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AL QAEDA IN THE
ISLAMIC MAGHREB

by William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy

Executive Summary

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) emerged from a decades-long militant Islamist tradition in Algeria. In 1998, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC) broke away from the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, or GIA) because of the GIA’s extensive targeting of civilians. Gradually, the GSPC evolved to encompass global jihadist ideology in addition to its historical focus on overturning the Algerian state. In 2006, the GSPC officially affiliated with al Qaeda core, soon rebranding itself as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In the following years, AQIM was able to conduct a small number of large-scale attacks, most notably its 2007 bombing of the UN headquarters in Algiers. In recent years, counterterrorism pressure and weak governance have combined to shift the center of AQIM’s presence to the Sahara-Sahel region. AQIM continues to make its presence known through smuggling operations, kidnappings, and clashes with security forces in the desert. In the coming years, general instability within the region could allow AQIM to further expand its influence.

The Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) Futures Project is a joint study undertaken by the CSIS Transnational Threats Project and the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program. The initiative will produce a series of alternative futures regarding the state of AQAM in the year 2025 and generate recommendations to defeat the threat over the long term. Drawing on historical analysis, social science research, expert interviews, and targeted fieldwork, this project will provide to policymakers and strategists a vision beyond the next few years and will consider the trends and shocks that may shape AQAM over the next decade and a half.

This case study is one of several examining the historic evolution and future prospects of al Qaeda and its range of affiliated groups. The purpose of the case studies is to determine the key drivers that have influenced a terrorist group’s trajectory over time. Ultimately, these drivers, in conjunction with additional supporting analysis, will be used to inform projections about the future of al Qaeda and its affiliates.

Key Judgments

The Emergence of Algerian Militancy: 1991–September 2006

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* Counterterrorism operations led to dwindling resources, prompting the GSPC to affiliate with al Qaeda core in order to increase its relevance.
- *Foreign intervention.* Supporting the insurgency in Iraq strengthened the GSPC's connections with global jihadists, making an affiliation with al Qaeda core possible.

The Evolution of AQIM: 2006–Present

- *Aligning of interests with AQ core.* AQIM's decision to affiliate with al Qaeda changed the group's strategic direction, refocusing its ideology and selection of targets toward global jihad.
- *Inadequate governance.* Inadequate governance in North Africa and West Africa has served as a driving factor in the group's operational shift from Algeria's Mediterranean coast to the Kabylia region of Algeria and the Sahara-Sahel region of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.
- *Funding.* AQIM continues to successfully fund itself through ongoing smuggling and kidnapping operations, to the extent that some suggest profit is the group's primary focus.

Narrative

The Emergence of Algerian Militancy

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the most recent iteration of a militant Islamist movement dating back to Algeria's 1991 general elections, in which the Algerian military nullified a democratic political majority won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). In the immediate aftermath of the FIS's collapse, a collection of armed Islamic groups formed an insurgency that coalesced into two primary movements: the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, or GIA) and the Armed Islamic Movement (*Mouvement Islamique Armé*, or MIA).¹ Over time, the groups changed in form and composition but continued to reflect two distinct schools of thought. The MIA

focused primarily on overturning the Algerian government and attacking state security forces. The GIA's agenda included an aggressive "re-Islamisation" of Algerian society through coercion and the practice of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim to be an infidel), which was used to justify attacks on civilians and foreigners as well as on military and government targets.²

The GIA's leadership was composed of former guerillas who had fought the Soviets in Afghanistan and later returned to Algeria.³ Through their Afghan connections, the GIA was able to procure funding from Osama Bin Laden, who was living in Sudan at the time.⁴ It also corresponded with Ayman al-Zawahiri and his Egyptian group, al-Jihad.⁵ As the decade progressed, the GIA was able to establish control over a large percentage of the Algerian population.⁶

This control began to wane in the late 1990s when the group perpetrated a series of large-scale massacres that alienated both the Algerian public and devout Muslim members of the GIA. The magnitude and arbitrary nature of the violence also isolated the group from bin Laden, Zawahiri, and other Islamic militant movements. A September 1997 declaration that all Algerians who did not support the GIA deserved death⁷ further distanced the organization from its civilian base, and the group quickly began to lose momentum. In May 1998, a splinter group called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC) declared its independence from GIA under the leadership of Hassan Hattab, who had been a GIA district leader in Algeria's mountainous Kabylia region.⁸

The GSPC gained members and credibility by rejecting the GIA's brutal tactics while vowing to continue the struggle against the secular Algerian government. Despite his initial involvement in the GIA's civilian massacres, Hattab now directed the GSPC to attack military and government targets rather than civilians. In 2003, Hattab was ousted from his leadership role after disputes with younger commanders Naibil Sahrawi and Abdelmalek Droukdel (also known as Abu Musab Abdelwadud). While Hattab had wanted the group to maintain a more local focus, Droukdel and Sahrawi favored a more aggressive strategy of supporting the global jihad.⁹ On June 18, 2004, Sahrawi and his deputy were killed in a gun battle with Algerian security forces,¹⁰ and the GSPC leadership was taken over by Droukdel.

Immediately upon assuming leadership, Droukdel sought a closer relationship with al Qaeda-affiliated militants, including Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. The two men worked to establish a network of smuggling routes and training centers with the goal of bringing volunteers from the Maghreb to join the insurgency in Iraq. This effort proved to be extremely successful, and in 2005 U.S. authorities reported that one out of every four suicide bombers in Iraq was Algerian.¹¹

The Evolution of AQIM

As the GSPC worked to increase links with global jihadists, it began to face mounting counterterrorism pressure. By 2006, the group was forced to retreat from Algiers to its traditional stronghold in the eastern Algerian mountains. Government efforts directed at reducing militant activity, such as a 2005 amnesty plan, were largely successful and further reduced GSPC numbers and recruitment capabilities. Although porous borders and ungoverned terrain made it difficult to fully restrict the group's movements, Algerian counterterrorism operations were able to significantly impede GSPC operations.

By supplying recruits to the insurgency in Iraq, Droukdel had become increasingly well-connected with the global jihadist community. On September 11, 2006, al Qaeda core's then-second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, released a videotaped statement formally announcing his group's affiliation with the GSPC, which four months later would rebrand itself as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The move was an attempt to revitalize the dwindling organization in Algeria and to align with Islamic extremists in global jihad.¹² The GSPC stated that although it was committed to installing an Islamic state in Algeria, foreigners and foreign interests would also be targeted.¹³

Immediately, AQIM recruitment improved, and the group changed its tactics in order to emphasize vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and suicide attacks. One of the most prominent of these attacks was the 2007 bombing of the UN office in Algiers. After more successful bombings, AQIM began to face an increasingly aggressive Algerian counterterrorism strategy. Mounting pressure forced the group to shift its area of operations from along Algeria's Mediterranean coast to the lower Sahara and Sahel regions. This shift allowed AQIM to take

advantage of a security vacuum that existed due to weak Sahelian governments and vast stretches of open space.

Although AQIM focused on large-scale bombings in Algerian cities immediately after its official affiliation with al Qaeda core, more recently the group has largely been relegated to lower-level activities in the Sahel. While it still conducts attacks near its Kabylia stronghold, many of its current operations take place in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Among the higher-profile attacks have been numerous kidnappings of Western citizens in the Sahel, as well as an attempt in February 2011 to assassinate the Mauritanian president. AQIM has been able to use money garnered from ransoms and trafficking to fund sophisticated communications equipment and vehicles.¹⁴ This allows the *katibas*, or battalions, to operate with a high degree of mobility and coordination in the desert. The level of flexibility enjoyed by AQIM makes it difficult for authorities to implement successful counterterrorism measures. As explained by a Malian military officer, AQIM groups "move fast and never stay in one place."¹⁵

AQIM has worked to strengthen ties in the Sahel by marrying into local tribes and generating income for impoverished communities.¹⁶ The group has also been satisfying basic needs by supplying locals with food, water, medicine, and fuel. AQIM has tried to present itself as a protector of the people and has been careful not to target local communities or their interests in the area. While Droukdel still appears to lead the overall organization, the leaders of the various *katibas* seem to operate with a good deal of autonomy. This trend is particularly prominent with leaders who operate further away from AQIM's leadership in Algeria. Droukdel himself has stated that the entire network is very loosely organized.¹⁷

Despite al Qaeda core's initial high hopes for it, AQIM has demonstrated a weak global reach. During the 1990s, the GIA was able to use international networks throughout Europe to provide financial support to militants in Algeria. It also showed the capability to mobilize these networks for operations. In 1995, it launched a deadly bombing campaign against the Paris subway. Al Qaeda core hoped that AQIM would be able to revitalize some of these networks in order to attack Europe. In this respect it has been disappointed, as the group has failed to live up to Zawahiri's

claim that it would “be a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders and their allies.”¹⁸ AQIM has also failed to expand its influence throughout the Maghreb to unite militant groups from Morocco and Tunisia.

AQIM’s involvement in criminal activities is a principal source of revenue. Although these activities provide AQIM with a great deal of income, they also have the potential to diminish its credibility within the international jihadist community, which has historically been wary of the conflict between criminality and pure jihad. Funding sources include protection rackets, muggings, arms and human trafficking, money laundering, and, increasingly, the kidnapping of Western civilians in exchange for ransom or the release of AQ prisoners.¹⁹ The successful kidnappings of foreigners within Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger have netted the group millions of Euros in ransoms. There have also been reports that AQIM is using its well-established smuggling networks to become involved with cocaine trafficking from West Africa into Europe. In 2009, an undercover investigation in Ghana by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration led to the arrest of three men linked to AQIM on charges of conspiracy to commit narcoterrorism and conspiracy to provide material support to terrorist groups.²⁰

Recently, concerns have been mounting about AQIM’s determination to take advantage of the Arab Spring. Reports from across the Maghreb and Sahel regions suggest that AQIM has been obtaining weapons in Libya. The president of Chad claims that AQIM is poised to become the best-equipped army in the region. Algerian counterterrorism officials have stated that Libya is functioning as an “open air arms market,” which has allowed AQIM to acquire large quantities of heavy weaponry.²¹ Convoys of trucks have been moving from eastern Libya through Niger into Mali, where AQIM has established bases. AQIM has reportedly managed to obtain rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns, and security agencies are particularly concerned about reports that the group has acquired surface-to-air missiles. Niger’s army also intercepted an AQIM truck containing 634 kilograms of explosives and 435 detonators that were marked as belonging to the Libyan army.²² Algerian authorities claim that the flood of weapons from Libya has incited an upswing in attacks.²³

Analysis

Period I: The Emergence of Algerian Militancy

- *Counterterrorism pressure.* Algerian counterterrorism pressure was a driving factor in the GSPC’s alliance with al Qaeda core and its subsequent emergence as AQIM. Simultaneous military and amnesty campaigns targeting the group’s insurgents and leadership left it undermanned and scrambling to remain relevant. Although the GSPC boasted nearly 30,000 members at its postwar peak, Algerian counterterrorism efforts reduced the organization’s membership to less than 1,000 in the first years of the twenty-first century.²⁴

On September 29, 2005, Algeria passed a referendum known as the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, a national amnesty plan that allowed fighters to rejoin society if they laid down their weapons and renounced offensive jihad.²⁵ In addition to depleting the GSPC’s ranks, the amnesty plan built public support for subsequent military campaigns that targeted key GSPC leaders.²⁶ Compounding its troubles, the GSPC also suffered from a lack of funding and weapons.²⁷

- *Foreign intervention.* While Algerian counterterrorism pressure played a large role in depleting the ranks of the GSPC, the group also faced ideological problems in its efforts to attract fighters. The GIA’s civilian massacres in the late 1990s had caused Algerian youth to become disillusioned with militant movements and their ideology of an Islamist Algeria. The war in Iraq provided the GSPC with a new cause that broadened its appeal and fit with many members’ increasingly global outlook.

In 2004, Droukdel sent a message to Iraq seeking a closer relationship with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, and he soon established the GSPC as the North African recruiting hub for jihad in Iraq. Even before the GSPC officially joined al Qaeda, Algerians were reportedly the single largest group of foreign fighters in Iraq, comprising 20 percent of total fighters in 2005.²⁸ Droukdel’s role in facilitating this influx of volunteers to Iraq garnered him a measure of fame in the online jihadist community. This notoriety ingratiated him with the al Qaeda leadership and allowed him to reach a new pool of potential recruits, who were inspired by the fight against the Western “crusaders” in Iraq.²⁹

Period II: The Evolution of AQIM

- *Aligning of interests with al Qaeda core.* Of the factors shaping AQIM's evolution, the group's alliance with al Qaeda core was the most significant. The partnership provided the tactical and ideological basis for AQIM's emerging identity and introduced a new goal of attacking Western targets outside Algeria while remaining committed to overturning the Algerian government. AQIM's dual nature is an example of the "ideological hybridization" that has occurred within jihadist circles as distinctions have faded between "revolutionary Islamist" groups with a focus on overturning local Muslim regimes and "global jihadist" groups that seek to attack the West.³⁰ Operationally, the group's Algerian base ties it strongly to regional politics. The organization's Islamist ideology advocates a theocracy in Algeria and the Sahel region, as well as Spain and Portugal.³¹

AQIM's merger with al Qaeda core sparked a shift away from traditional guerilla tactics toward those being used by al Qaeda and its affiliated movements around the world. Over time, AQIM has gradually shifted its focus to softer targets that yield greater casualties from fewer attacks. Immediately after the official alliance, AQIM adopted the use of IEDs, suicide bombers, and synchronized attacks. In 2007, there were 33 documented AQIM-related attacks inside Algeria, 14 of which used at least one IED and 3 of which used VBIEDs.³² The use of explosives in 2007 rose by more than 50 percent from 2006, while the use of firearms dropped considerably.³³ The sudden shift in operations from firearms to suicide bombers and VBIEDs indicated a new trend targeting greater numbers of individuals on a broader scale, as opposed to operations aimed specifically at government personnel. It is likely that AQIM was also aided by the willingness of militants returning from Iraq to pass on newly acquired battlefield techniques, such as IEDs and suicide bombings, to local fighters. The trend of escalating violence continued in 2008. Although the overall number of attacks decreased, the attacks themselves were bloodier.

- *Inadequate governance.* Algerian counterterrorism authorities were forced to react and adapt to AQIM's new tactics. Security forces continued to combat AQIM using a combination of military force and amnesty to reduce the number of fighters and protect government institutions.

Algerian counterterrorism pressure pushed the group since its emergence to shift its operations to areas with inadequate governance in both the mountainous Kabylia region and the Sahara/Sahel.

By mid-2007, the Algerian government had begun to launch large-scale counterterrorism operations against AQIM, killing or capturing approximately 1,100 militants. Authorities also foiled several attempts to organize affiliate cells, recruit fighters, and conduct attacks in the Maghreb's border regions where the group had attempted to spread. In 2008, the army launched a massive military operation deploying 15,000 troops to the northeastern regions of Batna, Jijel, and Skikda.³⁴

The statistical evidence from AQIM attacks suggests that government counterterrorism pressure began to diminish the group's resources and capabilities. In 2009, a total of 40 armed assaults, in which 107 people were killed and 107 wounded, were attributed to AQIM. Of the 40 attacks, 22 involved IEDs, mostly in roadside bombings that were part of armed assaults. AQIM soon began to use fewer explosives in the IEDs, however, and it moved away from the more powerful VBIEDs previously used in large-scale attacks. Moreover, the lethality and quantity of AQIM attacks in 2010 dropped considerably from previous years. The frequency of attacks fell from January to June, with only 10 in 2010 compared to 22 in the same six-month period in 2009.³⁵ The majority of the attacks in Algeria were carried out near the group's stronghold in the Kabylia mountains, primarily on softer, more vulnerable targets far outside the capital.

Central to the change in AQIM identity has been the prominent role assumed by the Sahara-Sahel wing of AQIM. The *katibas* that operate throughout the vast un-governed space have increasingly become the centerpiece of the organization. Despite some successful government interventions, the loosely patrolled borders and sparsely populated states of the Sahara-Sahel have provided AQIM freedom to operate and grow relatively unchecked.

Countries like Mali and Niger suffer from pervasive corruption and severely underfunded and undermanned militaries. Some Western officials have suggested that a tacit nonaggression pact exists between Mali and AQIM.³⁶ Also, Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré has stated that some local officials are well connected with various

outlaws, including terrorists.³⁷ Government efforts to combat AQIM have been further complicated by the lucrative financial role that some Malian officials play in kidnapping-for-ransom negotiations. Corruption in Mali has also led to general underdevelopment. A 2009 audit of the Malian government revealed that a record \$224 million in governments funds marked for rural development, water, and food security were mismanaged or misappropriated.³⁸ AQIM is able to win over disaffected local populations, therefore, by providing alternative sources of income.³⁹

Previously established GSPC connections have also allowed AQIM to cooperate with the Tuareg tribes in Niger and Mali; the tribes abduct foreigners and trade or sell them to AQIM, which then holds them for ransom.⁴⁰ These kidnappings have been an extremely lucrative enterprise for AQIM. As of February 2011, AQIM is reported to have received more than \$70 million in ransoms since 2006.⁴¹ AQIM's kidnapping enterprise has proved so successful that al Qaeda core reportedly was planning to adopt the practice to finance its own activities, according to intelligence obtained in May 2011 from Bin Laden's safe house in Abbottabad.⁴²

- *Funding.* AQIM's criminal enterprises have allowed it to become both a well-funded and a self-sustaining organization. In addition to kidnappings, AQIM has become increasingly intertwined with smuggling operations throughout the Sahara and the Sahel. The group has traditionally been involved in trafficking cigarettes, humans, and weapons, and some analysts now think that AQIM has partnered with Latin American cartels on cocaine smuggling.⁴³ This development is particularly troubling, as narcotics trafficking has higher earning potential than AQIM's other criminal activities.⁴⁴ However, while allegations of AQIM involvement in cocaine trafficking are increasingly prevalent, the extent of this involvement remains unclear, as there is still insufficient evidence in the public domain.⁴⁵

AQIM's combined criminal activities have brought in a great deal of revenue. The head of France's internal intelligence agency, the *Direction Centrale du Renseignement Intérieur*, has noted that AQIM has accumulated a "war chest" in recent years.⁴⁶ Because of this increased funding, AQIM now has sophisticated equipment, including GPS, encrypted communication equipment, night vision goggles, and vehicles.⁴⁷ Additionally, the increase in funds has coincided with regional weapons proliferation as a

result of the Libyan conflict, which has reportedly allowed AQIM to acquire large quantities of weapons from Libyan stockpiles.

Although AQIM's criminal activities bring in a substantial amount of funding, they have the potential to draw the group away from its religious underpinning. Because its foundation has evolved from political to primarily theological, AQIM must reconcile its long history of criminal partnership with its religious focus. As governments have cracked down on terrorist donors in recent years, such a balance has become more commonplace within the jihadist community. In Southeast Asia there is a tradition of *fa'i*, which is the act of using money from crime to support religious causes.⁴⁸ Jemaah Islamiyah, an al Qaeda affiliate in Southeast Asia, financed their 2002 Bali bombings in part through jewelry store robberies.⁴⁹ Al Qaeda in Iraq is also said to have been heavily involved in criminal activities to fund terrorism.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, criminal financing remains controversial. Osama bin Laden historically rejected criminal activities and discouraged his followers from involving themselves in the drug trade. He felt it was too risky and required working with untrustworthy people. He preferred instead to rely on rich donors to finance operations.⁵¹ In his later years, however, such funding sources began to dry up, and he too began to see certain criminal activities as potentially legitimate.⁵²

Today, a consensus seems to be building among various groups that crime is an acceptable mechanism for funding terrorism. Even so, the line between what AQIM does to fund jihadist activity and what it does purely for profit has become blurred. The French official in charge of combating terror finance has made the claim that AQIM "no longer relies on crime to finance terrorism. Now, terrorism is used as a cover-up for crime, the sole purpose of which is to make a fortune."⁵³

The Future of AQIM

After a brief period in which AQIM appeared relatively inactive, 2011 has seen several kidnappings in Algeria and Mali, as well as suicide bombings directed at political and government targets. The group's reliance on criminal activity, in conjunction with counterterrorism efforts and lack of public support, has reduced AQIM's operations to

the mountainous Kabylia region and ungoverned areas of neighboring countries.

Regional Instability

Despite AQIM's marginalized position at present, events within the region have provided it with opportunities to expand its influence. In Algeria, AQIM's position is relatively fixed. Although the group is still capable of mounting successful attacks, its ideology is unlikely to resonate in Algeria where the public is weary of violence after the bloody civil war of the 1990s. In the Sahel, support comes largely from those drawn to AQIM for financial gain. The group serves as an attractive employer for impoverished desert youth, while the instability within the Sahelian countries provides AQIM with room to conduct its operations. The degree to which AQIM can solidify connections with local communities in the region will thus be a key factor in determining its long-term impact there.

The instability in Libya seems to be the biggest opportunity for an AQIM expansion. Although it is unlikely that AQIM played a role in initiating the uprising, the ongoing chaos in Libya does offer the group a significant opportunity for strategic advantage. AQIM has made statements in support of the rebels and is looking for ways to attach itself to the fight. According to sources across the region, AQIM has already exploited the instability in order to move large quantities of weapons to Mali and Niger. Beyond providing AQIM with arms, however, Libya also provides the group with a cause that AQIM can exploit to draw support from around the world, similar in a way to how the conflict in Iraq has been used.

Public Dissatisfaction

Another possibility for the group is to expand further south into Nigeria. The country's northern region is home to Boko Haram, a militant Islamist group whose name in the Hausa language means "western education is a sin." Northern Nigeria is home to widespread poverty, unemployment, and inequality relative to Nigeria's Christian south. Boko Haram has capitalized on these grievances and general public dissatisfaction to acquire what has been described as a "cult-like following" in certain areas.⁵⁴

AQIM has previously issued several communiqués expressing support for Boko Haram and its leaders. In early 2010, AQIM made an offer to arm the group to fight

against its Christian countrymen. Intelligence sources say there is evidence that some members of Boko Haram have trained with AQIM in Niger.⁵⁵ In recent months, Boko Haram has been increasingly aggressive in using al Qaeda-like tactics to attack the Nigerian state as well as civilians.⁵⁶

Polling data also indicate that al Qaeda has attained a substantial degree of popular support among Nigerian Muslims. Data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2010 show that 49 percent of Nigerian Muslims have a favorable attitude toward al Qaeda.⁵⁷ This was the highest percentage of all countries polled including Indonesia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Pakistan.⁵⁸ The relatively high percentage of Muslims with favorable attitudes would indicate that al Qaeda enjoys some degree of ideological resonance in Nigeria.

Despite these early signs, there are still theological and ethnoracial divides that could limit AQIM's expansion into Nigeria. The brand of Islam prominent in Nigeria is Sufism, which is removed from the radical Salafism preached by AQIM. Most Nigerian Muslim leaders have been outspoken in dismissing AQIM and its ideology.⁵⁹ Another hurdle would be the ethnoracial divide present within al Qaeda. Although AQIM has expanded into sub-Saharan Africa, there remains a level of distrust between black Africans and the group's Arab leaders.⁶⁰

Foreign Intervention

Libya could provide AQIM with a larger opportunity if foreign intervention increases and NATO soldiers actually fight in ground combat. AQIM could formulate a narrative where it is fighting against injustice at the hands of both Muammar Gaddafi and the Western powers. Zawahiri recently released a video calling for jihadists to help the rebels fight Gaddafi, but to also be sure to fight NATO forces. AQIM could use Libya to draw in fighters from around the region and unite them under one cause. This would allow AQIM to achieve its goal of becoming a true pan-Maghreb organization and incorporating fighters from across North Africa.

Another place foreign intervention will be important is the Sahel, where governments are working with the United States and France to increase their capacity to respond to the AQIM threat. The United States is currently working to improve these small undertrained and underfunded militaries that are incapable of adequately controlling the open

deserts. The flow of U.S. funding and training might eventually lead to militaries that are capable of denying AQIM a desert safe haven. If forces in the Sahel prove unequal to the task, the United States could take a direct action role in combating AQIM if the group becomes a significant threat beyond its current area of operations.

Leadership

In a 2008 *New York Times* interview, Droukdel acknowledged that AQIM operations in the region could be best described as a growing network of militants only partially controlled by his far-flung deputies.⁶¹ Eventually, the loose organizational structure of the network could lead to the fragmentation of AQIM. The level of operational latitude afforded to individual deputies has provided room for commanders to form their own organizational identities.

Belmokhtar and Abu Zayd, AQIM's two chief field commanders in the Sahel, illustrate the potential for these different identities to emerge. Belmokhtar is a veteran of the Afghan War who has risen to prominence in the deserts of the Sahara and Sahel. He has established a close relationship with desert tribes by marrying into notable families.⁶² He became so well known for his expansive smuggling network that he garnered the name "Mr. Marlboro." Belmokhtar's high profile and his geographic distance from AQIM leadership in Kabylia began to worry Droukdel, who thus promoted Abu Zayd to act as another field commander in the Sahara.⁶³

Belmokhtar is better known for criminal endeavors, while Abu Zayd quickly garnered a reputation as a zealous ideologue. These reputations have arisen in part from the ways in which they run their respective *katibas*. Belmokhtar pioneered AQIM's kidnapping-for-ransom enterprise in the Sahel. Abu Zayd departed from this scheme in May 2009, when his Taregh Ibn Ziyad brigade murdered a British hostage in Mali. The Malian army responded forcefully in pursuing AQIM. This hurt Belmokhtar, who used Mali as a safe haven and release point for ransomed hostages and had deliberately avoided hostilities on Malian soil.

The differing priorities of the two commanders illustrate AQIM's potential to eventually fragment into a number of smaller organizations with varying purposes. One possible scenario could have Belmokhtar leading a criminal off-

shoot that separates itself completely from the leadership in Algeria, while Abu Zayd remains Droukdel's commander in the Sahel. Another possible scenario would be that the entire Sahelian wing of AQIM breaks away from Droukdel's leadership in Algeria in order to form a number of smaller militant groups around the region.

AQIM's emphasis on criminal activity has the potential to change the fundamental nature of the group, but it is unlikely to affect recruitment in the Sahel and Sahara regions. The extreme poverty experienced by people living in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania ensures that AQIM will remain an attractive employer and provider in the region. However, AQIM's criminal activities might hurt recruiting and its political support among Algerians motivated primarily by religion and global jihadist rhetoric. Additionally, AQIM's deep involvement in drug trafficking and smuggling has the potential to hurt the al Qaeda "brand name" around the globe.

By contrast, opportunities in Libya and Nigeria could allow AQIM to expand its influence and potentially draw from a wider pool of recruits around the Islamic world. It is unlikely that AQIM will be completely eliminated. Since the days of the Algerian civil war, AQIM and its predecessors have shown a remarkable ability to adapt and evolve in response to varying circumstances. Whether as a transnational criminal organization or as a regional jihadi collective, this proven flexibility, in addition to the prevalence of ongoing grievances and ungoverned space in North Africa, suggests that AQIM will remain a force in the region for years to come.

Notes

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analysts to believe that Boko Haram has undergone training with foreign terrorist groups. A few days prior to the attack, the group issued leaflets claiming group members had just returned from Somalia where they had trained with al Shabaab, an al Qaeda-affiliate militant movement trying to overturn the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia. This would indicate that Boko Haram is beginning to align itself more closely with the global al Qaeda movement. The Abuja bombing also showed that Boko Haram is becoming more aggressive, as Abuja is geographically distant from the group’s stronghold in the north. In the weeks since the Abuja bombing, Boko Haram has maintained a rapid operational tempo in attacking both government and civilian targets. See John Campbell, “Abuja Bomb Blast,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 16, 2011, <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2011/06/16/abuja-bomb-blast>.

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