

The North Africa Project

The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad

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The GSPC: *Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad*

The GSPC, one of the most notorious terrorist groups in North Africa, has aligned with Al-Qa'ida and changed its name to "The Organization of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb." On April 10, 2007, the new organization claimed credit for two suicide car bomb attacks in Algiers that killed 23 people. Some observers have speculated that North Africa may be the next safe-haven for al-Qa'ida, and that European countries may face a greater risk of attack if Algerian terrorist groups expand their base of support in Europe. The alignment of the GSPC with al-Qa'ida represents a significant change in the group's strategy, however, its decision to join al-Qa'ida's global jihad should be understood as an act of desperation.

The Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) was founded in 1998 as an offshoot of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA was one of the strongest and most violent groups fighting the Algerian government in a civil war that killed over a hundred thousand civilians. Operating as a guerilla army, the GIA was able to establish control over large areas of the Algerian countryside by using terrorism against civilian populations. GIA fighters executed - and sometimes beheaded - anyone suspected of collaborating with the police or gendarmerie. By the late 1990's, the group had lost momentum as government crackdowns reduced its numbers while the group's own hyper-violent tactics alienated the Algerian population.

With the GIA discredited and weakened, Hassan Hattab,¹ a GIA operational commander, founded the GSPC in 1998. Eventually, the GSPC eclipsed the GIA in power and size, drawing away many of the GIA's top military leaders. The GSPC's numbers declined in later years due to aggressive counter-terror measures on the part of the Algerian security services and an amnesty program put forth by the Bouteflika regime, which resulted in the demobilization of hundreds of militants from both the GIA and the GSPC.

Forced to retreat from urban areas, having lost support from the Algerian people and struggling to fill its ranks with new recruits,² the GSPC faced an uncertain future, and so the group took a series of steps to align its activities with al-Qa'ida's framework for a global jihad. The GSPC had declared its loyalty to al-Qa'ida several times since 2003, and Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly acknowledged GSPC's affiliation with al-Qa'ida in a video statement released in September 2006.³ In January 2007, the group announced that it would henceforth be known as the

¹ Also known as Abu Hamza.

² Arielle Thedrel, "The New Jihad of Algerian Islamists," Paris Le Figaro (April 6, 2004).

³ "Algerian Militant Group Pledges Allegiance to Bin Laden, FBIS Feature (December 14, 2004). Accessed 4/12/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>. Arielle Thedrel, "Al-Qa'ida has Reportedly Become Model for Algerian Fundamentalists," Paris Le Figaro (February 27, 2003). Accessed 02/09/2006 from

Organization of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This report will analyze the events which necessitated this transition, describe the advantages for both partners, and explain why AQIM will probably not emerge as a major regional threat.

GROUP PROFILE

Ideology & Political Platform

The GIA and GSPC both sought to establish an Islamic state in Algeria and rejected the legitimacy of secular democratic governance. The GIA was split by internal theological differences over the use of violence against non-combatants, which led to disputes over strategy and tactics. The GIA's most extreme members felt that anyone who didn't actively support them could be judged to be an apostate and killed. The uncontrolled violence turned the Algerian population against the GIA and also caused other terrorist groups to distance themselves from the Algerians. Hassan Hattab's decision to establish the GPSC was a direct result of the GIA's strategic impasse, and the new group repudiated the GIA's use of violence against civilians and promised to limit its attacks to military and security targets. There have been rumors that Usama bin Laden encouraged Hattab to create the new group, although Hattab later denied this.⁴ The GIA's internal arguments and theological debates, which were observed by other jihadist groups, foreshadowed al-Qa'ida's later crisis over al-Zarqawi's tactics in Iraq.

Algerians became less tolerant of the GSPC's violent tactics as the GSPC exhausted the goodwill of the people in the rural areas that had served as a refuge for its fighters. In 1999, Algerians voted to support a Civil Concord that offered amnesty for fighters who voluntarily surrendered. Thousands of former fighters have reportedly been demobilized.⁵ Confrontations with Algerian security services resulted in the arrest or death of key leaders, causing disarray that was compounded by power struggles within the group. In order to ensure its survival, the GSPC had no choice but to find a new mission that would re-energize its followers.

Emir Nabil Sahraoui may have been the first GSPC leader to seek engagement with al-Qa'ida, but after he was killed by Algerian security forces in 2004, Abdelmalek Droukdal (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud) took over the top leadership position. Droukdal appears to be the driving force behind the GSPC's transitions, as it was under his leadership that the GPSC began making noticeable changes in its public statements. In 2005, the group stated that - although it still sought an Islamic state in Algeria- France was responsible for supporting the apostate

<http://www.opensource.gov>; "Is Al-Qaeda/GSPC Alliance Spin?" Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor (November 15, 2006). Accessed 02/06/2007 from <http://www.janes.com>.

4 Andrew Koch, "US to Bolster Counter-Terrorism Assistance to Africa," Jane's Defence Weekly (October 06, 2004). Accessed 02/02/2006 from <http://www.janes.com>

5 The GSPC declared that any of its fighters that accepted the amnesty would be killed by the group, demonstrating that the group felt threatened by the government's outreach efforts. In 2006, the government began releasing over 2,500 former members of the GIA and other violent groups that had been detained by the government. There is concern that some of those released may return to violent activity, and the GPSC has specifically targeted these parolees for recruitment.

Algerian regime, and therefore France, would be now be the group's primary target.⁶ This declaration directly mirrors Usama bin Laden's insistence that al-Qa'ida should focus on attacking Western powers rather than local regimes, and the GSPC's very public announcement that France would be a priority target indicates that the group felt a need to demonstrate its commitment to global jihadist goals. The focus on France is not new for Algerian opposition groups: the GIA hijacked an Air France flight in December 1994, possibly with the intention of flying the plane into the Eiffel Tower, and the group was also responsible for a series of bombings in Paris in 1995.

Operations

The GSPC traditionally operates primarily in the northern mountains and southern deserts of Algeria. The GPSC generally targets Algerian government officials, particularly the military, police and *gendarmerie*. The most common attacks have been false roadblocks and ambushes, armed attacks against police or military buildings, bombings, and assassinations. The group also perpetrates incursions or raids on towns or neighborhoods, often for the purpose of stealing vehicles or saleable goods. Roadblocks or checkpoints necessarily generate a response from local security services, thus setting the stage for a secondary ambush against the responding government forces.⁷ The group uses these attacks to supply itself with weapons and communications equipment, although it also purchases weapons on the international black market. The group has targeted tourists traveling in the remote southern deserts in order to obtain satellite phone, GPS and other navigation devices, and four-wheel drive vehicles. To date, the GSPC has not attacked Algeria's vulnerable natural gas and oil pipelines.⁸

A number of the groups' key military commander were (or claim to have been) soldiers in the Algerian military. This has fueled speculation that the GSPC is actually a tool of the Algerian security services, which use the group's presence as a tool to generate domestic (and international) support for its security measures. The GIA was widely believed to have been thoroughly infiltrated by Algerian security services, resulting in a loss of trust on the part of other jihadist groups who feared that their own operational security would be compromised by association.⁹ In any event, the GSPC has avoided force-on-force confrontations with the Algerian military when it did not have the advantage of surprise, preferring to retreat rather than engage in battles that usually resulted in extensive casualties.¹⁰

6 "Extremist Group GSPC Says Algerian President is Ruling in France's Name," Paris AFP (September 28, 2005). Accessed 2/19/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

7 "Algerian Sources Say 13 Customs Officers Killed in Southern Terror Attack," Cairo, (April 08, 2006). Accessed 04/25/06 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

8 This curious fact has been cited as evidence by those who believe that the government maintains some level of control over the group.

9 Multiple sources claim that the government was aware of, and possibly directing, the GIA's activities in order to consolidate power after its cancellation of election results that would have brought an Islamist political party, the FIS, into Parliament.

10 Faycal Oukaci, "The Region Has Become a Retreat Area for the Terrorist Group: The Salafi Group for Call and Combat's Maquis in Kabylie," L'Expression (February 27, 2007). Accessed 03/02/2007 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

The GSPC, like the GIA, is organized as a loose confederation of regional divisions under a national commander (or emir) and a religious authority who supervised the overall direction of the group. Each of the regional groups, called *katibats*, controlled a territory that roughly aligned with the governments' own military districts.¹¹ The group's videos show the men living in rough mountain camps, with no permanent structures, and media reports suggest that the leadership is constantly on the move. Such conditions make it extremely hard for the leadership to coordinate or control the activity of its fighters, as every attempt to communicate carries a risk of discovery or interception by the security services. Deep personal rivalries divided the field commanders, and a number of GSPC cadre were killed or captured by Algerian security services following leads provided by rival GSPC elements.¹² The *katibats* were not necessarily under the control of the national leadership, and each was at least partially responsible for supplying and funding its operations. Sheikh Ahmed Abu al-Baraa, one of the groups' founding members, provided religious guidance, but his death in 2006 at the hands of Algerian troops may have left the group without strong leadership in a time of crisis.¹³

The GSPC generates revenue through criminal activity in Africa and Europe.¹⁴ Many of GSPC's operational elements joined the group after gaining relevant experience as smugglers, bringing valuable skills and criminal contacts to the group. Groups use roadblocks to shake down anyone passing through their territory, and criminal associations in Europe allow the group to raise funds through identity theft, credit card fraud, and drug smuggling. GSPC's capacity to raise money through donations is unknown, although European security services suspect that the group has capitalized on relationships with immigrant communities in Europe.¹⁵ The group reportedly raised 100,000 Euros in Switzerland alone, according to a 14 September 2006 report in *Le Figaro* magazine.

The European GPSC cells' level of operational capability is unclear. The GSPC has not managed to execute any attacks in Europe, and although the European press is full of reports of disrupted GPSC plots, these plots may not actually have anything to do with the GSPC. The European jihadist networks are so intermingled that it is difficult to be sure of the exact relationship between the Algerian and European elements, and Abdelmalek Droukdal may not have any authority over them.¹⁶ At the same time, AQIM's "franchise" agreement may give Droukdal access to new criminal, operational, or logistics networks.

11 "Salafi Group Reportedly Sets Up New Structures in Algeria," *Algiers El-Khabar* (March, 2006). Accessed 3/30/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

12 "Terrorist GSPC Seen Imploding," *Algiers L'Expression* (October 23, 2005). Accessed 3/17/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

13 Stephen Ulph, "Major GSPC Founder and Ideologue Killed," *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 3 Issue 5 (February 7, 2006). Accessed 2/22/2006 from <http://www.jamestown.org>.

14 Hayder Mill, "Tangled Webs: Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 4 Issue 1 (January 12, 2006). Accessed 1/17/2006 from <http://www.jamestown.org>.

15 Class Petersson, "The World's Most Brutal Network is Controlled From Here," *Stockholm Aftonbladet* (July 13, 2005). Accessed 3/30/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

16 "The Two Organizations Seek the Support of Al-Qa'ida: GSPC-GICM: A War for Leadership," *Le Jour d'Algerie* (December 13, 2006). Accessed 02/26/2007 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

One of the most notorious GSPC field commanders was Abderrazak El Para (a.k.a. Amari Saifi), who kidnapped 32 European tourists between February and April of 2003. Seventeen of the hostages were released in May, but the remaining fifteen were held for several more months before the German government reportedly paid five million Euros in ransom. The kidnapping triggering an international manhunt (and running gun battle) that transited Mauretania, Mali, and Niger before El Para was eventually captured in Chad with help from the American government.¹⁷ This episode has been widely cited as evidence of the transnational reach of the GSPC.

Currently, Mokhtar Belmokhtar is thought to be one of the stronger field commanders. He controls the Ninth region, which encompasses the southern portion of Algeria and includes many of the most profitable smuggling routes. From this southern base, Belmokhtar led a cross-border attack on a Mauretanian military garrison in El Mreiti in June of 2005, killing approximately 15 Mauretanian soldiers and capturing a significant number of weapons.¹⁸ Belmokhtar claims to have trained in al-Qa'ida's Khalden and Jihadwal camps, and although he has declared that his group will attack governments that participate in U.S. counter terrorism efforts in the region, there are conflicting reports as to whether or not his *katibat* is now part of AQIM.

Belmokhtar is believed to have married a number of Touareg women as a means of securing cooperation from the tribes that control territory along the borders with Mali, Niger, and Mauretania. Mali and Niger have difficulty monitoring the harsh terrain, and both states reduced their military presence in their northern territories in the late 1990's as part of peace agreements with Touareg separatist groups. The government is still viewed with suspicion by many Touareg, who have no particular reason to report terrorists in their territory. Although the Touareg and GPSC/AQIM have many common interests, they are not natural allies, and the cooperation between them is based on mutual profit, not trust. Belmokhtar has come into armed conflict with Touareg tribesman, probably as a result of disagreements over control of smuggling routes. Nevertheless, any increase in GSPC/AQIM activity in the border regions may provide job opportunities to youth with few other options.

THE LOGIC OF THE MERGER

The announcement in January of 2007 that the group had changed its name to "Organization of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) formally subsumed the GSPC hierarchy under Usama bin Laden and al-Qa'ida.¹⁹ GSPC reportedly had strong links to both Ayman al-

17 Salima Tlemceni, "The Enigmatic Case of Abderrazak the Para: Revelations About the Career of a Terrorist Leader," *Algiers El Watan* (April 10, 2006). Salima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, "Who Staged the Tourist Kidnappings? El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Ladin," *Paris Le Monde Diplomatique* (February 1, 2005).

18 "GSPC blamed for Mauritania attack," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor* (July 22, 2005). Accessed 02/02/2006.

19 In 2004, militant Islamic websites circulated a declaration that announced the creation of a new al-Qa'ida affiliate, Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Berber

(Organization of Al Qaida in the Land of the Berbers), which was followed several months later by a similar announcement for Qa'idat al-Jihad fi al-Jaza'ir

(Organization of Al Qaida in Algeria). The relationship of these groups to AQIM is unclear.

Zawahiri and Abu Musab al-Suri, and the decision to change the group's name formalizes a transformation that had been underway for some time. The GSPC courted al-Qa'ida because of the need to maintain relevancy and to have a certain number of visible successes to shore up declining recruitment. Given the leadership struggles within the GSPC, it seems likely that the old-guard fighters with a nationalist orientation have been forced out of AQIM, whose leadership has redirected the group's efforts in order to preserve its viability. The more interesting question is whether or not the transformation reflects an ideological shift on the part of the AQIM leadership. The current leadership may be more radical, or it may simply be composed of professionalized terrorist-mercenaries who simply prefer to keep fighting, irrespective of the nature of the cause.

By affiliating itself with al-Qa'ida, AQIM stands to gain new sources of financial support as a result of its official participation in the global jihad, and it may also receive financial support directly from al-Qa'ida. AQIM may have an easier time recruiting informants, logisticians, and operatives for a cause that is seen (by some) to benefit the global community of Muslims. Terrorist groups attract and maintain support when they appear to be active and successful, so GSPC leaders were under pressure to conduct attacks in order to hold the group together. Droukdal may have felt that he was losing control of the *katibats*, and that a formal relationship with al-Qa'ida would provide a new focal point for the members, allowing the current leadership to stay in place. Furthermore, AQIM may now have access to al-Qa'ida's networks of financiers, logisticians, intelligence assets, and media specialists, reinforcing the group's capabilities.

The primary disadvantage for AQIM is that its alignment with al-Qa'ida will generate increased attention from government security services. Long-time rivals such as Morocco and Algeria have begun cooperating in response to the internationalization of North African terrorism, and the United States has increased its counter terror initiatives in the region. Becoming an international terrorist group earns a place on the Department of State's list of designated terrorist groups, and becoming an al-Qa'ida affiliate moves the group higher on SOCOM's list of priorities.

CHANGES IN TRAINING, TACTICS, AND PROCEDURES

GSPC cells escorted al-Qa'ida emissaries into North Africa on several occasions with the intention of unifying the various local terrorist groups under al-Qa'ida, presumably with GSPC acting as the local coordinating entity.²⁰ One of these emissaries was intercepted by Moroccan security services, and another, a Yemeni named Emad Alouane (a.k.a. Abou Mohammed al-Yemeni), was killed by the Algerian military in 2003.²¹ In 2006, Algerian security services,

20 Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda Networks Uncovered in Morocco," *Terrorism Focus*, Vol. 2 Issue 23, (December 13, 2005). Accessed 01/20/2006 at

<http://www.jamestown.org>. "Moroccan Paper on Attempt to Set Up Al Qa'ida Base in North Africa," *Rabat al-Alam* (February 13, 2006). "Algerian Security Forces Arrest Al-Qa'ida Emissary to Terrorist Group," *Algiers Al-Khabar* (March 22, 2006). Accessed 4/16/2006 from <http://www.fbis.gov>.

21 Radia Djouzi, "Al-Zarqawi, One of Its Most Active Members, Reportedly Lived in Algeria," *Algiers La Tribune* (July 23, 2005). Accessed 4/11/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>

acting on a tip from local citizens, arrested a known terrorist named Abou-Tourab, who was a founding member of the GIA.²² Abou Tourab was on a mission to re-establish contact between the GSPC and al-Qa'ida, and he was supposedly carrying a letter from Sheikh Sulayman Bin-Nasar Bin-Abdallah al-Alway, an al-Qa'ida official since taken into custody in Saudi Arabia.

In 2005, reports surfaced that GSPC cells were training recruits to fight in Iraq with Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi's organization.²³ The trainings reportedly continued after Zarqawi's death, as volunteers were passed through a series of handlers, some of them reaching Syria via Europe while others traveled through Egypt or the Gulf states. The training was apparently conducted in temporary bivouacs in the desert, and the locations changed every few days to prevent detection. It seems likely that the group wanted to gain credibility by supporting the insurgency in Iraq, perhaps with the hope of establishing itself as some sort of training authority. However, trainings of such short duration could not have been very substantive, and it is unclear whether the GSPC, which practices guerilla warfare, could have much to offer a future suicide bomber or a combatant headed to an urban war zone. The GSPC has only recently begun using remote timing devices of the sort that are common in Iraq, and press reports suggested in 2006 that GSPC might have sent some of its own fighters to Lebanon to train with Hezbollah.²⁴

On December 11, 2006, GSPC elements attacked employees of Brown Root and Condor, a joint venture of KBR and Algeria's Condor Energy, killing an Algerian and injuring several Americans. On March 3rd, AQIM attacked Russian employees of a natural gas contractor, killing one Russian and three Algerians. These attacks made a splash in the media in part because it provided evidence that GSPC is widening its target focus to include foreigners, but also because GPSC had never before made any serious attempts to disrupt Algeria's energy sector.

On April 10th, 2007 a large car bomb was detonated outside the Prime Minister's residence in Algiers, killing 12 people, while a second bombing near a police station killed 11 people.²⁵ Reports suggest that both devices may have been triggered by suicide bombers, and AQIM has claimed responsibility. This is the most aggressive and deadly attack in years and it may indicate that AQIM has recently recruited terrorists who have fought with insurgent groups in Iraq. Such fighters have an entirely different skill set than the aging "Afghan Arabs" who formed the core of the Algerian terrorist groups. If this flow of trained fighters from Iraq continues, AQIM could gain operational expertise in urban insurgency techniques and procedures that will be much more difficult for the government to stop. Detonating a large

22 Ibid.

23 "Al-Hayah Cites Detainees on Moroccan Al Qaida Group That Enlists Volunteers for Iraq," London Al-Hayah, (November 29, 2005). Usamah Mahdi: "Arrivals from Algeria disclose to 'Ilaf': Algerian fundamentalists are helping al-Qa'ida establish bases in the Sahara," Ilaf (October 28, 2003).

24 Le Jeune Independent (October 9, 2005). Accessed 3/19/2006 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

25 "Explosions Rock Algerian Capital," BBC News, (April 11, 2007). Accessed 04/12/07 from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6544437.stm?ls>. Craig Smith, "Blasts by Qaeda Unit Are Deadliest Attack in Algiers in Years," New York Times (April 12, 2007). Accessed 04/12/2007 from <http://www.nytimes.com>

bomb in a public place represents a reversal of GSPC's pledge to avoid civilian casualties; however it is entirely consistent with al-Qa'ida's fondness for mass casualty attacks that generate a lot of publicity. Since its affiliation with al-Qa'ida, AQIM has devoted more attention to media communications, and it evidently has access to al-Qa'ida's al-Sahab media network for distribution of its videos and statements. The stepped-up media effort may reflect AQIM's desire to show that it is contributing to the global jihad in order to gain support, attract recruits, and generate additional financial support.

THE FUTURE OF AQIM

Algerian press reports suggest that some GSPC *katibats* resisted the association with al-Qa'ida, and it is unclear at this time how much of the GSPC remains loyal to Abdelmalek Droukdal. Droukdal might see himself as some sort of Zaqawi figure for North Africa, but he evidently lacks Zaqawi's leadership skills: although Droukdal has lasted longer than many previous emirs, his control of the other military commanders has been shaky and the *katibat* led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar may be among the groups that don't consider themselves part of AQIM.²⁶ The European criminal and terrorist networks associated with GSPC were probably already operating independently, and may have been following instructions from al-Qa'ida operatives or the Moroccan Group for Islamic Combat (GICM).²⁷ European operatives may have no personal ties to Droukdal, and might see him as some kind of rear-guard remnant of the parent organization.

Given that Droukdal wasn't able to unify the GPSC, he certainly won't be able to subsume all of the North African jihadist groups into one entity under his command. It is unlikely that the strongest North African groups such as GICM will accept Droukdal as a legitimate authority figure. There is a lingering distrust of GSPC/AQIM on the part of other militant groups who suspect that, like the GIA, it has been thoroughly infiltrated by Algerian security services. Also, past experience has taught other groups that it can be dangerous to cooperate with the Algerians. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) learned this lesson the hard way when the GIA killed several LIFG fighters who had been sent to Algeria for joint training.

AQIM will probably increase its attempts to attack Western targets in the region, particularly any businesses associated with the United States or with France. If the recent attacks in Algiers are an indication of AQIM's current strategy, suicide attacks may become more frequent. Such a shift would significantly increase the group's ability to damage Western interests, but will also incur a massive response from Algerian security services and will open the doors for greater American support to the Algerian regime.

26 Majid T., "Ould Kablia: The Salafi Group for Call and Combat is Not a Threat to the Maghreb and France," *Liberte* (February 01, 2007). Accessed 02/23/2007 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

27 "Italy: Three Alleged Terrorists Arrested Suspected of Planning Attack in Italy," *Milan Il Giornale* (November 17, 2005). "The Two Organizations Seek the Support of Al-Qa'ida: GSPC-GICM: A War for Leadership," *Le Jour d'Algerie* (December 13, 2006). Accessed 02/26/2007 from <http://www.opensource.gov>.

AQIM may be able to draw new recruits from neighboring countries if its re-branding effort attracts youth who haven't yet witnessed the reality of the group's criminal enterprises and brutal tactics. A worst-case scenario would be for AQIM to relocate to Mauritania or Nigeria, capitalizing on local discontent and rising radicalism to establish itself as a West African terrorist group. West African states are less prepared to respond to terrorist attacks, and should AQIM establish a foothold in Nigeria while adopting suicide bombing as a tactic, it could exact considerable economic damage to the energy sector in the Niger delta. This remains unlikely due to distrust between North African and Sub-Saharan populations, and because Droukdal's own *katibat* has not operated in the South (this is why the question of Belmokhtar's allegiance remains critical to predicting AQIM's future).

CONCLUSION

At this time, AQIM is not a serious strategic threat to U.S. interests in North Africa, nor is it on the brink of creating a new African safe-haven for Usama bin Laden. AQIM does not currently pose a threat to the survival of the Algerian government, or to any of its neighbors. AQIM cannot further radicalize the Algerian people, who have been exposed to violent extremist Islamic rhetoric and have largely rejected al-Qa'ida's vision of Islam. It is unlikely that AQIM will succeed in unifying other North African groups under its leadership, and without them, it is simply not strong enough to destabilize any North African regimes.

AQIM is capable of disrupting trade and development in the region, thereby derailing efforts to combat the poverty and unemployment that facilitate the group's continued existence. Cooperation among Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian, Malian, Nigerian, and Nigerian security services will be the key to preventing the group from expanding its reach. AQIM is currently fragmented, and Droukdal may still be determining which fighters are loyal to him. The group must not be allowed to regroup and retrench, and therefore improving the capacity of local security services to handle terrorist threats within their territory should remain a high priority for the United States. Long-term success in combating terrorism requires that states counter the radical ideologies that fuel terrorist recruitment while also providing economic alternatives to terrorist and criminal activity. So long as people believe that participation in extremist activity is either spiritually or economically beneficial, these networks will continue to regenerate.

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