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Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

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Introduction

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is a Salafi-jihadist militant group and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization (FTO) operating in the Sahara and Sahel. The group traces its provenance to Algeria's civil war in the 1990s, and has in the past decade become an al-Qaeda affiliate with regional ambitions. Though AQIM and its offshoots pose the primary transnational terror threat in North and West Africa, they are unlikely to strike U.S. or Western interests beyond the region, U.S. officials say.

What are AQIM's origins?

AQIM's lineage extends back to a guerilla Islamist movement known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which violently opposed the secular leadership in Algiers in the 1990s. The insurrection began after Algeria's French-backed military canceled a second round of parliamentary elections in 1992 when it appeared that the Islamic Salvation Front was poised to win power. In 1998, several GIA commanders grew concerned that brutal tactics such as beheadings were alienating their Algerian constituency and broke away to found the Salafist

Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). GIA, now defunct, was delisted as an FTO in 2010.

A road sign written by Islamist rebels at the entrance into Timbuktu reads: "The gate of the application of sharia law welcomes you." (Photo: Benoit Tessier/Courtesy Reuters)

GSPC initially drew support from the Algerian population by vowing to continue the rebellion without killing civilians, but a government amnesty and counterterrorism campaign drove it into disarray in the early 2000s.

The group **aligned with al-Qaeda** in the 2000s to retain relevance with high-profile attacks and improve **recruiting** [PDF] and fundraising, analysts say. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's emir, who was at the time second in command, announced the union on September 11, 2006, and GSPC rebranded itself as AQIM the following January.

The new name denoted the group's broadened aspirations, which after the merger included Western interests in addition to Algerian targets, analysts say. "Adopting the famous name may have enhanced AQIM's legitimacy among extremists and **facilitated recruitment** [PDF], while enabling al-Qaeda to burnish its international credentials and, potentially, access a region geographically close to Europe," writes Alexis Arieff, an analyst at the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service (CRS).

That year, 2007, marked the high point for AQIM **suicide attacks and other violent**

incidents in Algeria [PDF]. In Algiers in December, AQIM simultaneously **bombed the regional UN headquarters** [PDF] and the Algerian Constitutional Court, together killing thirty-three.

However, analysts say that recruitment suffered in response to the group's indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets and its new affiliation with the brutal tactics of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The al-Qaeda merger may have "discredited AQIM among Algerian Islamists focused on a domestic agenda and/or opposed to violence against civilians," Arieff writes.

What are its objectives?

According to West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, AQIM's objectives include ridding North Africa of Western influence; overthrowing governments deemed apostate, including those of Algeria, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia; and installing fundamentalist regimes based on **sharia**. Analysts say AQIM's ideology blends global Salafi-jihadist dogma with regionally resonant elements, including references to the early Islamic conquest of the Maghreb and the Iberian Peninsula.

While these states of the Maghreb and Sahel are AQIM's "near enemy," the group has declared Spain and France its foremost "far enemies." France, in particular, has a long history as the region's colonial heavyweight, and continues to provide political and military support to local regimes AQIM opposes.

Where does AQIM operate?

A successful Algerian counterterrorism campaign forced AQIM from its base of operations along the Mediterranean coast south to the Sahel region that includes Niger, Mauritania, and Mali, where the group has established footholds. AQIM's members also joined the ranks of the insurgency in Iraq during the 2003–2011 war with the United States.

In a January 2013 Congressional testimony, then secretary of state Hillary Clinton compared the **security risks in Mali** to those of Taliban-era Afghanistan. "This is going to be a very serious ongoing threat because if you look at the size of northern Mali, if you look at the topography, it's not only desert, it's caves," she said. "We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven."

AQIM has not attacked Europe or the United States, although individuals suspected to have ties to

the group have been arrested in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and the Netherlands. The UN Security Council's al-Qaeda **sanctions committee** says European cells are a source of the group's funding.

In 2012, the U.S. State Department said **AQIM had coordinated** with other terrorist groups in the region, including Nigeria's **Boko Haram**, Somalia's **al-Shabab**, and Yemen's **AQAP**, with arms and funds flowing among them. **Clinton** and the former head of Africa Command, **General Carter Ham**, are among senior U.S. officials who said there were "links" between AQIM and the Libyan militants who attacked the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi in September 2012, but these allegations have not been substantiated in subsequent reporting or unclassified investigations.

What is its composition?

Much of AQIM's leadership is believed to have trained with other Arab volunteers—among them, Osama bin Laden— in Afghanistan during the 1979–1989 war against the Soviet occupation. Many returned to the Middle East and North Africa radicalized.

The group is divided into *katibas*, or brigades, which are organized in often independent cells. AQIM's **top commanders** [PDF] "may be rivals as much as comrades or they may operate relatively autonomously," according to Arieff. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin E. Dempsey likewise characterized AQIM as "**a syndicate of groups who come together episodically**, when it's convenient to them, in order to advance their cause. Sometimes their cause is terrorism. Sometimes it's criminal. Sometimes it's arms trafficking."

Algerian-born **Abdelmalek Droukdel** has led the group since 2004. Also known as Abou Mossab Abdelwadoud, he is a trained engineer and explosives expert. AQIM declared France its primary target under Droukdel's leadership.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a founding member of AQIM who led a battalion on the Algeria-Mali border, broke with the group in late 2012 and created his own organization known as the al-Mulathamun Battalion (aka Those who Sign in Blood Battalion). The one-eyed veteran of the anti-Soviet Afghan insurgency is believed to have masterminded the January 2013 hostage crisis at a natural-gas facility in eastern Algeria that left at least thirty-eight civilians dead, as well as twin suicide bombings in Niger that killed at least twenty-six in May.

U.S. secretary of state John Kerry **designated** al-Mulathamun an FTO in December 2013. CFR Senior Fellow John Campbell opposed the move, writing that it will have "little practical consequence, but [the] designation greatly **enhances the profile and prestige** of an individual and a group that, arguably, more closely resembles a bandit and smuggling network than a terrorist organization."

What are its tactics?

AQIM's tactics include guerilla-style raids, assassinations, and suicide bombings of military, government, and civilian targets. Its members have frequently kidnapped, and sometimes executed, aid workers, tourists, diplomats, and employees of multinational corporations.

The group raises money through **kidnapping for ransom** (KFR) and trafficking arms, vehicles, cigarettes, and persons, according to the U.S. State Department. AQIM's operational area saw an influx of arms in the aftermath of NATO's 2011 Libya air campaign.

Kidnappings not only raise funds, but also facilitate prisoner exchanges and discourage foreign enterprise in the region. In October 2012, David Cohen, undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Treasury Department, said KFR was "the most significant terrorist financing threat today."

Belmokhtar's "family connections with local tribes allow [AQIM and affiliated groups] to **capitalize on criminal opportunities in the southern Maghreb**, such as smuggling, to finance terrorism," according to the UN sanctions committee. Cigarettes, a lucrative contraband, earned Belmokhtar the moniker Mr. Marlboro.

AQIM also smuggles narcotics, providing a vital Sahel way station between suppliers in Latin America and European markets, analysts say. In July 2012, Gen. Ham described AQIM as al-Qaeda's "**wealthiest affiliate**."

What is AQIM doing in Mali?

AQIM and splinter groups **Ansar al-Dine** and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) aided the semi-nomadic Tuaregs—a historically disenfranchised regional ethnic minority—who launched a rebellion in early 2012 against Mali's government and wrested control of the country's sparsely populated north. But they soon marginalized Tuareg forces and began

implementing their own severe brand of sharia in the breakaway northern territory. According to the United Nations, the jihadist influx was particularly **brutal for women**, many of whom were raped and forced into marriage or prostitution.

Mali, a predominantly Muslim, landlocked West African nation that straddles the arid latitudes of the sub-Saharan Sahel, gained independence from France in 1960. Its democratization over the past two decades had been celebrated by Western donor states, but the military coup in 2012 and ongoing Islamist insurgency has exposed deep and destabilizing political rifts. (A transitional civilian government assumed power with the military's consent in early April.)

After a brief union combating state forces, Ansar al-Dine and MUJAO drove Tuareg separatists out of major towns including Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. MUJAO merged with Belmokhtar's al-Mulathamun Battalion in May 2013 to form al-Murabitoun, according to the State Department, which is covered under the same FTO designation.

How are Western and regional powers responding?

The State Department says "the best strategy for dealing with AQIM remains working with regional governments to increase their capability, foster regional cooperation, and counter violent extremism." While Algiers has abjured a direct counterterrorism role for Western powers—namely, the United States and France—it has welcomed indirect support, according to CRS.

The George W. Bush administration established the **Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership** in 2005 to "take a holistic approach to countering violent extremism," providing civilian and military assistance to more than half a dozen partner countries in the Maghreb and Sahel—$44.3 million in fiscal year 2013. However, the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that TSCP lacked a strategy beyond bilateral aid and has faced challenges from the outset. Mali is the third partner country since 2008 to experience a military coup, after Mauritania and Niger, which triggers a suspension of security assistance **under U.S. law**.

In December 2012, the UN Security Council authorized a military peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as **MINUSMA**, for which regional coalition Economic Community of West African States pledged thousands of troops. However, a rebel advance southward in January 2013, prior to the deployment of African forces, prompted Bamako to request immediate military assistance from France. French forces retook Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal, pushing AQIM militants northward into the mountains.

In late 2013, militant Islamists were kept from major towns, though they sporadically attacked MINUSMA troops and claimed responsibility for the **kidnapping and execution of two French journalists**, highlighting the insecurity that remains in the country's north. The African-led peacekeeping mission was only at half of its full operational capacity (6,300 uniformed personnel out of an authorized 12,640) at the start of 2014.