

Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb in 2008

Jean-Pierre Filiu

Associate Professor

Sciences Po (Paris Institute of Political Studies), Paris

The prolongation of US occupation of Iraq has encouraged the development of a Jihadist network in Mediterranean countries by offering them a new cause for mobilisation and increased recruitment opportunities. This is how hardened combatants from Iraq have managed to introduce Fath al-Islam at Palestinian camps in northern Lebanon. And it is as a platform for training and transfer to Iraq that the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) undertook its transformation into the North African branch of al-Qaeda, a transformation that was completed by 2007. Al-Qaeda pursued its terrorist campaign in the Maghreb in 2008 without really managing to go beyond the national boundaries of its Algerian branch.

The Boundaries of the “Islamic Maghreb”

The year 2007 saw the bloody launching of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). On 11 April, three coordinated suicide bombing attacks struck the Algerian capital, one of the explosions intended for the government palace in the very heart of the city. On 11 July, a van filled with explosives was driven into a barracks in Lakhdaria. On 11 December, the United Nations offices in Algiers and the Constitutional Council became the targets of yet another attack. This sinister litany of attacks perpetrated on the eleventh day of different months, echoing the US 9/11 attacks, falls within the chronological fetishism of Bin Laden's organization. Yet it was accompanied by a slew of random, deadly suicide attacks as well, one of the most memorable being against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's motorcade in Batna on 6 September 2007.

The year 2007 was therefore a dark one that revived a traumatized Algeria's worst nightmares from the preceding decade, with its civil war and blind terrorism. Ten years earlier, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) multiplied its massacres of civilians. This spiral of violence sparked a barrage of purges, dissensions and settlements of accounts, from which the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) emerged in 1998-99. But Bouteflika's "national reconciliation policy" caused turmoil in the ranks of the GSPC. Abdelmalek Droukdal, going by the name of Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud, took control of the GSPC in 2003 with the policy of absolute refusal of all contact with the "impious" regime. He accentuated his reckless flight forward by publicly vowing allegiance to Osama Bin Laden in October of 2006. Since then, the GSPC has formed part of al-Qaeda, becoming its off-shoot for an "Islamic Maghreb."

It was this Maghrebi ambition that visibly set the pace in 2008, since the GSPC seemed incapable of going beyond its profoundly Algerian structure to acquire a truly North African dimension. Although hundreds of Moroccan, Tunisian, Libyan and Mauritanian militants have gone through the GSPC training camps since 2003, the majority of them hoped to go to Iraq to participate in the Jihad against American occupation, very few of them remained in Algeria to join the ranks of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), very well represented in the al-Qaeda hierarchy, maintains its operative autonomy and its Jihadist cells in Morocco and Tunisia seem altogether independent of Droukdal's dictates.

The only other Maghreb country where the AQIM has attempted to carry out a terrorist dynamic is the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. AQIM has claimed responsibility for the assassination of four French tourists on 24 December 2007, the attack against the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott on 1 February 2008 and the

ambush on 15 September 2008, in which some 15 Mauritanian soldiers perished. The putsch that overthrew the democratic government in Nouakchott in August 2008 did not mitigate the aggressiveness of al-Qaeda, which made reiterated declarations of Jihad against the new regime. Mauritania served as privileged terrain for GSPC operations beginning in 2005, that is, long before its transformation into AQIM, and carrying out subversion associated with al-Qaeda since then thus falls within a logic of continuity rather than rupture.

Saharan Traps

Since its origins, the GSPC was one strong branch in southern Algeria, and its members travelled nomadically through the Saharan Desert from Mauritania to Chad, dedicating themselves, among other things, to trafficking of all sorts. One of these itinerant cells had abducted some thirty Western tourists in Algeria in 2003, holding them for several months before releasing them in either southern Algeria or northern Mali. The fear of these Saharan insurgent networks causing transnational subversion was a determining factor in the US's decision to launch a regional security initiative (first called Pan-Sahel, then TSCTI/Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative). Parallels between the no-go areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border and the uncontrollable regions along the edges of the Sahara were even evoked.

The fear of cross-border destabilisation returned on 22 February 2008, upon AQIM's abduction of two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia. The Jihadist organisation quickly brought the hostages to southern Algeria and publicly demanded the release of AQIM members held under arrest in Algeria and Tunisia. This type of demand, common for hostage-taking in the preceding century, contrasts with al-Qaeda's *modus operandi* in Iraq as well as Pakistan, where they have used Western hostages to create morbid spectacles and not to negotiate the release of one or another of its militants. It quickly became evident that it was the local group bartering the lives of the Austrian hostages, with no contact whatsoever with the AQIM leadership.

After long months of laborious negotiations, punctuated by crises and theatrical moves, the two Austrian hostages were rescued on 30 October 2008 by the Malian army. Though the conditions of this happy end fortunately remain secret, it seems evident that the

ignoble dimension of the abduction of Western tourists was as determining in 2008 as it was in 2003. Jihadist crime in the Saharan Desert, the perpetrators of which the GSPC has managed to rally since its foundation, has changed neither in nature nor in logic under the al-Qaeda banner. Indeed, the growth in regional power, about which Abdelmalek Droukdal and his propaganda machine boast, remains largely a smoke screen.

Relative Containment of Terrorism

The transformation of the GSPC into AQIM immediately meant the introduction into Algeria of the suicide attack technique, practically absent there until then, even at the height of the civil war in the 1990s. This form of operation has entailed considerable loss of human lives, in particular in the double explosions in Algiers on 11 April and 11 December 2007. During the course of 2008, the only operation of comparable dimension was the kamikaze attack against the police academy in Boumerdes, which killed 45 people on 19 August. However, many attacks resulted in the death of only the suicide bomber himself, as on 23 July 2008 in Lakhdaria, when 13 soldiers were injured.

In general, al-Qaeda is coming up against rejection of its mass terror by the Algerian population

AQIM pursued its media campaign of denouncing the "new colonization" and hammering threats against "infidel" America, as well as "crusader" France and Spain. But its repeated attempts to strike Western nationals in Algeria largely failed. It took a year and a half of deadly tracking until the former GSPC finally claimed responsibility for the assassination of a French engineer on 8 June 2008 in Lakhdaria, at the price of the death of 11 other Algerians, killed by the successive explosions of two car bombs. AQIM's propaganda, however, goes to great efforts to magnify its anti-Western scorecard: according to it, AQIM killed 12 Canadians from the SNC-Lavalin company in Bouira on 20 August 2008, whereas the explosion of the company bus produced only Algerian victims.

In general, al-Qaeda is coming up against rejection of its mass terror by the Algerian population and Jihadist forums relay the serious criticism that this tactic elicits, even among sympathizers. Abdelmalek Droukdal has been making efforts to neutralise this wave of rejection, asserting, despite the evidence, that his organization is careful to spare civilians, concentrating on military targets. But it is the methodical repression carried out by the Algerian secret service, in particular the dismantling of sleeper cells in the capital, that has been the main force behind the waning of the terrorist dynamic. Thus, for the first time in many years, the month of Ramadan, traditionally a period of Jihadist activity, was relatively tranquil in 2008.

International cooperation remains the key to the prevention of terrorism

The threat of al-Qaeda remains very serious in Algeria, but the expansion of AQIM beyond former GSPC bastions seems to have been contained, at least for the time being. Less than half of Algerian provinces were the stage of terrorist activities in 2008, and AQIM focussed its essential operations in the Bouira, Boumerdes and Tizi Ouzou *Wilayas*. In this “triangle of death”, the populations of isolated villages continue to be plundered by Jihadist commandos, who complete their resources through various forms of trafficking (the criminal dimension of AQIM funding, though not as predominant in Kabylia as in the Sahara, should not be underesti-

mated). In any case, the capacity for projection of al-Qaeda hard core through its mountain strongholds is a good deal more limited than through its Saharan networks.

Despite its declared will to expand its field of action to the whole of the “Islamic Maghreb,” al-Qaeda did not really succeed in its plans for regional expansion in 2008, its Algerian organization even largely withdrawing to its historical bastions. However, networks affiliated with Bin Laden are very well established in the south-western Mediterranean and the threats proffered by Abdelmalek Droukdal against France and Spain should be taken very seriously. It is yet too early to say whether the 2008 trend towards a relative containment of AQIM will be confirmed in the future, or if Jihadist networks will succeed in regaining their territorial projection. In this eminently sensitive topic, international cooperation remains the key to the prevention of terrorism.

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