

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: 2007, a Pivotal Year

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On 13th September 2006, the former Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) published on its website a communication entitled “Communication and good news.” Emir Abû Mus`ab `Abd al-Wadûd (whose real name is Abdelmalek Droukdel) announced that al-Qaeda’s leaders responded favourably to the request to join Osama Bin Laden’s organisation. He noted that, after long talks and contacts that lasted for more than one year, good news had arrived: “The GSPC is now under the banner of al-Qaeda. Its soldiers and leaders swore allegiance to *Sheikh* Osama Bin Laden.” After recalling that “Zionists and Christians have allied with the apostate slaves in order to call for total war on Islam,” he pointed out that the victory of Islam can only come after the union between the different groups of the Jihad. Only the al-Qaeda organisation is, according to him, capable of guiding the global Jihad and this is why “the GSPC, which considers itself to be one brick (*labîna*), among others, in the construction of the Islamic State” puts itself at the disposal of its Emir and leader Osama Bin Laden.

On 24th January 2007, a second communication signed by the same Emir, Abû Mus`ab `Abd al-Wadûd, announced the change of name of the GSPC, which would now be called Organisation of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). He justified this as follows: “After the GSPC joined al-Qaeda’s organisation and after having sworn allegiance to the current lion of Islam, Osama Bin Laden, God save him [...], the group had to change its name in order to demonstrate the veracity of the union, the strength of the understanding and the sincerity of the link between the

Mujahidins in Algeria and their al-Qaeda brothers. We were concerned with changing our name from the day we joined but we could not do so before consulting *Sheik* Osama Bin Laden.”

Henceforth, all attacks would carry this new label and be in the name of its Emir, Abû Mus`ab, the successor of Abû Hamza (alias Hassan Hattab). While the latter had preferred to rejoin those who had responded to the call of the authorities for national reconciliation, Emir Droukdel preferred to radicalise his position. Through a communication, dated 12th January 2005, he publicly dissociated himself from his predecessor. Henceforth, no concession would be made to the “apostate leaders,” the “supporters of the cross and its slaves.” There would be a notable outbreak of bombings, skirmishes and deadly mopping-up operations.

GSPC: The Long Road Towards Al-Qaeda

Since its creation in 1998, the GSPC has distanced itself from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) conforming to the positions of al-Qaeda, whose spokesmen had denounced the excesses of the GIA on the occasion of the massacres that had taken place in different towns in the mid-1990s.

The year 1997 had been particularly marked by these hecatombs where thousands of villagers from the centre and the west of the country had been savagely murdered. The horrifying massacre committed in Bentalha, on the eve of 22nd September 1997 on the eastern outskirts of Algiers and which in one night had cost the lives of more than 400 citizens, exemplifies this perspective. On 30th December that same year, a horrible carnage marked the first day of Ramadan in three villages located several kilometres from Relizane, in the west of the country (Kherarba, Ouled Sahnine and Ouled Tayeb). The number of men, women and children murdered by armed men came close to

400 people. The year 1998 opened with another massacre perpetrated on 4th January in Ramka and Had Chekala (Relizane). The number of victims amounted to around 1,000 according to A. Ouyahya, the Head of Government at that time.

These massacres had damaged the reputation of the GIAs in terms of their support in the country and abroad. In order to recover this lost support, the GSPC was created in 1998 and it decided to refocus its attacks mainly against the power and its symbols. Since its birth, the GSPC has emerged as a righter of the wrongs occasioned in the name of the Jihad through the deviations of the GIA.

The State, which has acquired experience in terms of fight against terrorism, finally cuts off the armed groups from most of their support, placing them in a critical situation from a practical point of view and even forcing them to turn against those who in the past provided them with all kinds of assistance and logistics. Moreover, the relative success of the reconciliation policy which managed to rally certain members of these armed groups to a process of national reconciliation had further weakened the advocates of the Jihad, obliging them to search for outside support. The contribution lost at a local level had to be replaced by joining with al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups acting in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere. In exchange for a more active support on the part of the ideologists of the international Jihad, which had ceased due to disapproval of the methods of the GIAs, the GSPC agreed to join al-Qaeda's main line of action. It was out of these circumstances that the GSPC was born. After a testing period and in order to mark its distance in relation to those who the authorities managed to convince within the framework of the reconciliation policy, the GSPC once again requested and obtained from the heads of al-Qaeda stronger approval of its affiliation with Osama Bin Laden's organisation.

This change of course and of strategy had to be "publicised" and this was achieved by the spectacular attack of 11th April 2007 against the Palace of the Government in the very centre of Algiers. Now known as AQIM, it managed to prove that the combatants of the former GSPC continued to be present and powerful, belying the official discourses that regarded them as moribund and in dire straits. The targets chosen for this first major attack were symbolic enough to sow the seeds of trouble within the heart of the State, whose representatives had until then managed to minimise the media impact of the attacks, which had never ceased.

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This commotion provided evidence that the members of the former GSPC were well and truly within al-Qaeda's line of action. At the same time, in terms of the local context, it is a way of stating through the acts that they were first soldiers of God rather than mere political candidates. A soldier of God must give up searching or waiting for gratification on Earth: he must devote himself completely to the cause of God until the supreme sacrifice. This is what the communications and acts of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb try to emphasize.

2007, the Year of the Suicide Bomber

As in previous years, 2007 was marked by violent events on a daily basis. Every day people fell victim to bullets or explosives. The confrontations between

ATTACKS FOR WHICH AL-QAEDA'S ORGANISATION IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM) CLAIMED RESPONSIBILITY

13th February: 6 people killed in Kabilya in 7 almost simultaneous attacks with bombs and car bombs.

11th April: At least 30 dead and more than 200 injured in 2 almost simultaneous attacks in Algiers, one against the Palace of the Government in the town centre and the other perpetrated with the aid of two car bombs against a police station on the eastern outskirts.

11th July: 10 soldiers killed and 35 injured in Lakhdaria (south-east Algiers) in a suicide attack carried out with a refrigerated lorry loaded with explosives against a barracks.

6th September: 22 dead and more than 100 injured in a suicide attack

against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's retinue in Batna.

8th September: 32 dead and 45 injured in a suicide attack using a car bomb against a coastguard barracks in Dellys, port of Kabilya, 70 kilometres east of Algiers.

21st September: Close to Lakhdaria, a suicide attack against a bus carrying the employees of the French public works group Razel with 9 people injured (among them 2 French people and 1 Italian).

11th December: 2 attacks rocked the capital and ravaged the headquarters of the Constitutional Council and that of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with 41 dead and more than 170 injured.

the police and the armed opposition were increasingly bloodier and limited to the circles of the main rivals. Henceforth, the attacks by groups of armed police patrols and their barrack buildings supplanted the isolated targets. The objectives were those put forward by al-Qaeda's organisation: the State, its symbols and its auxiliaries. Among the strategies employed, the use of explosives and car bombs multiplied. But throughout 2007, the appearance of suicide bombers especially called attention. Although 1997 could be regarded as a year of massacres, 2007 is unquestionably the year of the suicide bomber.

In fact, 2007 really started for the AQIM in the early morning of 11th April, when two suicide attacks with car bombs, carried out almost simultaneously, hit the Palace of the Government in the centre of Algiers and a police station on the eastern outskirts of the capital. The cost was relatively high: around thirty dead and more than two hundred injured. Unexpected and spectacular, those attacks carried out almost at the same time in two highly symbolic places of Algiers came, in the space of a few minutes, after several months of efforts of all kinds to rekindle the link of confidence between the State, its apparatus and citizens.

The spectacle, the nature of the targets reached and the procedure used made this attack on authority a masterstroke that managed to weaken the confidence that the citizens had started to place in the State and its reconciliation policy. This attack tolled the bell for a period of relative calm and disturbed a partially reconstructed peace. The day after this attack, the American Ambassador in Algiers had considered it necessary to warn against other possible attacks by the AQIM. The Algerian authorities protested vigorously against what they considered an intrusion into Algerian affairs which could only sow the seeds of further trouble and panic. This panic would be all the more stronger three days later, on 14th April 2007, when some suicide bombers blew themselves up in front of the American Consulate in Casablanca, causing panic in the neighbouring country and suggesting the power of the organisation beyond the Algerian borders, as its new acronym sought to signify. The warnings of the Embassy of the United States in Algeria about new attacks were confirmed and the anxiety reached its paroxysm in the police services and among the citizens of the two targeted countries.

Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb therefore managed to mark the beginning of its new strategy in Algeria and in the Maghreb, as well as the opening of a new more active and more determined jihadist era. Four months

after its allegiance to *Sheik* Osama Bin Laden, the test was now complete: the GSPC had become international and an active branch of al-Qaeda even if no organic bond is proven. The link is in the first place symbolic and ideological. The al-Qaeda label would have to provide media coverage for operations decided and executed on site in function of the possibilities offered by a highly enclosed security field.

When the public started to believe that terrorism was over, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb hit a serious blow and called that attack *Badr* of the Muslim Maghreb (*Ghazwat Badr al-maghrib al-islâmi*). The reference to the battle of *Badr* was deliberate. It was the first major victorious battle of the Muslims led by the Prophet against the clan of *Quraysh*, which was behind his exile in Medina. This battle is symbolic because it was won by a small group of Muslims against an enemy who had a larger number of combatants. Moreover, it marked the beginning of the conquest of power by the followers of Islam. Following the example of the Prophet's companions, the members of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb believe in the possibility that a small group of followers can substitute an army of unbelievers. Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb now follows this spirit: fewer but more determined!

Three months later, on 11th July, a military camp located in the east of the town of Lakhdaria (90 km from Algiers) was the target of an unusual attack. A suicide bomber at the wheel of a refrigerated lorry which usually provided this barracks with goods was able to enter and blow up his lorry filled with explosives. Ten soldiers died and more than thirty were injured. In September the Head of State was targeted in Batna. A suicide bomber blew himself up amidst the crowd waiting for the presidential retinue. The attack resulted in twenty dead and more than one hundred injured. Abdelaziz Bouteflika reacted by reaffirming the "strategic and irreversible choice of the Algerian people" regarding the national reconciliation policy: "We will not abandon it, whatever the price to be paid." Two days later, a 15-year old teenager blew himself up in a coastguard barracks in Dellys, in the *wilaya* of Boumerdès. The cost was high: 34 dead and around 60 injured. Some ten days later another suicide attack took place in Lakhdaria, in the *wilaya* of Bouira, against a vehicle carrying employees of a French company. The year ended with a final spectacular action. On 11th December two attacks rocked the capital and ravaged the headquarters of the Constitutional Council and that of the UNHCR (two highly symbolic targets), resulting in 41 dead and more than 170 injured.

Al-Qaeda, a (Shared) Communication Label

Since the rupture with the ideologists of the international Jihad, the armed Islamist opposition has not ceased searching for support capable of providing media coverage for their combat in the geopolitical scene and, above all, for legitimating it from a theological point of view.

How to respond to all those muftis who are increasingly condemning this Jihad whose main targets are Muslims? An authority like that of Ayman az-Zawâhirî, is necessary to challenge someone like *Sheik* Youssef Al-Qaradhâwî, who vigorously condemned the attacks in Algeria. Osama Bin Laden's lieutenant censures the *Sheik* of al Azhar as follows: "Qaradhâwî believes the main murderers and accuses the Mujahidine of lying. In his fatwa he has referred again to what had happened in the towns of Batna and Dellys, presenting the events as the murder of innocents and as an acceptance of the legality of making the blood of innocents flow. Thus, he repeats the lies of the criminal Algerian regime. The operation in Dellys was aimed at a naval base rather than a school. As for that of Batna, it aimed to kill the criminal President who has killed thousands of innocent civilians, who fights Islam, refuses to apply the Sharia, is loyal to the United States and France, and recognises Israel because it belongs to the United Nations and supports the Arab capitulation initiative."

If the combatants, isolated and increasingly cut off from their support, find a real interest in joining an international organisation which makes life difficult for its most determined rivals, it is possible to ask what benefit this organisation can derive, in its turn, from this alliance? The benefits are in fact shared. Al-Qaeda multiplies the centres of extremist activities thereby trying to loosen the noose around it in Baghdad and in Afghanistan. In the eyes of its adversaries, it is still a force to be reckoned with and can choose the time and place to attack. Al-Qaeda's attacks in the Maghreb also offer the opportunity to speak with strength and be the voice of all oppressed. This is how after the 11th December attacks in Algiers which rocked the headquarters of the United Nations, the Constitutional Council and the police academy, Ayman az-Zawâhirî, the number two of al-Qaeda, could state: "The United Nations is the declared enemy of Islam: it has legitimated the creation of the State of Israel on

Muslim land; it considers Chechnya as part of the Russia of the crusaders; it considers Ceuta and Melilla as part of the Spain of the crusaders. And it has also legitimated the presence of crusaders in Afghanistan and in Iraq [...], it has legitimated the independence of Timor from Indonesia, while it does not recognise this right to Chechnya or the Muslims of the Caucasus, of Cashmere, of Ceuta and Melilla or of Bosnia."

AQIM's members, strong with the support of al-Qaeda's leaders who approve and sanction their actions, no longer hesitate to assume them publicly and publish photos of their perpetrators on the Internet.

An Undesirable Evolution

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Many questions have been asked about those responsible for the 11th April attacks: were they suicide bombers without realising, or declared suicide bombers, voluntary candidates for death? Public powers are trying to reassure themselves in relation to such an evolution in the modes of action and at first put forward other explanations suggesting that suicide bombers can be so unaware. The will to minimise the symbolic scope of such an act clashes with the reality of obstinate facts.

The answer would come in a communication signed, as was right and proper, by Emir Abû Mus'ab in the name of AQIM. The communication recalls that the choice of such a strategy was not dictated by a lack of logistical means and that it was to be expected that the list of suicide bombers would lengthen. In fact, the

¹ On the occasion of the spectacular attack of 6th September aimed at the presidential retinue in Batna, the condemnation (first oral and later in writing) had been argued more vigorously and at length than following the 11th April attacks. See the text of the letters on the website of Al-Qaradhâwî, consulted on April/May 2007.

answer was aimed at all those who were trying to reassure themselves by minimising the scope of these acts, attributing them to the confusion of a group in dire straits. These operations are not, as the first official reactions led us to suppose, avatars of attempts that failed or fomented strategies without the knowledge of their author. From the point of view of their intellectual authors, it is a new progression which is not due to a weakness of the means, as one might think, but rather it would be the consequence of a better practical preparation. The different statements of Islamists of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb declare it proudly as a new way of acting.

The official discourse has constantly spoken of the "difficulties" of the terrorist groups due to the defections and dissensions. If anything is true in these affirmations, it is also true that the several thousand combatants remaining are more mobilised than ever and determined to die as martyrs. On 11th April 2007, terrorists hit the heart of the State and, later, on the occasion of the failed attack in Batna on 8th September of that same year, they tried to hit the head by targeting the presidential retinue.

Although the facts were well established and proved that the attacks that started on 11th April 2007 fell within the category of suicide attacks, some still awaited a disagreement within the armed groups over the use of such procedures. Through a communication, dated 14th May 2007, the information committee of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb categorically denied what it considers allegations concerning the existence of internal dissensions on the use of the method of suicide operations (*'amaliyât istish'hâdiyya*). On the contrary, it notes that there is a consensus on such a method that delights the combatants who had waited for it for such a long time. According to this same communication, if this option has taken a while to materialise, it is only because of a lack of preparation and it foresees that henceforth the list of candidates for martyrdom (*al-istish'hâdiyyîn*) will be longer everyday.

The Suicide Bomber and the Voluntary Martyr

The comparative biographies in the press agree on a certain number of points. The resulting profile of the suicide bomber is that of a new internal convert, a kind of recent born-again, in his thirties, with a precarious social and economic situation, who has already been in prison, mostly for minor offences or

for his Islamist past. Some of our suicide bombers seem to have benefited from the pardon offered by the reconciliation law. This reopens the controversy over this law, exemplified by the first declaration of the Head of State after the attack in Batna, which he had just escaped, in which he reasserted his reconciliation policy. This average profile is not always respected. Two cases fundamentally question it: that of Belkacemi Nabil (alias Abû Muç'ab az-Zarqâwî), the 15-year old teenager who blew himself up in the coastguard barracks in Dellys, in the *wilaya* of Boumerdès; and that, even stranger, of the suicide bomber who perpetrated the attack against the UN headquarters in Hydra, Chebli Brahim, alias Abû 'Uthmân, also known as 'ammi Brahim, given his advanced age. He was sixty-four!

Beyond the insurmountable differences, these figures could coincide in a kind of total disillusionment with the political and social policy in the country. They would have preferred other values and another ethic, however utopian. Neither the vocabulary used nor the spirit of these imagined values form part of the character of the suicide bomber. From the point of view of those who ordered these attacks and of their material authors, they are not suicide bombers. Islamists prefer the term *istish'hâdî* (pl. *istish'hâdiyûn*), which can be translated as (voluntary) candidate, to that of martyr, a term popularised by the Palestinians in the second Intifada. The religious and political elites have widely debated its licit aspect. The famous Egyptian mufti Al-Qaradhâwî, who himself condemned the attack in Batna the following day, had previously contributed to making the status of *istish'hâdî* licit for the Palestinians by stating that the author of such an attack did not commit suicide since he had sacrificed himself for a just cause. Al-Qaradhâwî distinguished between the *istish'hâd* and the suicide (*intihâr*). For this very influential wise man, "the suicide (al-muntahir) kills himself and for himself, while this other (the *istish'hâdî*) offers his person as a sacrifice for his religion and his community. The suicide is desperate [...] and the mudjâhid places his complete faith in God. The suicide breaks free of himself and his problems by killing himself while the mudjâhid combats the enemy of God and his enemy with this new weapon placed by destiny (*al-qadar*) in the hands of the oppressed (*mustad'affîn*) to resist the tyranny (*al-djabarût*) of the proud and powerful."

The debates aroused by the confrontation of Muslims first in Palestine and later in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have enriched and made the notion of martyr

evolve by introducing a distinction between the *shahîd* and the *istish'hâdî*. The latter is someone who has decided "to become a *shahîd*", while the traditional *shahîd* is someone who has gone into combat as a *mudjâhid* waiting for a victory in life but has been surprised by death before he could see his wish fulfilled. The members of the AQIM make a clear distinction between the *shahid* and the *istish'hadi*, as shown by the communication of 11th December 2007 by which they claimed responsibility for the double attack against the Constitutional Council and the United Nations headquarters in Algiers. The communication dedicated this operation to one of the main members shot down by the police in October 2007. Entitled *Ghazwat ash-shahid Sufyân Abî Haydara*, the communication makes a clear distinction between this *shahid* (martyr) fallen in combat and the *istish'hadiyûn* who have just accomplished these two operations (*'amaliyatayn istish'hadiyatan*) in order, among other reasons, to avenge him.

The different translations of the Arabic name, such as suicide bomber or *homme-bombe*, are used as a metaphor of the *istish'hâdî* but at the same time trivialize his act by reducing it to a mere suicide operation. The debate between those who consider the act as a mere suicide operation and those who attribute to it a more idealistic dimension actually expresses two logics of perception. A conception forged in an increasingly shared spirit and culture of Islam, which considers this act as a sacrifice sometimes elevated to the level of a religious obligation. The other conception, closer from the western point of view and which also has supporters among Muslims (including Arab and Palestinian), considers the suicide attack both as a suicide and a criminal act.

Al-Qaradhâwî's "theory" was resumed as a guarantee by many groups who attacked the declared enemies of Islam. The trivialization that followed has meant that other groups have seized it, including those who oppose the Arab regimes considered enemies of Islam. However, the phenomenon is neither new nor characteristic of Islam. In this start of millennium, suicide operations have multiplied through the different conflicts of the world we live in and the armed Islamists in Algeria seem to embrace a more global movement, therefore forming part of this fabric woven by the jihadists worldwide, well-symbolised by the Internet, where they have a strong presence. If the Iranian revolution has had any influence, it is dangerous to attribute the phenomenon to the Shiite conception of the martyr. Such a martyr culture only

partially explains how a project of life becomes a project of death. Several logics come together to form the candidate for martyrdom, the potential *shahîd* and the future *istish'hâdî*.

To conclude, it is important to point out a phenomenon which could develop in the shadow of the violence of the last few years until becoming a mode of action at least as formidable as the suicide attack. We refer to kidnappings, which in 2007 had many victims. Whether they are in fact committed by armed groups or other actors, they have become a firm reality. In 2007 they reached worrying levels even according to the police who usually minimises the impact of the turbulences that affect the country. According to the declarations made in the Senate on 15th May 2008 by Yazid Zerhouni, the Minister of Home Affairs, and reported by the national press, 375 cases of kidnapping were recorded in 2007. According to the Minister, 260 cases are minor offences while 115 cases of kidnapping have a direct connection with terrorism. In both cases, kidnapping has become one of the expressions of the confrontations and undoubtedly some of these kidnappings could have been perpetrated by armed groups opposed to power. In this case, these kidnappings could suggest that the practical resources of these forces have diminished. The repression and the changing of power have cut the armed groups off from their traditional support. Kidnapping might have become one of the means to fund the conflict as, according to the same declarations by the Minister, the parents of the victims often agree to the demands of the kidnappers and pay the ransom requested, sometimes (perhaps usually) without warning the public authorities.

The most emblematic case is that of the abduction of the brother of a wealthy entrepreneur of public works on 25th April 2007. The kidnappers obtained a ransom of perhaps 25 billion centimes for his liberation, according to the testimony of the victim to the court of Tizi Ouzou which judged the case, and before which he was able to recognise two of her kidnappers on file as belonging to a terrorist group.

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