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Zemni, S.

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# From Local Insurgency to Al-Qaida Franchise

SAMI ZEMNI

On 11 December 2007 two car bombings targeting UN buildings and the Constitutional Council in different neighbourhoods of the Algerian capital caused at least sixty two casualties while injuring more than a hundred others. The bombings moved the international community and disgruntled the Algerian public as “Al-Qaida in the land of the Islamic Maghreb” (AQIM) claimed responsibility for the attacks

calling the UN “the international den of infidels.” The bombings signalled the transformation of a localized Islamist insurgency, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafi Group for Predication and Combat, GSPC) into a member of the Global Jihad movement. While AQIM, just like the GSPC, still acts first and foremost to destabilize the Algerian state, the movement has adopted an international discourse in which it fulminates against the West in general and against the US and France in particular. Far from being a sign of strength, it is the weakness of the movement and the unintended consequences of the War on Terror that have radicalized the movement.

During the 1990s Algeria was enmeshed in a civil war that caused more than 150,000 casualties but from which emerged a period of relative calm and stability. While there remained several armed Islamist groups at large, it was the GSPC that had been the most active one in fighting the Algerian regime. The group emerged from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) after it broke down into several splinter groups in the second half of the 1990’s, as a result of the extremist attitude of its leadership under the emirs Djamel Zitouni (1994-1996) and after him Antar Zouabri (1996-2002).<sup>1</sup> It was in late 2006 that the local franchise of Al-Qaida became active with repeated bombings and attacks and the first suicide attacks the country witnessed on 11 April 2007. The AQIM group is now seen as a potential threat by the international community. This became even clearer in the beginning of 2008 when the Paris-Dakar rally—passing through Mauritania and Mali—was cancelled after a statement, presumably issued by

AQIM, that branded the race neo-colonialist and accused Mauritania of collaborating with “crusaders, apostates, and infidels.”<sup>2</sup>

## The War on Terror

Throughout 2005 and 2006 most observers in and outside Algeria agreed that the GSPC found itself politically isolated, under pressure of the security forces, and lacking basic infrastructure and means (money, weapons, logistics, popular support). The combined action of the government with its efficient security policy and its reconciliation programme seemed to bear its fruits. However, the “framing” of the fight against the GSPC into the logic of the global War on Terror has prompted the United States to grant military, logistic, and intelligence support to the Algerian regime. The active cooperation between the US and Algiers led to a growing number of youngsters in Northern Algeria wanting to fight in Iraq and a mounting displeasure in the Sahel-region, a hitherto peaceful region turned into a securitized area “seemingly full with terrorists.” Since 2003 the Sahel region has become a second front against terror. US and Algerian troops have militarized and securitized a vast Saharan region stretching over parts of Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. Today, it becomes clear that the Algerian government tried to link the GSPC to the “Saharan” corridor as a means to “attract” US military help.<sup>3</sup>

**One of the unintended consequences of the global War on Terror in the Maghreb is the transformation of the local Islamist insurgency into an Al-Qaida franchise. The Salafi Group for Predication and Combat, which in the past targeted the Algerian government, has now become part of the global jihad against the enemies of Islam. With the transformation new tactics such as suicide-attacks and assaults on foreigners have emerged.**

Marginalized, the GSPC’s “Afghan” core, the militants who fought in Afghanistan against the Russians and who came back to Algeria in the 1990s, made some appeal to Al-Qaida for help in order to win the franchise of the movement. After contacts with the leader of Al-Qaida in Iraq, al-Zarqawi, the GSPC officially shifted in September 2006 from a local group which was active within Algeria into an organiza-

tion with—at least in discourse—regional ambitions...thus becoming in a way something that the Algerian and US security communities were saying already existed.

The shift became complete with the adoption of the new name and the espousal of new strategies of violent action, including suicide attacks. While the group carries out symbolic attacks in the heart of Northern Algeria (capital and central cities), it also uses the tribal areas of the East and the mountainous regions of the West as its strongholds. The choice is based on the consideration that the militants can better adapt to this area on the borders of several countries than in the suburbs of the heavily policed cities of the North.

The new name does not really change the movement’s organization but offers the possibility for the movement to access more easily the channels and funds of recruitment networks of people around the globe who are sympathetic to the fight against the US army in Iraq. This shift does not entail a shift in authority over the movement as no international or foreign player (Bin Laden or otherwise) can dictate the movement’s strategy. Some observers even suggest that the adoption of an Al-Qaida affiliation has been a conscious effort of the movement to: “keep Algerian fighters from leaving their home country and to attract them to the fight against the Algerian government.”<sup>4</sup>

## New tactics

While AQIM still tries to destabilize the Algerian regime—just like the GSPC before—it has nevertheless introduced new tactics that aim to rekindle the insurgency and increase the number of recruits. First of all, there was since the end of 2006 a growing number of smaller attacks in the tribal areas of the East of the country and in provinces far from Algiers that seem unavoidably linked to the movement’s search for funds and the control over parts of the trade routes through the desert. AQIM seems to be in part reliant on the proceeds of trading in stolen vehicles, smuggling cigarettes and drugs, and people-trafficking as well as “tax-levies” on smugglers looking for safe passage through the Algerian desert. Algerian newspapers have regularly reported on the link the jihad groups and criminal activities. These allegations should be taken with precaution but it is nevertheless likely and logical that AQIM is in search of funding.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the group clearly started targeting foreigners working in the oil and gas industry as well as in the development sector. For example, according to the al-Jazeera website, the AQIM stated on 21 September that: “This morning, the morning of the blessed Friday, 9 Ramadan 1425 AH at 0715, the martyr hero Othman Abou Djaafar drove a vehicle—brand Mazda—loaded with more than 250 kg of explosives to target the French crusaders who are building the biggest dam in El Hammam Maala village near Lakhdaria.” Algerian security services admitted that nine people were wounded, including two French nationals and an Italian.

Defying “foreign” nationals and their presumed interests has always been a tactic that aims to show the strength of the group as well as putting the foreign support of the Algerian regime under pressure. New for the AQIM—in comparison with the GSPC—is that these operations bolster its media presence by taping the operations and posting the videos online, particularly the attacks that target foreign workers. The usage

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## Not available online

PHOTO BY LOUAFI LARBI / © REUTERS, 2007

of multimedia technology (especially the Internet) is a new component in the ideological battle for the movement, which signals the fact that AQIM has stepped up its global propaganda. Posting its attacks on Al-Qaida affiliated websites has given the movement the opportunity to recruit new militants from several other countries in the Maghreb.

Thirdly, the group also introduced the use of suicide attacks against official buildings such as army barracks, security services buildings, police stations, or other governmental agencies. These attacks are carried out by a new generation of younger militants, foremost interested in fighting the Americans in Iraq and mainly recruited in Algerian mosques that are not controlled by the state. However, after their training, they are more and more asked to carry out attacks in the country itself. The enlistment of young teenagers who have been excluded from the educational system and who come out of impoverished backgrounds of the capital city's suburbs (where the GSPC has numerous contacts) as well as the recruitment of foreigners (mainly Libyans, Malians, Mauritians, and Tunisians but only few, if any, European Muslims until today) is presumably a sign of the movement's loss of members which for months has been emptying the terrorist organization of its resources.

### Internal dissent

The new tactics and the merger with Al-Qaida have led to generalized internal dissent, massive defections, and a general disarray over what course to follow. The rather unilateral decision of the emir of the GSPC, Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wudud, aka Abd al-Malek Droukdel to join the Al-Qaida movement directly led to divisions and disagreements. The emir was—until his removal during last summer—facing harsh criticisms and strong opposition to his methodology of carrying out attacks using explosives in public areas and robbing the money of Muslims and terrorizing them. Hassan Hattab, the founder of the GSPC, denounced on several occasions the new methods used by the group and has accused Abd al-Malek Droukdel of turning Algeria into a second Iraq. He also tried to convince the terrorists still active to lay down their weapons and give themselves over to the authorities. He finally rendered himself to the authorities in September.

Another prominent leader, Salim al-Afghani from the Humat Al-Da'wah Al-Salafiya (Protectors of the Salafi Da'wa) declared that he was against joining Al-Qaida for many reasons, including the fact that AQIM treats innocent civilians as crusaders or blasphemers plus its abandoning of the doctrines of Sharia and focusing on recruitment of young men whom are used to carry out suicide attacks. The issue of suicide attacks has indeed divided the Islamist armed groups. Newly "imported" into Algeria in 2006, most of the armed groups have rejected the strategy. This became all the more clear when, after the first suicide attack of 2008 on 29 January in Thénia, AQIM stated in a press release its disgust

at the radio programmes on Quranic teachings and the scholars that proved that suicide attacks were illegitimate in Islam.<sup>6</sup>

The continuous bomb attacks have shown however that the numerous defections of both leaders and militants from the movement, the internal conflicts, and the government's reconciliation policy are incapable of completely bringing an end to the violence. While there are inherent deficiencies in the national reconciliation policy (lack of resources, no ideological or psychological help) it is clear that the programme has also had success. Around 6,000 militants have renounced terrorism since 1999 (as part of the civil harmony law), and another 2,000 repented over the past two years as part of the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>

With the 11 December attacks and a string of lesser publicized ambushes and bombings during the fall of 2007, AQIM seems to be increasing the level of violence again. It looks like Algeria will be facing terrorist attacks under Islamist banners in the coming years. However, it is also obvious that these groups cannot really count on large popular support. Only a growing feeling of insecurity and destabilization of the Algerian state could bring into turmoil a population that is largely against terrorism. Dissatisfaction with the government (that is already struggling to keep up its legitimacy in the face of growing socio-economic problems) can make it easier for AQIM to recruit the disappointed youth. While the access to the collection of funds from protection rackets and smuggling, and an increasingly sophisticated Internet-based exposure will keep the material basis of the insurgents stable, it is the growing dissatisfaction with the war in Iraq and the global War on Terror that will remain the underlying political basis of the movement's perpetuation and its global Jihadi agenda. The "duty" to fight the "enemies" of Islam will remain a potent slogan in the coming years as the War on Terror keeps generating unintended and unwanted consequences. One thing is sure: it has not made the world any safer.

Sami Zemni is Professor of Political Science at the Department of Third World Studies, Ghent University, where he heads the Middle East and North Africa Research Group (<http://www.psw.ugent.be/menarg>).  
Email: [sami.zemni@ugent.be](mailto:sami.zemni@ugent.be)

### Notes

1. On the history of the armed groups, see Luis Martinez, *La guerre civile en Algérie* (Paris: Karthala, 1998).
2. See <http://africa.reuters.com/top/news/usnBAN648110.html>.
3. For a thorough critique of this policy see Jeremy Keenan, *The Dark Sahara: America's War on Terror in Africa* (forthcoming 2008); idem, "The banana theory of terrorism: alternative truths and the collapse of the 'second' (Saharan) front in the War on Terror," *Journal of Contemporary Africa Studies* 25, no. 1 (2007): 31-58.
4. Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, "Between the 'Near' and the 'Far' enemy: al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 411.
5. See, for example, *Al-Khabar*, 29 December 2007 and *Liberté*, 24 April 2007.
6. The Algerian daily *Al-Khabar* was sent a communiqué from the movement (see its issue of 31 January 2008).
7. See <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=10220>.