

Uniting Radical Forces

The Evolution of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb

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From a Local Organization to Ties with Al-Qaeda

In 1996, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) split off from the Armed Islam Group (GIA), which had stood out even in the bloody Algerian civil war for its ruthless atrocities. This history of brutality by the GIA likely served as a direct cause of the split in its ranks.

The newly created GSPC since its onset was characterized by the expansion of activity towards the desert, and by primarily targeting the security forces and foreign interests in Algeria (rather than civilians), while carrying out bombings in Europe. Some interpret the beginning of the GSPC's connections to al-Qaeda in 2002 as being related to this major transformation in the type of its operations.

On Jan. 24, 2007, GSPC announced that it was officially merging with al-Qaeda, which had been aspiring to oversee and coordinate with extremist groups in the Maghreb, including GSPC, the Libyan Islamic Combat Group (GICL), the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group (GICM) and the Tunisian Combatant Group.¹ The statement, coming four months after GSPC had declared its intent to join al-Qaeda, said that “after GSPC's joining al-Qaeda and announcing its loyalty to the lion of Islam... Osama bin Laden, God preserve him, the organization must change its name to high-

1 Interview with Jean-Louis Bruguiere: “Un Arc Islamiste Radical, au Maghreb Menace la France,” Agence France Presse, March 13, 2007.

Salafist Islam represents the rising generation of radical youth opposed to the Arab governments and regarding the Western powers led by the United States to be the primary enemy of the Arab and Islamic world.

light the reality of the relationship between the mujahideen in Algeria and their brothers in al-Qaeda. We had been keen to change the name since the first day we joined, but did not do so before consulting Sheikh Osama bin Laden, God preserve him.”

In the stages of the evolution of political Islam in Algeria, the GSPC and similar groups can be labeled as part of the “third political Islam,”²

that of rebel groups. This Salafist Islam represents the rising generation of radical youth opposed to the Arab governments and regarding the Western powers led by the United States to be the primary enemy of the Arab and Islamic world.

It blends religious fanaticism with political counter violence in reaction to both superpower policies and the repressive Arab authoritarian state. It is also an expression of the profound structural crisis in the relationship between the state and society, since the Arab ruling elite refuses to pay the price of a transition to a genuine democracy with true mechanisms of representation that can make political Islam an integral component of modern civil society. Instead, the governments continue to draw strength from Western support and resort to systematic repression on the pretext of fighting fundamentalist terrorism as a guarantee of legitimacy and survival.

Thus, the GSPC announcement that it was joining al-Qaeda comes as no surprise for many monitoring extremist groups. They argue that the name change to al-Qaeda stemmed from increased cooperation both publicly and in the field between various jihadist organizations in the region and al-Qaeda. Some news reports even go further and claim that the leaders had been in touch since the days of the Islamic Salvation Front (FSI) in 1992,³ but had been unable to reach a unified stance on a number of issues.

Now that the merger has been completed, the central question is how credible the merger is, and how useful it is for the two sides.

2 The first being the Islam of the Organization of Muslim Scholars under Sheikh Abdul-Hamid Ibn Badis, who has a modern understanding of Islam, combines pan-Arabism with Islam, and joined the Algerian Revolution when the National Liberation Front took up arms against the French colonial power. The second is the Islam of the Islamic Salvation Front, which draws from sources ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to the Salafist groups, and which is an Islam with wide popular support.

3 Several newspapers cited the claim that an al-Qaeda official named Qari Saeed contacted both Shabouti and Malyani of the FSI, but that they were unable to agree upon a unified stance.

A Marriage of Common Interests or an Organic Relationship?

If the GSPC – al-Qaeda relationship is based on common interests, then we can expect it to end at some point when their interests diverge. However, it could instead be a long-lasting organic relationship based on organizational and ideological unity. In order to answer these questions and understand the announced merger, we must understand what each side is looking for in the relationship.

Al-Qaeda has four main goals from its expansion in the Maghreb:

- Trying to bring together the jihadist movements operating in the region, the most important being GSPC, GICM, GICL and the various Tunisian jihadist-Salafist organizations.
- Expanding the battlefield with the West and the United States to include North Africa and the Sahel, launched from a single command center, so as to give the impression that the organization has a strong presence in the region.
- Benefiting from the region's youth surplus to recruit candidates for work in other theaters, especially Iraq. This point has serious repercussions given the strong desire on the part of the region's youth to fight alongside the Muslim Iraqi people against the United States. Extremist groups according to numerous sources have no trouble recruiting young men and re-establishing their cells. These youths in reality often have their original goal of Iraq changed to operating in their home countries after they have been trained, psychologically conditioned, and had their path of return to normal life cut off.
- Reaching Europe by setting up an organization in a nearby region with close ties to the continent, especially through the North African migrant community traveling back and forth across the Mediterranean.

GSPC's Objectives from the Relationship

- Compensation for its military decline after most of its forms of support dried up.
- Desire for a sort of legitimacy from association with al-Qaeda. The popular conception of Osama bin Laden's organization for a sizeable portion of the public within the Arab world, including within the Maghreb, is that al-Qaeda is the leading organization confronting (or waging jihad against) America in Iraq and Afghanistan. Consequently, any given group joining al-Qaeda or undertaking operations in its name is bestowed a certain legitimacy. This issue was particularly critical for the GSPC, whose name in Algeria was linked with

horrific atrocities against civilians and religious deviancy.

- Benefiting from al-Qaeda's capabilities as a wide-reaching transnational network, compared to its own limited possibilities.

The GSPC had one of the more powerful hard-line Islamist organizations in Algeria until 1998, but after the national reconciliation initiative was announced, its activity was sharply reduced and at times was almost nonexistent.

- Making use of al-Qaeda's accumulated experience in specific types of operations, particularly car bombs, simultaneous bombings, synchronized suicide bombings, the selection of symbolic dates and targets for attacks, and remote-control detonation. The most recent bombings in Algeria have shown that this local organization has absorbed and employed these methods, which previously had been a trademark of al-Qaeda operations.

- Moving up the ladder of armed jihadist movements, since joining al-Qaeda means a promotion from being a run-of-the-mill violent local group to the ranks of international jihadist organizations.

What to Expect from al-Qaeda in North Africa

The GSPC had one of the more powerful hard-line Islamist organizations in Algeria until 1998, but after the national reconciliation initiative was announced, its activity was sharply reduced and at times was almost nonexistent, appearing only occasionally with operations whose main impact was in making the news. This raises doubts about its true strength, and its ability to continue even after joining al-Qaeda. There are two points of view on this matter, the first arguing that the organization's capabilities are limited, while the second counters that several factors will ensure its survival despite its apparent weakness.

Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb in Decline?

This argument is based on a number of points, most importantly:

(A) **National Reconciliation:** This view points to the positive impact of national reconciliation and accompanying legal measures. Supporters claim that al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) is suffering through a crisis because of the growing number of former militants declaring their repentance to benefit from the national reconciliation policy's offer of amnesty, as well as the pressure maintained by the Algerian army in the border regions with Mali and Libya and mountainous areas, all traditional rebel strongholds. This has clamped down on the organization's freedom of movement, iso-

lating it geographically and amongst the population.

Meanwhile, the repentant former militants have turned into informants par excellence, with the detailed field information they are providing to the intelligence agencies threatening the entire organization. Their tips have been behind most of the successful raids launched by the Algerian security forces, especially after ten Tunisian activists were arrested on their way to the Algerian mountains to receive military training, which reinforced the impression that AQIM could be infiltrated.

(B) **Successive Splits within AQIM:** The organization has been reeling from the painful blows dealt by the Algerian security forces, as well as the back-to-back losses of top leaders, most importantly with the arrest of the leader of the cells within the capital Algiers, Fatih Bou Darbala, also known as Abdul-Fattah Abu al-Basir. In addition to this, there has been a growing movement within AQIM calling for mass repentance, feeding internal conflict. The stance towards reconciliation is one of the main points of disagreement for factions debating whether or not to seek a rapprochement with the authorities.⁴

(C) **Stance towards the Parent Organization:** Despite the GSPC joining al-Qaeda and renaming itself AQIM, there are still those who think this merger has hurt the GSPC, and may have taken place over the opposition of some members. This would have crystallized the conflict within the group between the pro-merger side and another faction insisting on maintaining a local Algerian identity in the wake of the unilateral decision taken by Abdul-Malek Droudekadal in January 2007 to join al-Qaeda. A number of observers claim that this move triggered rifts, which widened later that year with the defection of dozens of militants, the most prominent being the member of the Council of Notables and amir of the 9th region Abdul-Qadir bin Masoud. Bin Masoud brought with him chief propagandist Abu Abdul-Rahman Mazoud, the organization's founder and former leader Hassan Hattab (Abu Hamza), and prominent militant Mukhtar Belmukhtar. The common denominator between these figures was their consensus that GSPC's activity had witnessed "many deviations" since uniting with bin Laden, such as the group becoming involved in activities like burglary and kidnapping since 2005, which also resulted in the killing of innocent civilians (which GSPC had tried to avoid since splitting off from GIA).

In this context, the recent operations by AQIM were interpreted as an attempt

4 The "accommodationist" camp is mostly leaders of civilian background, while the rejectionists are dominated by former military officers.

to compensate for this decline by undertaking spectacular, headline-grabbing operations, with three distinct features: suicide attacks, focusing on cities instead of the mountains, and targeting key government and international institutions, such as the headquarters of the Constitutional Council, the Supreme Court and the UN headquarters.

(D) **Intellectual Figures:** Complicating the situation for the GSPC is the fact that Sayyed Imam al-Sharif (Dr. Fadl), the main intellectual source behind al-Qaeda's philosophy, has recanted his original beliefs and declared GSPC's jihad to be illegitimate, as have several other inspirational intellectual figures. This has been a trying experience for the organization, revealing the splits within the newer membership, and also the group's willingness to make do with gullible teenagers easily persuaded to go to Iraq, as well as recruiting foreigners and luring in youth with offers of money.

(E) **The Changed International Stance and Shrinking Sources of Aid:** One of the direct results of Sept. 11 was a united front against groups linked to al-Qaeda and stepped-up coordination in drying up sources of funding and hunting down members of al-Qaeda networks operating around the world. For Algeria, these transformations sparked a sharp change towards the groups working on funding and weapons acquisitions in Europe in particular, which also helped tighten the noose on groups operating domestically.

Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb Bound to Survive?

Despite the aforementioned indicators hinting the AQIM could be struggling, other observers argue that there are still domestic and regional factors bound to keep the organization on its feet, and even increase in strength. The most important factors are as follows:

(A) **The Failure of Political Development in the Maghreb:** This has been embodied in the deep-reaching structural crisis in the state-society relationship, with the ruling elite still seeing it as not in their material interests to accept any serious democratic transformation that would create genuine representation and the peaceful transfer of power, turning political Islam into a normal component of modern civil society. It could even be said that with the falling domestic legitimacy of the ruling regimes, the elites have sought to use Western backing and organized repression under the pretext of a war on fundamentalist terror as their source of legitimacy.

The external factors consolidating an environment of repression in the Arab coun-

tries in general, including those in the Maghreb, are quite important. However, we should not ignore the internal factors such as the legal, economic and political systems, which still prevent Arabs from enjoying the freedoms and rights that were laid out in Arab values, culture and religion before international conventions on human rights enumerated them. The violation of freedoms is increasing and becoming harsher when the question of political freedoms and association with ethnic, religious or other groups in society is raised.

(B) **Civil Society on the Decline:** The aforementioned methods of governance had a profoundly negative impact on the political and social levels, with the countries of the Maghreb and the Sahel witnessing a sharp decline in party and union activity. Even more ominous is the lack of signs of life within civil society, which has made the conflict one of state security versus armed organizations, without any effective role for civil society and intermediary institutions, particularly political parties.

There is ongoing conflict in the Western Sahara and the Tuareg regions in northern Mali and Niger, creating a healthy environment for al-Qaeda to expand its recruiting, smuggling and other activities.

(C) **Instability:** North Africa has seen chronic tension and continued backing for such organizations, which can be clearly noted when comparing the level of activity by al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations in Algeria and Mauritania with that in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. There is also ongoing conflict in the Western Sahara and the Tuareg regions in northern Mali and Niger, creating a healthy environment for al-Qaeda to expand its recruiting, smuggling and other activities.

(D) **Weak Regional Cooperation:** The American-backed Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership and its predecessor the Pan-Sahel Initiative are the first moves towards broad regional coordination with the technology to keep track of militant activity in the Maghreb and Sahel regions, but the partnership is still of limited effectiveness due to deteriorating relations between the parties, keeping multilateral coordination sporadic.

(E) **Social and Economic Conditions:** These are the broader deciding factors in the fate of al-Qaeda and other radical organizations. A youth who takes to the mountains with AQIM, and who could blow himself up to enter heaven within 30 seconds as promised by the organization, is essentially no different from the young

man desperately risking his life trying to cross the Mediterranean on a flimsy boat in an attempt to reach the promised lands of the northern shore.

The acts of violence committed by the armed Islamist groups in the Maghreb countries, Algeria in particular, reaffirm the tenacity of this new fundamentalist ideology of takfir⁵ aimed at Muslim peoples and rulers, and at anyone supporting the government in any way. The militants' defeat at present is far from inevitable, but the establishment of transparent, just political regimes incorporating the culturally and ethnically diverse spectrum of political and social activism would guarantee victory over the medium and long terms, and at long last provide Arabs in the 21st century with a successful example of a peaceful transition of power. ■

5 Excommunication or declaring someone previously considered to be a Muslim to actually be an unbeliever.