, later exchanging them for a five million euro ransom. This kidnapping launched GSPC onto the world stage, both garnering the notice of intelligence agencies worldwide and providing a monetary foundation upon which to expand the group’s activities. Soon thereafter in mid-2005 the American military took notice, launching a joint military exercise named “Flintlock 2005” under the framework of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP); American special forces teams began the training of local counterinsurgency forces in Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. This exercise, and indeed the entire TSCTP initiative, are evidence of the extreme seriousness with which the outside world took North African terrorism. The GSPC, which would later become Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), constituted a key part of the renewed violence in the Maghreb.

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Despite a very successful Algerian government amnesty program in the late 1990s, which led many of the former GIA militants to lay down their arms, the GSPC nonetheless continued to gain power and influence. While there are speculations that Usama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network provided early funding for the GIA and was involved in the GSPC's formation, the group did not declare allegiance to Al-Qaeda until 2003.^[6] This may have been due to a desire for broader, global objectives (e.g. jihad within the West, the establishment of an Islamic caliphate) and the experience of some GSPC founding members in Al-Qaeda's Afghan training camps.^[7] On September 11, 2006, Al-Qaeda lieutenant Ayman Al-Zawahiri declared the GSPC merger with Al-Qaeda, officially creating AQIM. This marked a shift from a regional insurgency not unlike the GIA, into a global struggle with a regional North African dimension, aimed at overthrowing *takfiri* (apostate) regimes and establishing Islamic caliphates on the model of the Prophet and the four "rightly guided" caliphs. The aforementioned 2003 kidnapping provided valuable funding to reinvigorate the Algerian jihad, providing for the purchase of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), heavy machine guns, mortars, and satellite-positioning equipment.^[8] With a revitalized ideology and renewed resources, AQIM was able to begin a major escalation in its terror campaign. Eschewing its former claims to discriminate targeting, AQIM began to perpetrate bloody Al-Qaeda style suicide bombings in urban environments,^[9] including suicide car bombings such as the 2007 attack on the United Nations offices in Algiers. This evidenced a transformation from a local group that was by its own admission lacking money, weapons, and recruits^[10] into a powerful insurgency with global connections and international aspirations. As early as 2004, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal sent a secret communiqué to Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia commander Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, proposing an alliance and eventual merger.^[11] This was a significant step for the previously local movement, beginning its contribution to a pan-Islamist jihad waged throughout the Muslim world and even beyond.

Terrorism flourishes in environments where authority is diffuse and recruits are plentiful, as is the case in the Federally-Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. This was also the case in Taliban-era Afghanistan, where Al-Qaeda was able to establish a longstanding, highly organized series of training camps, often tailored towards the needs of various "customers" (e.g. rich Saudis, Chechen rebels, Western Muslims). This phenomenon is now beginning to be duplicated in the Maghreb, particularly with the facilitation of AQIM. The group is presently running small training camps for North African militants, including would-be jihadist fighters from Morocco, Tunisia, and even Nigeria.^[12] Sophisticated AQIM recruitment videos, along the lines of Al-Qaeda's As-Sahab propaganda wing, have begun to emanate from North Africa. This has resulted in the continued attraction of new recruits despite Algerian successes in killing or capturing an estimated 1,100 militants in 2007, up from less than half that number in 2006.^[13] AQIM has also successfully coopted many pardoned former militants from the Algerian civil war. These developments have understandably raised the concerns of counterterrorism officials in Europe and North America, who correctly remember that the 9/11 attacks had their origins in Al-Qaeda's Afghan training infrastructure. Europe, particularly France, became increasingly alarmed by AQIM, both due to their pronouncements against France as "our Number One enemy"^[14] and their increasing sophistication. French officials' fears were confirmed in December 2006 when authorities arrested eight French-Algerians in Paris, seizing computers, night-vision goggles, global positioning systems, cell phones, weapons-making machinery, and over \$30,000 in cash.^[15] In June 2008, Spanish authorities arrested eight men and accused them of providing logistical and financial support to AQIM.^[16] Such incidents provide evidence of AQIM networks beyond the Maghreb, operating (initially at least) as procurement wings for the regional terror campaign, not unlike the sophisticated Hezbollah supply networks that have been known to range as far as Venezuela, the United States, and even Canada. This combination of domestic terror training combined with foreign procurement is a worrisome development for North Africa, coming from a period in the late 1990s when the Algerian civil war appeared over and GIA militancy was rapidly losing cohesion.

As the organizational structure and sophistication of AQIM increasingly mirrors larger movements like Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda, so too do its objectives. Recently, in August 2008, AQIM leader Abdelmalik Droukdal proclaimed jihad against the Mauritanian government, stating that Mauritanian elites were "all[ies] of the Zionists and the Crusaders in Mauritania".^[17] This type of language is identical to that of the Al-Qaeda core, and evidences a movement towards the targeting of Israeli interests and regional "apostate" regimes. This may prove easier for AQIM than waging a campaign solely within Algerian territory, as Algeria's security apparatus is extensive and experienced in counter-terror and counter-insurgency. This form of rational deterrence — in this case from Algeria to Mauritania — may bolster the apparent increase in regional terrorism, as AQIM shifts its focus to move vulnerable areas. Indeed, the group was so bold as to attempt an assassination on the military ruler of Mauritania, Gen. Muhammad Ould Abd Al-

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Aziz.^[18] In keeping with their anti-“Zionist” objectives, AQIM has also attacked the Israeli embassy in Mauritania, and was reportedly planning to kidnap the former Israeli ambassador until the Mauritanian AQIM cell was disrupted by local authorities.^[19] The December, 2007 AQIM murder of four French tourists in Mauritania further underscores the increased activity of the group in North Africa, whether against former colonial powers, the state of Israel, or “apostate” Muslim regimes. This wide variety of targets gives AQIM room to maneuver, choosing from a spectrum of “hard” (e.g. foreign VIPs) and “soft” (e.g. foreign tourists) targets. This flexibility will allow the group to conduct more successful attacks, provided that AQIM targeting is not overly ambitious and continues to blend “soft” and “hard” target attacks. The organization has already displayed this kind of operational flexibility, as recent reports note that AQIM is shifting its training camps to Mauritania and the deserts of northern Mali,^[20] effectively ‘hedging their bets’ against any severe crackdown by Algerian authorities.

It is clear from the aforementioned evidence that AQIM is becoming a significant player in North African and Middle-Eastern terrorism. Even the Al-Qaeda core appears to believe this: in 2008, German signals intelligence (SIGINT) intercepted a communiqué from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Abdelmalik Droukdal, in which Zawahiri noted the coming republication of the Danish Prophet Muhammad cartoons and requested AQIM help in “taking revenge”.^[21] This is evidence of the high-level respect and coordination accorded to AQIM by the Al-Qaeda core. As the central Al-Qaeda reserve of former Afghan mujahideen dries up, so too will the AQIM reserve of mujahideen veterans from Iraq increase. As the Al-Qaeda core wanes, with the prolonged absence — indeed the possible death — of Bin Laden, it is possible that AQIM will take up the reins of conducting — if not captaining — the global jihad. The Al-Qaeda core is still suffering from its Afghan expulsion and the constant pursuit of U.S. authorities in Waziristan, while the less high-profile AQIM is able to flourish to the extent of successfully dispatching operatives as far away as Iraq.

While AQIM may benefit from its lower profile and the porous borders and weak authority in its region, the fact remains that it is not an appropriate heir for Al-Qaeda central. Droukdal does not have the fame of Bin Laden or even Zawahiri, and the Maghreb is traditionally considered subsidiary to the Middle-Eastern Mashriq. Droukdal and his compatriots, while they may be Arab, are not Saudis or Egyptians. They belong to a less respected and recognized area of the Muslim world, and for this reason AQIM would have enormous difficulty portraying itself as the central authority in the global jihadist movement. While AQIM violence and propaganda may continue to increase, it will continue to remain ideologically bound to the Al-Qaeda core. Should the Al-Qaeda central authority — however diffuse and symbolic it may be — finally collapse, AQIM may find itself rudderless and without foreign inspiration. Even if it is discovered that Bin Laden himself is deceased, AQIM may face a drop in profile and prestige, both of which are necessary tools for broad-based recruitment. Nonetheless, AQIM continues to be a major player in North African terrorism, and is likely to remain the central terror network in the Maghreb for at least the coming decade.

AQIM and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) have forged a degree of connection since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, with North African insurgents contributing significantly to the Iraqi jihad. One terrorism consultant estimates that between 9% and 25% of foreign fighters in Iraq are of North African origin, though the majority are still either Saudi or Jordanian.^[22] North Africans in Iraq have acted as suicide bombers, foot soldiers, and even mid-level commanders. This may provide evidence of some power projection by AQIM, offering support to the distant Iraqi insurgency due to its ideological and strategic importance. AQIM successes in Iraq will only continue to raise the group’s profile among extremist networks. Individuals such as Adil Sakir Al-Mukni, the Syrian-based AQIM lieutenant who shuttled foreign fighters into Iraq to serve AQI, are living examples of the connection between these two strategic theatres. Showcasing its longstanding hatred of the French state, AQIM has also called upon the AQI network to attack French nationals in Iraq, and is said to have applauded the 2005 assassination of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq.^[23] The AQIM focus on Iraq is certainly evidence of the globalization of Maghreb terrorism. There have been unconfirmed speculations — mainly from Algerian authorities — of state-sponsorship for AQIM from Iran and Sudan.^[24] While this may be slightly supported by the new AQIM focus on Iraq — a key objective for Iran — there is a significant religious and ideological divide between Shi’a Iran and the Salafi AQIM network. It is more likely that these Algerian claims have instead been aimed at garnering support from the vehemently anti-Iranian Bush administration.

Algeria has been shrewd in its “marketing” of the AQIM network, and has done so with a calculated eye towards Western support. Blanket attribution of all regional terrorism to AQIM have been, despite a dearth of hard evidence, quite common in the Maghreb.^[25] These attributions are designed to coax both military aid and diplomatic support

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from the United States, which to this day remains almost obsessively focussed upon the Al-Qaeda network. Indeed Algerian attempts to construe AQIM as a “single and centralized Salafist movement”^[26] representing all jihadists in the Maghreb are plainly facile, and ignore the existence of other regional terrorist organizations such as the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (GICM). Their efforts are aimed at reviving Algerian strategic importance to U.S. policymakers, who have traditionally viewed Algeria as part of the Western European sphere of influence, relevant solely for its place at “NATO’s southern flank”.^[27] Algerian elites have likely watched with interest as large influxes of U.S. assistance have arrived in locales with “global terrorism” issues: Columbia, Afghanistan, Israel, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and others. This dynamic mirrors the Cold War period, wherein pro-Western nations — including some of the world’s most undemocratic dictators — merely had to evoke the spirit of “domino theory” and “Communist infiltration” in order to garner Western military and financial assistance. Viewed in this context, terrorism in the Maghreb *and its marketing* has grown significantly. Rent-seeking behavior from North African regimes, like that of Algeria, has found the “War on Terror” to be a convenient and dependable source of funding. The rebranding of GSPC as AQIM has proved enormously fortuitous to Algeria; not only Islamic terrorism, but self-proclaimed *Al-Qaeda terrorism* has arrived in their nation. Insofar as disasters, no disaster could have been better arranged to achieve maximum U.S. backing with minimum U.S. oversight. This is not to say, however, that North African terrorism cannot spread to European or North American shores; the primarily Moroccan cell^[28] that committed the 2004 Madrid train bombings infiltrated Europe by way of North Africa.^[29]

Political rhetoric and media claims aside, the threat posed by AQIM will continue to grow. Its widespread support network, geographically advantageous setting, broad-based Islamist appeal, and sophisticated terror techniques have all contributed to its increasing power. Regardless of rent-seeking North African regimes, who have at times used terrorism to justify the curtailing of civil freedoms and human rights abuses,^[30] the AQIM network in Algeria and its neighbouring states will continue to flourish. The war in Iraq has allowed the network to send its fighters abroad for experience in urban insurgency, gaining valuable veterans for the AQIM cause in the Maghreb. This process closely mirrors the experience of the Al-Qaeda core leadership in 1980s Afghanistan, wherein the anti-Soviet jihad provided a well-funded training group for new recruits to gain valuable fighting skills. Many of these Afghan veterans went on to become the middle and high-level leadership of Al-Qaeda, including Bin Laden himself. Iraq may prove to be similarly advantageous to the cause of Maghreb terrorism, both ideologically and operationally. While AQIM will lose some fighters to Coalition counterinsurgency operations, AQIM stands to gain significantly through the return of battle-hardened veterans to its North African network. Having gained the necessary leadership and combat skills, these respected veterans will in turn be able to pass on their deadly trade. A new generation of North African training camps and jihadists will likely emerge as the Iraqi insurgency begins to recede.

Terror in the Maghreb is expanding for several key reasons, including resources, ideology, regional history, and foreign conflicts. Resources have poured into North African terrorism — specifically AQIM — through foreign procurement networks and the donations of wealthy Al-Qaeda sympathizers in the Gulf states.^[31] The ideology of Maghreb terrorism has shifted from the increasingly unpopular local struggle, such as that of the discredited GIA, to a pan-Islamic global jihadism. This has cemented the North African influence of Al-Qaeda’s leadership, providing newfound prestige and capacity to the former GSPC. Evidencing new boldness and capabilities, AQIM has been able to execute suicide bombings, ambushes, and four attempted assassinations on Algerian President Bouteflika. Islam more generally is gaining popularity as well, with populations in authoritarian states such as Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco becoming increasingly religious; this increasing religiosity may make local populations more vulnerable to jihadist propaganda.^[32] The regional history of the Maghreb, with its anti-colonial struggles, has also provided a sound basis upon which insurgents and jihadists could construct a new strategy for their conflict; existing grievances and veteran fighters offered fertile ground for a newly rebranded North African insurgency. This has mirrored the situation of Egypt in the 1990s, where local terrorism by Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) — under the command the Al-Zawahiri brothers — evolved and merged with Al-Qaeda.^[33] Additionally, unpopular Western engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have generated new veterans for Maghreb terror groups, for example former Afghan mujahideen and AQIM field commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar.^[34] These veterans have imported valuable skills in smuggling, arms trafficking, and urban warfare into the Maghreb region. The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts also provide an excellent *causis belli* for “defensive” jihad, easily deployed by extremists as an example of Western attempts at Middle-Eastern hegemony. Foreign interventions are always excellent fodder for domestic radicalization. These conflicts have also allowed for the consolidation of regional terror networks in the Maghreb, leading the larger Algerian AQIM to subsume smaller

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Islamist groups in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Mauritania.^[35] All of these aforementioned factors have led to a rise in the prevalence, sophistication, and strategic implications of North African terrorism. While North African terrorism once consisted of disparate, anti-colonial, anti-authoritarian insurgencies, now it has begun to grow and consolidate into a “new arc of terror,”^[36] even spreading to European and North American locales. With the focus of Western counter-terror efforts being on Afghanistan, Pakistan, Waziristan, and Iraq, the magnitude of North African terror may grow due to this deterrent factor in other regions. This phenomenon is only likely to increase, particularly upon the return of all North African fighters in Iraq and Afghanistan to their various home states in the Maghreb.

1 ^[1] Arezki Daoud. *Should North Africa Brace for more Terror Attacks?*. http://www.north-africa.com/blog/?page_id=37. Accessed Nov. 16, 2008.

2 ^[2] Andrew Hansen and Lauren Vriens. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*. Council on Foreign Relations: July 31, 2008. cfr.org/publication/12717.

3 ^[3] Nouredine Jebnoun. *Is the Maghreb the “Next Afghanistan”?*. Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University: 2007. <http://www12.georgetown.edu/sfs/ccas/ccas/www/files/NouredineJebnounOccasionalPaper.pdf>.

4 ^[4] Ibid.

5 ^[5] Ibid.

6 ^[6] Hansen and Vriens. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*.

7 ^[7] Ibid.

8 ^[8] Ibid.

9 ^[9] Andrew Black. *Recasting Jihad in the Maghreb*. Jamestown Foundation: October 2007. <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373742>.

10 ^[10] Souad Mekhennet et al. *A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda*. New York Times: July 1, 2008.

11 ^[11] Ibid.

12 ^[12] Mekhennet et al. *A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda*.

13 ^[13] Ibid.

14 ^[14] Ibid.

15 ^[15] Ibid.

16 ^[16] Hansen and Vriens. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)*.

17 ^[17] Gilad Zahavi. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) — Planned assassination of Mauritania’s military ruler and the kidnapping of the former Israeli Ambassador*. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism: October 2008. <http://www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/tabid/69/Articlsid/515/currentpage/1/Default.aspx>.

18 ^[18] Ibid.

19 ^[19] Ibid.

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20^[20] Zahavi. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) — Planned assassination of Mauritania's military ruler and the kidnapping of the former Israeli Ambassador.*

21^[21] Mekhennet et al. *A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda.*

22^[22] Hansen and Vriens. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).*

23^[23] Ibid.

24^[24] Hansen and Vriens. *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).*

25^[25] Jebnoun. *Is the Maghreb the "Next Afghanistan"?*

26^[26] Ibid.

27^[27] Ibid.

28^[28] Allegedly members of the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (GICM), though this has been contested. The Spanish judge in the 3/11 case deemed the perpetrators "local cells of Islamic extremists inspired through the internet."

29^[29] Jebnoun. *Is the Maghreb the "Next Afghanistan"?*

30^[30] Ibid.

31^[31] Amir Taheri. *Al-Qaeda's sinister creep into North Africa.* The Times Online: July 30, 2008. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article4425820.ece.

32^[32] Ibid.

33^[33] J. Peter Pham. *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: An Evolving Challenge in the War on Terror .* World Defense Review: May, 2008. <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham050808.shtml>.

34^[34] Ibid.

35^[35] Pham. *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: An Evolving Challenge in the War on Terror.*

36^[36] Taheri. *Al-Qaeda's sinister creep into North Africa.*

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