

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy — Tufts University

# Patterns of Attack

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Understanding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

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## Acronym Guide

ACH – Analysis of Competing Hypothesis

AIS – Islamic Salvation Army (*Armee Islamique Du Salut*)

APNA – Algerian People's National Army

AQAP – Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

AQIM – Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AST – Ansar Al-Sharia-Tunisia

FIS – Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamic du Salut*)

GIA – Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armee*)

GSPC – Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*)

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

MUJAO – Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (*Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest/Jamaat Tawhid wal Jihad fi Gharb Afrika*)

SNA – Social Networks Analysis

SVBIED – Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device

VBIED – Vehicle-Born Improvised Explosive Device

## Introduction

Regional security, border security, and international cooperation frameworks are all popular topics in the current discussion of

counterterrorism in Africa. NGOs,

governments, and international

organizations have taken steps to improve

regional security with the sometimes

explicit, sometimes implicit goal of

preventing the spread of terrorism,

focusing on the potential joining of groups in North Africa (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and

Morocco), West Africa (Nigeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania), and even as far as East Africa

(Somalia and Kenya). The great fear is that the major players — Al Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, and Al Shabab — might link up to (in this projection's most

extreme rendition) radicalize a significant portion of the African continent and gain the resources

to pose a major threat to Europe and the United States. But how realistic is this portrayal? Do

these groups want to join? Are they in fact interested in continent-wide domination?

Map 1: Algeria



I began this project with the intention of answering the question, *Is Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) primarily an Algerian nationalist movement or a transnational ideologically driven terrorist organization?* This question has been posed before, and was especially prevalent in counterterrorism discourse in 2008 and 2009, shortly after the group declared its allegiance to Al Qaeda and appeared to be gaining strength, increasing operations (especially against Western targets), and threatening other countries in the region. Whether a

group is nationalist or internationalist changes the way they are understood externally, providing a framework to understand their operations, recruitment strategies, fragmentation, and potential objectives. All of these factors influence counterterrorism approaches. In 2008-9, most analysts construed AQIM less as an Algerian issue and more as a regional threat. However, the region has changed significantly since then. The Arab Spring in 2011, AQIM's role in the Tuareg civil war in Mali in 2012, the subsequent French intervention in 2013, and the increasing role of international terrorist movements and illicit trade throughout North Africa and into the Middle East have changed the context of AQIM's operations, meriting a revisit to the question of its goals. Additionally, the group itself has changed significantly, due to internal conflicts — ideological and operational — that have resulted in multiple spin-offs, weakening AQIM's base in the mountain region just southeast of Algiers under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdal. Most recently, AQIM is having an intense internal debate over whether to align with ISIS or remain loyal to Al Qaeda. This issue led to a split within AQIM leadership in fall 2014, with Abdelmakel Al Gouri forming a new group called Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria (*Djound Al-Khilafa en Algerie*, or Djound) pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's group, while the rest remained under the leadership of Droukdal and loyal to Al Qaeda. Thus, while answering the question of AQIM's regional versus international goals would give insight into the objectives of AQIM under Droukdal, the group has been so weakened by recent events that the answer seems less relevant in the face of the new threat — namely, the alignment of AQIM with ISIS. Al Gouri was killed by French forces in December 2014, stalling (if not ending) the fledgling Djound movement, leading to new questions: what is the future of Islamist terrorism in the Maghreb? Will Djound reunite with AQIM? Or will Droukdal concede to internal pressures and align with ISIS?

Understanding the evolution of AQIM, especially its activities since the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, will give insight into the trajectory it was on prior to the rise of ISIS. Since it publically declared allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2007, AQIM has conducted operations outside Algeria in Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, and Mauritania. Drawing from Al Qaeda's playbook, its trademark means of attack are coordinated vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) and suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attacks. For financing, the group is infamous for kidnapping and ransoming Western nationals. To give a complete picture of AQIM, this paper will begin with a brief history of the evolution of Islamic extremism in Algeria and an overview of AQIM today, focusing on five categories of analysis and drawing on data about regional terrorist incidents, to assess recent change over time: ideology, leadership, organizational structure, locus of operations, targeting, and ties with other groups. I will use Analysis of Competing Hypothesis (ACH) to test whether AQIM is more of a national or international threat based on its locus of operations and targeting. Insights derived from this quantitative and qualitative analysis will show that AQIM is an internationally oriented movement, influenced by the tactics of Al Qaeda, but that the group's ability to operate outside of its current geographic area is severely limited and it is essentially in "survival mode." I will use Social Networks Analysis (SNA) to assess and visualize the group's current ties with other Islamist groups (within Africa and internationally) to show that all AQIM's former African affiliates are now aligned with ISIS, which will likely be an influencing factor in AQIM's calculus of whether or not they should remain loyal to Al Qaeda. The historical analysis, combined with the data on AQIM's more recent activities, illuminates a cyclical pattern, now midway through its third rotation, of Islamists going abroad to fight the jihad then returning to Algeria with new skills, increasingly extreme ideology, and international ties. Understanding this

pattern will point to projections for the group's future. This paper will conclude that based on its history of aligning with international groups to gain support and legitimacy, AQIM will eventually align with ISIS, with extremist elements, augmented by returnees from the ISIS struggle, creating a core group of "die-hards" to lead and intensify the next wave of Maghrebian terrorism. However, based on the group's current lack of capacity, the overall unwillingness of Algerians to support extremist violent causes, and the illicit economic opportunities that have opened up in the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, I predict that at the same time many AQIM jihadis will shift to operating within the vast criminal network of North Africa and abandon the ideological cause all together.

Understanding AQIM — its past, present, and projected future — is critical to understanding the evolution from insurgency to terrorism to criminal groups that can occur in militarily strong states (i.e. Algeria) surrounded by weak ones (i.e. Tunisia, Mali). The insights derived from this research could inform the national and international counterterrorism strategies in North Africa, as well as point to areas for further research, especially the issue of returning foreign fighters and their influence on local jihadi movements.

## CHAPTER 1: Becoming AQIM

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)<sup>1</sup> is the current iteration of a group whose roots can be directly traced back to the late 1980s, and arguably back to Algerian independence struggles in the 1950s and 60s.

### The Algerian Civil War: FIS and GIA

In 1988, civil unrest broke out in nearly all of Algeria's major cities, protesting the role of the military in politics, and resulting in a new constitution in 1989 allowing for a multi-party system and so-called "democratic" reforms. In 1989, Algerian Islamists formed the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamic du Salut*, or FIS), a conglomeration of multiple Islamic groups, that in 1990 and 1991 gained significant ground in Algeria's first local and regional elections. This party, outside of the established order dominated by the regime's elites and not under control of the military made the existing powers uncomfortable and led to an extreme military response.<sup>2</sup> In the first round of National Assembly elections in December 1991, FIS won 188 seats (in contrast to the governing party, which won only 18 seats), and was on track to garner significant legislative victories in the planned second round in January. In response to the threat of Islamist victory, the military suspended the vote in January 1992, forced the president to resign and took power, arresting FIS leadership and banning the use of mosques by any political

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as "Organization of al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb" or, in Arabic, "Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami." Lianne Kennedy Boudali, "Newest Franchise in Al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad," Combatting Terrorism Center, West Point, April 2, 2007, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-gspc-newest-franchise-in-al-qaidas-global-jihad> (accessed April 10, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100.

party.<sup>3</sup> In response, FIS called for a strike, which the regime perceived as a show of force and responded aggressively, resulting in violent clashes and the eventual declaration of a state of emergency in March 1992.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the state of emergency declaration, FIS was in turmoil, with its leadership either in exile, imprisonment, or hiding. Multiple armed groups began organizing and conducting attacks against security and government personnel, allegedly representing the FIS or other more extreme Islamist interests. This conflict is now termed the Algerian Civil War and came to be known as the "black decade," totaling approximately 150,000 conflict-related deaths from its beginning in December 1991 to its end in February 2002.<sup>5</sup> Several thousand FIS supporters had been imprisoned in camps in the Sahara as the party rose in power and conflicted with the military-state apparatus, leading those individuals to become further radicalized. In contrast to most of the groups, which targeted security forces and state institutions, the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armee*, or GIA) took a much more violent tact and began targeting anyone remotely associated with the regime, including "journalists, local administrators, secular intellectuals, and foreign nationals."<sup>6</sup> The GIA refused to compromise with the government and focused its activities in urban areas, recruiting from the large pool of unemployed poor. High fatality rates within the GIA led to rapid turnover of its leadership,

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<sup>3</sup> Khalifa Hajji, "The Origins and Strategic Objectives of the Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School (December 2009), 1, 16.

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group, "Islamism, Violence, and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page," Cairo/Brussels: ICG Middle East Report N°29, July 30, 2004, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Luis Martinez, "Why the Violence in Algeria?," *The Journal of North African Studies* 9, no. 2 (2004): 14–27.

<sup>6</sup> Willis, 74.

leading the group to become increasingly incoherent with numerous cells operating independently in discrete areas.<sup>7</sup>

The other major group to emerge out of former FIS supporters was the more moderate Islamic Salvation Army (*Armee Islamique Du Salut*, or AIS), with its political wing calling for peaceful political solutions.<sup>8</sup> The AIS continued in the political and sometimes violent fight through the 1990s, until a cease-fire was negotiated in October 1997 and Law on Civil Concord granted AIS (and other smaller armed group) members amnesty in 1999.<sup>9</sup>

The GIA, however, remained outside these negotiations and especially in the early to mid-1990s dominated the country. According to an Algerian Army general, the GIA comprised approximately 27,000 fighters in 1993, enjoying widespread support and posing a credible threat to the regime.<sup>10</sup> Many of the core leadership figures within the GIA had fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Osama Bin Laden was allegedly supporting their struggle in Algeria with weapons, equipment, and \$40,000 USD in thanks for Algerian jihadists' support of Al Qaeda's cause.<sup>11</sup>

The GIA employed a unique and brutal interpretation of Islamic Law, ideologically justifying killing anyone who criticized the organization or did not directly support its

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<sup>7</sup> Willis, 172-174.

<sup>8</sup> Hajji, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Willis, 186.

<sup>10</sup> Martinez, 14-27.

<sup>11</sup> Evan F. Kohlmann, "Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria: the GIA, the GSPC and ALQAEDA," *The NEFA Foundation* (May 2007), [www.nefaffoundation.org/info@nefaffoundation](http://www.nefaffoundation.org/info@nefaffoundation) (accessed December 19, 2014); Guiseppe Grillo, "The Next Battle of Algiers: An Analysis of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Newark, NJ: The Graduate School at Rutgers University (October 2009).

members.<sup>12</sup> This concept of "takfir" is critical to understanding the GIA's and its successor's operations. In its most literal sense, the term means "excommunication," and refers to the body of knowledge determining under what circumstances it is legitimate to declare a Muslim an infidel. Beyond simply following Sharia, if a Muslim is deemed susceptible to Western influences, then he or she is considered *jahiliyah*, or in the "state of ignorance," which some interpret as justification for capital punishment.<sup>13</sup> Takfirist ideology (interpretations of which are debated among Islamic extremists and rejected entirely by non-extremist Muslims) purports that Muslims who do not adhere to the extremist's values are apostates and no better than infidels, and thus are legitimate targets. Another aspect of this is the concept of "guilt by association" put forth by Sayyid Qutb, which argues for the "culpability of Muslims who associate themselves, even peripherally, with a *jāhilī* ('pre-Islamic', 'pagan') institution – thus laying the groundwork for collateral Muslim casualties."<sup>14</sup> The GIA targeted teachers — killing 200 — since as such they were part of what the GIA perceived as a corrupt government system, as well as entire families who were associated with the government, women not wearing the hijab, journalists, and Christians. The GIA also targeted foreign nationals, killing approximately 90, as they saw it "necessary to purify Algeria through hunting down all foreigners living or working there."<sup>15</sup> The group also targeted foreign-owned infrastructure, especially oil, as GIA spokesman said, "It is well known that the oil resources of this land are the largest source of revenue for the apostates

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<sup>12</sup> Hajji, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Tristan, "Takfir," *Middle East Issues*, <http://middleeast.about.com/od/glossary/g/me081213.htm> (cessed April 15, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Ulph, "Boko Haram: Investigating the Ideological Background to the Rise of an Islamist Militant Organization," Westminster Institute, October 24, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Hajji, 20.

which they use to fight *Mujahedeen* and to finance their operations."<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the GIA's strict ideology of "No Truce, No Reconciliation, and No Dialogue" informed its interactions with the Algerian government, and later, also with its own more moderate members.<sup>17</sup>

In the mid- to late-1990s, the GIA's brutal tactics began losing it support and many members defected. In response, GIA leaders started killing defectors and their families, further decreasing the group's popularity and turning public opinion, both domestic and international, against the GIA cause. While international Islamists, including Osama bin Laden, originally supported the GIA, even they recognized that the group's tactics against Muslims were becoming too severe, and eventually even bin Laden rescinded his support.<sup>18</sup>

### **Too Brutal of a Jihad: GIA to GSPC**

In 1998, some of the GIA's departing members formed the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, or GSPC), denouncing all massacres perpetrated by the GIA, and promising to spare civilians and only conduct selective operations against government and military targets. One of the group's leaders, Abdelmajid Dishu (a.k.a Abu Muab), allegedly received a call from Bin Laden urging him to "reestablish a

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<sup>16</sup> Kohlmann, "Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria."

<sup>17</sup> Kohlmann, "Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria."

<sup>18</sup> Lauren Vriens, "Armed Islamic Group, Algeria Islamists," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 27, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/algeria/armed-islamic-group-algeria-islamists/p9154#p4> (accessed April 4, 2015); Aaron Y. Zelin, "Al-Qaeda Disaffiliates with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham," *The Washington Institute*, February 4, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/al-qaeda-disaffiliates-with-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-al-sham> (accessed April 4, 2014).

better image of *jihad* in Algeria and the rise of the GSPC name in the Muslim world where the name of the GIA was tarnished."<sup>19</sup>

While the GSPC expressed ambitions to extend the jihad beyond Algeria to anywhere its fighters could reach, lack of support constrained its operations. Internally, the Algerian population was tired of violence, and externally, international Islamists who had supported the cause in the past were put off by Algerian Islamists due to the GIA's brutal tactics. Additionally, the Algerian government used the launch of the Global War on Terror after the 9/11 attacks to ramp up counterterrorism operations and justify harsh tactics against anyone it perceived as an opponent, thus severely weakening the GSPC. US military assistance to Algeria increased dramatically. In 2002, Algeria enjoyed "18 times the total amount of military assistance the country received over the previous 12 years."<sup>20</sup> Though extreme, this focus on counterterrorism assistance to Algeria is not unfounded. In 2007, it was estimated that Algerians made up 10% (and estimates go up to 30%<sup>21</sup>) of foreign fighters in Iraq,<sup>22</sup> and Saudi Arabian intelligence services (which, it should be noted, may have had motivation to inflate the numbers) estimated this number to be 1,200.<sup>23</sup>

The GSPC was operationally divided under northern and southern commanders, with the northern commander serving as Emir of the whole group. Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Amari Saifi (alias Al Para) successfully co-led the southern division until Saifi's death in 2005, conducting

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<sup>19</sup> Hajji, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Hajji, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Grillo.

<sup>22</sup> Nouredine Jebnoun, "Is the Maghreb the Next Afghanistan?" Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Occasional Papers (2007), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Hajji, 27.

many operations in southern Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania and gaining control of trade and trafficking routes throughout the region. The northern contingent was led by the group's leader, Abdelmalek Droukdal. Droukdal's faction had access to more high-value targets, but because of its locus of operations in a highly populated area under intense scrutiny of security forces, had less leeway to operate. "Thus, the northern division relegated itself to areas west of Algiers, and concerned itself more with kidnapping for ransom, and coordinating with other Islamist groups in the Maghreb."<sup>24</sup>

### **GSPC in Decline**

Support to Iraq was a divisive subject within the GSPC. One side, led by Droukdal, preached a pan-Islamist ideology and supported solidarity with Iraqis. The other side, led by Hassen Hattab (alias Hamza), was Islamo-nationalist, advocating for a strict focus on the "near jihad" of overthrowing the apostate Algerian regime and building an Islamic state in Algeria.<sup>25</sup> Droukdal's side won, as the GSPC Council voted in favor of "Active support to the brother Iraqis."<sup>26</sup> Some suggest that this vote indicates that the Council recognized that the struggle was essentially lost in Algeria, and thus voting to support Iraq was a face-saving move.<sup>27</sup>

Successful counterterrorism operations and departure of fighters to Iraq were not the only factors involved in the GSPC's decline. In 2005, in an attempt to revive support within Algeria, the GSPC conducted a recruitment campaign targeting Algerian youth, calling on them to

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<sup>24</sup> Grillo.

<sup>25</sup> Hajji, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Mathieu Guidere, "Al Qaeda a la Conquete du Maghreb, Le Terrorisme aux Portes de l'Europe," Monaco: Rocher (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Hajji, 31.

abandon their apostate educations and accept a “diploma in the *Jihad*.”<sup>28</sup> This campaign, however, was largely a failure, likely due to society's memory of the brutalities perpetuated by the GIA. The final factor was President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's National Reconciliation Project, instigated by the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation which attempted to pacify opposition by offering amnesty for repentant ex-combatants and prisoners of the Civil War. The Charter required a vote of popular support, which the GSPC actively campaigned against by highlighting the Algerian regime's cooperation with the United States on oil infrastructure, and emphasizing past grievances, including atrocities committed by the Algerian military during the Civil War, and even harkening back to atrocities committed by the French in the War for Independence of the early 1960s. The GSPC's efforts, however, did not find resonance in the war-weary Algerian populace. Though the reconciliation process was not a complete success — it only provided amnesty to repentant ex-combatants and did not address pacification of current combatants — it did dissuade released prisoners from joining the GSPC.<sup>29</sup>

Some argue, however, that the GSPC's weakening was actually to its benefit. "Indeed, in shedding its moderate members, the GSPC donned an even more extremist view, where the idea of political negotiation had dissolved, its goals were parallel to Al Qaeda's grander designs, and the stage was finally set for a merger with the global terrorist network."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Hajji, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Hajji, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Grillo.

## Becoming Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Retrospectively, analysts have traced the GSPC's activities and rhetoric in the latter years of its existence to identify its series of moves toward alignment with Al Qaeda. GSPC communiqués expressed ideological solidarity with other Islamist groups, including the Chechens in Russia and Al Qaeda in Iraq,<sup>31</sup> and the group's ties with international Islamists are believed to have begun within Algerian Diaspora. During the Black Decade, Algerian Islamist groups had few connections outside Algeria except for some fundraising in Europe. However, as the conflict progressed, Algerians in exile began seeking ties with other similar groups in exile including those from Palestine, Kashmir, and Chechnya.<sup>32</sup> This was reflected in operations at home as the group shifted its rhetoric to focus on the global jihad and international targets (in line with Al Qaeda's mission and rhetoric),<sup>33</sup> and it adopted communications tactics reflective of those of Al Qaeda. In 2005, Al Qaeda publically praised the GSPC, marking the first time it publically praised a group outside of its affiliation.<sup>34</sup>

In a September 2006 video, Al Qaeda deputy Al-Zawahiri stated, “We pray to God that the GSPC will be a thorn in the throats of the American and French Crusaders and their allies (...) this should be a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the traitors and apostate sons of France.”<sup>35</sup> Two days later, on September 14, the GSPC responded with a communiqué,

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<sup>31</sup> See Hajji (40) for a more detailed analysis.

<sup>32</sup> Willis, 194.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Black, “AQIM’s Expanding Internationalist Agenda,” *Combating Terrorism Center* 1, no. 5 (April 2008): 12–14.

<sup>34</sup> Hajji, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Guidere.

"We are glad to inform our Islamic nation and our Muslim brothers around the world about the great news which the *Mujahedeen* have been waiting for... the news of the merging of the *Salafist* Group for Prayer and Combat in Algeria with Al-Qaeda, ... We have decided to swear *Bayat* to Sheikh Osama Ben Laden and to continue our *jihad* in Algeria as soldiers under his command, for him to use us in the cause of Allah when and where he sees fit..."<sup>36</sup>

To complete the transition, on January 24, 2007, the GSPC announced its name change to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which some purport, was supposed to be an umbrella group — one "Maghreb brand"<sup>37</sup> — for all those waging jihad in North Africa and the Sahel.<sup>38</sup>

## CHAPTER 2: Conceptual Background

### Domestic v. Transnational Terrorism in Weak States

Beginning in the early 2000s, in the first years of the Global War on Terror, it became widely accepted that "Weak and failing states have arguably become the single most important problem for international order."<sup>39</sup> This theory has significantly shaped international counterterrorism strategy since that time. Especially in North and West Africa, the theory purports, "[v]ast distances, weak states, dispersed populations, and deep poverty all leave these lands susceptible to cross-border crime and insurgency. Opportunities for smuggling and other

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<sup>36</sup> Kohlmann, "Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria."

<sup>37</sup> Grillo.

<sup>38</sup> Hajji, 46.

<sup>39</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, "The Rise and Fall of the Failed-State Paradigm," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140347/michael-j-mazarr/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-failed-state-paradigm> (accessed December 28, 2014).

illegal activities are widespread, and regional powers' capacities—and sometimes motivation—for combating them are very limited.”<sup>40</sup> Under this set of assumptions, it follows that states without control of their territory can more easily serve as safe-havens for terrorist groups, provide venues for training camps, and operational control centers for active movements.

It comes as no surprise that the countries where AQIM has been known to operate can be broadly categorized as weak. According to the 2014 Fragile States Index, those in the Sahel rank in the "alert" and "very high warning" categories: Niger (19), Mauritania (28), Mali (36), and Burkina Fasso (39), while the states in North Africa fare better with all except Libya falling into the "high warning" classification, despite their prevalence of terrorism: Libya (41), Algeria (71), Tunisia (78), Morocco (92).<sup>41</sup> While the weak states model explains the incidence of terrorism in northern Mali and western/rural Tunisia, where terrorists have taken root in each country's ungoverned regions, Algeria serves as a counter-example. The weak states model predicts that states with stronger government control would have less conflict; however, Algeria has had the highest levels of terrorism in North Africa for decades (excluding Libya), despite the fact that it has strong (and often repressive) state control, a powerful military, and relatively widespread control of its territory.

To explain this phenomenon, the study of terrorism must be further broken down to distinguish between domestic and transnational groups. A few terrorist datasets make this distinction, and have concluded that there are significant differences between the *effects* of

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, "North Africa's Menace, AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response," RAND Corporation (2013), 6.

<sup>41</sup> "Fragile States Index 2014," Fund for Peace, 2014, <http://ffp.statesindex.org/rankings-2014> (accessed December 29, 2014).

domestic versus transnational groups on state stability and economic development.<sup>42</sup> But what about considering the other direction: what *causes* a state to be susceptible to transnational versus domestic terrorism? And what strategies can be implemented to mitigate those causes?

Statistical studies have demonstrated the link between domestic and transnational terrorism, showing that “countries plagued by transnational terrorist attacks on their interests at home or abroad cannot ignore a flare-up of domestic terrorism, because such contingencies raise transnational terrorist attacks with a lag.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, there are implications for neighboring countries: high incidence of domestic attacks in one country leads to a rise in transnational terrorism in the region over time. “Shocks to domestic terrorist events impact transnational terrorism out to 10 quarters into the future. This realization means that prime-target countries for transnational terrorism must devise counterterrorism policies that also account for the spillover of domestic terrorism.”<sup>44</sup>

The weak state model may explain North Africa’s terrorist incidents of the last two decades, from Algeria’s Civil War up to the Arab Spring: weak states with unsatisfactory political and social conditions leave civilians room for and motivation to rebel. Additionally, when the state is repressive (i.e. Algeria), the tactics adopted by those rebellions often take the form of terrorism. Once a domestic movement is underway, transnational groups may lend

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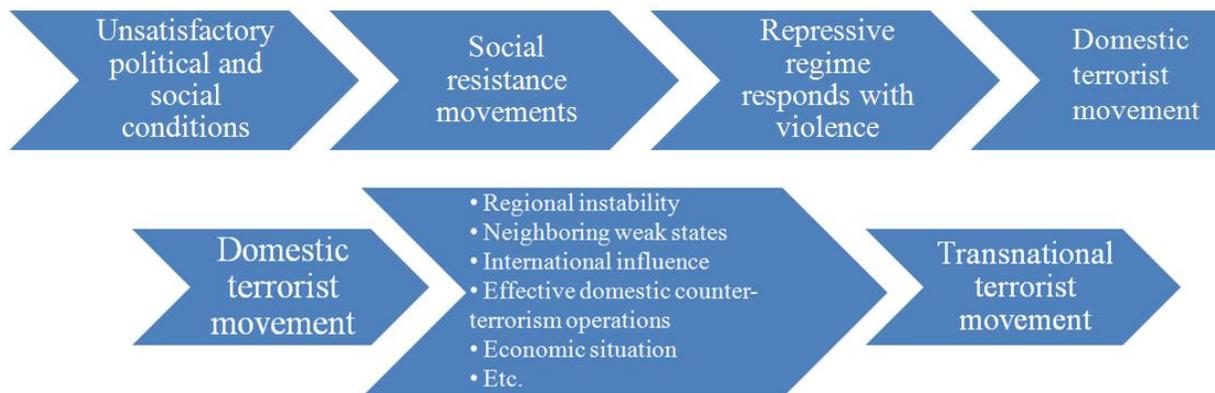
<sup>42</sup> “For example, the study of the impact of terrorism on economic growth necessitates a distinction between domestic and transnational terrorist events, because the latter can have a larger influence by scaring away growth-promoting foreign direct investment and requiring expensive border defenses. In a different instance, economic discrimination directed at domestic minority groups is more apt to be a root cause of domestic, but not transnational, terrorism.” Walter Enders, Todd Sandler, and Khusrav Gaibulloev, “Domestic Versus Transnational Terrorism: Data, Decomposition, and Dynamics,” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 48 no. 3 (May 2011): 319-337.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

support to gain a foothold in the country (for example, AQIM, a mostly Algerian group, took advantage of the weakness of the Malian state and offered assistance to the Malian Tuareg resistance movement in 2012/13, gaining AQIM power within Mali), or domestic groups may cross borders to seek safe havens from which to conduct their operations and thereby become transnational (for example, AQIM established bases in the Chaambi region of western Tunisia in 2013 and from there conducted attacks into Algeria as well as in that area of Tunisia). These examples demonstrate that the link between state weakness and transnational terrorism is secondary to the link between state weakness and domestic terrorism. Thus, the cause of domestic terrorism is unsatisfactory domestic conditions, while the cause of transnational terrorism is, in part, the incidence of domestic terrorism.

**Figure 1: A System of Domestic and Transnational Terrorism**



\*This graphic is exemplary, designed to illustrate a concept of the relationship between domestic and transnational terrorism. It is not intended to encompass all causes of either type of terrorism.

## Counterterrorism Strategy in Weak States

Today the lines between domestic and transnational groups in North Africa are blurred. It is almost impossible to distinguish between domestic and transnational terrorist attacks, as

domestic groups fighting towards domestic political goals may include foreign fighters and transnational groups align their objectives with domestic groups to gain footholds in weak states.

There are domestic, regional transnational, and also international (i.e., Al Qaeda, ISIS) groups to be considered, none of which operate in isolation.

Prescribed strategy to combat transnational threats requires more resources than combating domestic threats<sup>45</sup> because in the case

of transnational threats, “border defenses are needed along with homeland security measures.”<sup>46</sup>

In many cases transnational strategies may also require direct intervention into another country, or coordination with a neighboring country’s security forces. We see this now in the case of Algeria, which in October 2013 ended its policy of non-intervention on foreign soil and began conducting joint operations into Tunisia to combat AQIM based in Jebel Chaambi.<sup>47</sup>

This discussion suggests that the most effective way to prevent the spread of transnational terrorism is to address domestic terrorism issues by fostering states that both control their territory and represent the interests of citizens. The GIA is a prime example of a failure to effectively address domestic terrorism: the Algerian state did not fully control its

**Map 2: Jebel Chaambi, Tunisia**



<sup>45</sup> "Defensive overspending occurs as countries attempt to divert the attack abroad; proactive underspending follows as countries try to free ride on other countries' efforts. These tendencies are not anticipated for domestic terrorism because all externalities associated with counterterrorism measures can be internalized by the central government (Sandler, 2010)." Enders et al.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammad Ben Ahmed, "Sahel, Maghreb Nations Mobilize Against Terrorism," *Al Monitor*, October 29, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/security/2013/10/sahel-maghreb-algeria-tunisia-mali-anti-terror-operations.html#> (accessed December 28, 2014).

territory, nor did it have the support of the civilian population. Algerian operations against the GSPC exemplify a failure of effective transnational counterterrorism, which requires, in addition to preventing a group from burrowing into the population, the additional components of preventing transnational operations — namely, hardening borders, gaining new security capacity to prevent mobility, and regional coordination. The GSPC and AQIM especially were thinking globally (i.e. ascribing to the ideology of jihad) while acting locally. It is critical that counterterrorism practitioners understand groups' domestic-transnational linkages and adapt counterterrorism strategy to combat the threat.

### **Evolution of Thought on AQIM: Literature Review**

As stated in the introduction, a number of scholars and regional experts have asked and answered the question, *Is AQIM primarily an Algerian nationalist movement or a transnational ideologically driven terrorist organization?* We see from the immediately preceding section on domestic versus transnational threats in weak states that the answer to this question is central to both understanding groups' operations and developing effective counterterrorism strategies. During the Civil War of the 1990s, the GIA's and GSPC's movements were almost exclusively national in nature. Since the cease-fire, however, the motivations within the group shifted, and scholars came to various conclusions on the group's objectives depending on the mode of analysis and most recent domestic and international events. The following abbreviated literature review by no means covers all opinions on the group since 2008, but rather is designed to give an overview of prevalent scholarship of AQIM in recent times.

In 2008, Andrew Black wrote a report for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point that used content analysis of AQIM and GSPC statements from March 2005-March 2008 to

conclude that "the group has progressively shifted to a stronger focus on an internationalist agenda." Black cited increasing attacks on international targets, especially in Mauritania, as evidence supporting his conclusion.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, also in 2008, Anneli Botha argued that AQIM had realized that its national objectives were impossible to achieve, and thus the group became internationalized to justify its existence. Botha asserts that AQIM likely is not directly operationally linked to Al Qaeda; rather, their ties are ideological. According to Botha, this shared ideology will lead AQIM to both continue operations within Algeria and increase operations internationally.<sup>49</sup>

In 2009, Khalifa Hajji published his Master's thesis through the Naval Postgraduate School evaluating three hypotheses regarding the future of AQIM after its merger with Al Qaeda: "(1) This merger is merely an ideological one without operational implications; (2) this merger is ideological, operational, and logistical; or (3) this merger is merely a rebranding of a failing organization that needed to survive and, therefore, is not a genuine threat to the United States and its European allies." He concludes that hypothesis three is the best explanation for the merger, notably in contrast to the conclusion of Black and Botha just one year earlier. Hajji pointed out that Black's conclusions "were based essentially on open resources especially local media under the government control."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Black.

<sup>49</sup>Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: the Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, (Praetoria, South Africa: Institute of Security Studies) 2008, 204.

<sup>50</sup> Hajji, 7.

In 2010, Stephen Harmon asserted that with its rebranding, AQIM became dedicated to focusing on global jihad targeting the "far enemy."<sup>51</sup> He notes that AQIM became a "local group with global objectives," and shifted its activities "from armed assaults, to more terror-oriented operations such as bombings and kidnappings; while its rhetoric centered more on anti-Western government proclamations and global Jihad, than regime change in Algeria."<sup>52</sup> Harmon partially ascribes this shift to the US invasion of Iraq, which he cites as an important recruiting tool for Al Qaeda in North Africa, as Islamists employed rhetoric around an existential threat from the West to generate support for their cause.

GSPC and Al Qaeda expert Camil Tawhil published an analysis as Al Qaeda was about to name a successor to Bin Laden in 2011, noting that the reason Droukdel may have told the French to negotiate directly with Bin Laden to free French hostages taken by AQIM might be that "Droukdel may have been under pressure to justify why he switched his policy to kidnap-for-ransom in the Sahel region in the south, instead of continuing the military jihad against the Algerian government in the north." He explains that it was through Al-Zawahiri that the GSPC was able to connect with Al Qaeda in the first place, and thus if Al-Zawahiri is to take power of Al Qaeda (which he did), Droukdel would likely have more influence with Al Qaeda's leadership.<sup>53</sup> He concludes by abstractly referencing weak states and international threats,

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The evolution of an Algerian Islamist terrorist group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and its implications for the Sahara-Sahel region," *Concerned African Scholars*, Bulletin No. 85 (Spring 2010), 12.

<sup>52</sup> "Analysis: Fresh approach needed to quell terrorism threat in the Sahel," IRIN, October 7, 2010, <http://www.irinnews.org/report/90703/analysis-fresh-approach-needed-to-quell-terrorism-threat-in-the-sahel> (accessed April 4, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> Camil Tawhil, "How Bin Ladin's Death Will Affect Al-Qa'ida's Regional Franchises," *CTC Sentinel*, Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point (May 2011): 6-8.

warning, "Libya is within AQIM's reach, and should that country descend into a long civil war, AQIM may try to deploy fighters and build cells inside Libyan territory. It could also attempt to launch attacks against Western targets in Libya or in the wider region."<sup>54</sup>

In a November 2013 hearing before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Thomas Joscelyn, emphasized the criminal elements within AQIM over its terrorist operations. As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the group started as an ideologically driven insurgency/terrorist movement; however, more recently it has become more criminal in its operations -- some say this criminality is towards the end of supporting its terrorist operations, while others (including Jocelyn) suggest that the group may be more a criminal organization tied together by ideology and increasingly dangerous capacity.

"Western analysts should be careful not to underestimate the current or future capabilities of al Qaeda's many branches. Prior to its takeover of much of Mali, the AQIM threat was widely viewed as a criminal problem. Kidnappings for ransom, contraband smuggling, and extortion were and remain key AQIM operations. But the organization and its allies have now demonstrated a much more lethal capability. They have proven capable of taking and holding territory in the absence of effective central government control. Given that some of the governments in North Africa have only a tenuous grip on power, AQIM and its allies may have the opportunity to acquire additional territory in the future. They

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

will continue to contest for control of parts of Mali, especially after the French withdraw their troops."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, in April 2014, Samuel L. Aronson published an analysis in *CTC Sentinel* that instead of evaluating the relative national versus international threat posed by AQIM, looks at "two typologies of motivation—criminal kidnap-for-ransom and politically-motivated terrorism" to determine whether the group is transitioning from the former to the latter. This assumes that AQIM, before the beginning of France's Operation Serval in early 2013, was primarily a criminal group, which is reflective of the way many Western governments viewed AQIM. He concludes that groups operating in the Sahel — Belmokhtar's group and Boko Haram and its associates — are moving towards the politically-motivated terrorism model, posing a significant threat to Western-owned natural resource infrastructure and using ideology secondarily to justify their criminal acts.<sup>56</sup>

What we see from looking at the evolution of perspectives on AQIM is that they appear to be heavily reactive and conclusions are largely derived from international geopolitical events. The fear of expansionism, as expressed in both 2008 analyses (Black and Botha) came in the wake of the group's 2007 alignment with Al Qaeda, and was based more on analysis of rhetoric than of actual operations. Hajji's 2009 piece swings in the opposite direction, potentially due to the fact that the international threat foretold by his intellectual predecessors had failed to materialize. Hajji's report, however, is focused on AQIM operations within Algeria, North

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Political, Economic, and Security Situation in Africa," Congressional Testimony, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, November 21, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Samuel L. Aronson, "AQIM'S Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (April 2014): 6-9.

Africa, and dormant or supportive cells in Europe, so some might argue that his conclusions are of limited relevance due to the fact that in the time period of his assessment, AQIM was growing its base and increasing operations in Mauritania and Mali. Harmon's look at shifts in tactics, as well as reactivity to the ongoing war in Iraq, led him to conclude that AQIM was in fact an international threat. Tawhill's analysis takes this conclusion as a contextual assumption, shaping his description of the group around international events, namely the death of Bin Laden. And finally, Joscelyn's testimony was given in the wake of what was widely perceived to be a successful French intervention to stop the spread of violent extremism in northern Mali. At the time, AQIM had recently engaged in high-profile kidnappings, and was broadly perceived by Western governments as an increasing international threat.

Recent counterterrorism activities, plus major shifts in AQIM's structure, make it difficult to accurately assess the current perspective on AQIM's operations, especially in light of the rise of ISIS. At a UN briefing in May 2014, the internationalist perspective seems to dominate, as it stated, "The shift in geographical focus of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in particular demonstrates this adaptability. AQIM militants have moved away from Mali and Algeria to regroup in southern Libya. This combined trend of localization and globalization demonstrates the need for the Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee to maintain a global approach while at the same time constantly assessing and re-assessing the threat."<sup>57</sup> Whether the current perspective is based on actual assessment of the group's actions or rather based on assumptions stemming from

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<sup>57</sup> "Chair's Briefing to the Security Council," Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) Concerning Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities. May 28, 2014.

previous conclusions and formed in response to recent geopolitical dynamics and counterterrorism strategy has yet to be seen and is part of what this paper seeks to assess.

## CHAPTER 3: AQIM Today

### Ideology

Salafism derives from the teachings of the thirteenth-century scholar, Hanbali jurist Ibn Ta,<sup>58</sup> and lays out three missions: "to implement Sharia law, to maintain the unity of the Islamic *umma* by spreading Sharia, and finally to teach and 'safeguard the heritage' of Sharia law."<sup>59</sup>

Modern Salafism is based on Sayyid Qutb's teachings (popularized by Al Qaeda), and is focused on reestablishing the Caliphate by eliminating secular regimes and reinstating its interpretation of "pure" Islam. What is often termed Salafi-jihadism is anti-modernism, anti-secularism, and anti-Westernization and has resonated with many Algerians from the time of the GIA to the present day. Salafi-jihadism is inherently violent, as it "compels the actor to promulgate and champion the establishment of the Caliphate immediately and by any means necessary,"<sup>60</sup> and was increasingly integrated into the GSPC's ideology as it aligned with Al Qaeda from 2000-2006.<sup>61</sup>

Salafism is opposed to nationalism, as nationalism is a modern Western construct and thus "incompatible with Sharia moral code."<sup>62</sup> Therefore, Salafi-jihadists call for the elimination of

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<sup>58</sup> Harmon, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Grillo.

<sup>60</sup> Grillo.

<sup>61</sup> Harmon, 15.

<sup>62</sup> Grillo.

any "political wings" of their organizations, because in their eyes to negotiate or compromise is to muddy the purity of the doctrine.<sup>63</sup>

### **GSPC Ideology**

In its beginnings, however, the GSPC did not focus on the anti-nationalism and anti-dialogue aspects of Salafism and instead honed in on the "near enemy," with the stated operational mode of not targeting civilians. The "near enemy" implicates impure Muslim society—in this case, the apostate Algerian government that the GSPC viewed as complicit with the West.<sup>64</sup> Though the GSPC expressed ambitions to target outside of Algeria, its operations were primarily within Algeria. The anti-Western perspective is illustrated in a letter from Hittab to the Algerian people in September 2005:

"This Algerian regime allowed the installation of the U.S. military bases in the South of Algeria, It (Algerian regime) sold the oil wells and gas fields to multi-nationals... It worked with the former colonizers armies... it changed the code nationality...it canceled the chain of Islamic studies...But in all this, it did not consult the people even for once..."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Hajji, 35.

And regarding its relationship with the Algerian government, Hattab declared that, “There were only the people of the truth (Al-Haqq) and the people of perdition (Ahl Al-Zalat)...The Mujahedeen of the GSPC are of course in correct path while all others are in the wrong way...”<sup>66</sup>

The primary reason the GSPC's leaders split from the GIA was because the GIA brutally, and in the GSPC founders' view, excessively targeted civilians. Legitimacy of targets is a debated point in Salafi-jihadism, and interpreted in different ways by various groups. Within Sharia Law, there is no notion of "civilians;" rather, there is the classification of "harbīs" those who can be killed and those who cannot be killed. Those who can be killed are adult men, and those who cannot be killed include women, children, the elderly, and the infirm.<sup>67</sup> As mentioned in the discussion of *takfir*, who is considered a legitimate target within the Muslim community can be determined by their loyalty to Islam and rejection of Western things and ideas. Al Qaeda itself had cut off ties with the GIA due to its excessive targeting of Muslim civilians in the late 1990s,<sup>68</sup> so at least in the beginning not targeting civilians was central to the GSPC's ideology.

### AQIM Ideology

As the GSPC strengthened its ties with Al Qaeda, it shifted its *stated* focus from the "near enemy" to the "far enemy." Black's 2008 analysis of AQIM rhetoric from March 2005 through March 2008 reflects this shift, concluding that its rhetoric reflects an increased focus on targeting the West and Israel (though operations at the time of publication did not reflect this shift).<sup>69</sup> That

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ulph, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Harmon, 14.

<sup>69</sup> Black.

study, however, did not analyze data on other international targets, and others argue that AQIM's primary foreign targets are France and Spain, despite the fact that no AQIM attacks have occurred in either.<sup>70</sup> At its inception, AQIM had three major goals: to unite jihadists in the region, to recruit suicide bombers to send to Iraq and Afghanistan, and to carry out attacks in Europe and the US.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the GSPC's at least purported willingness to compromise and some restraint in targeting,<sup>72</sup> Al Qaeda's Salafi-jihadists repeat the slogan: "Jihad and the rifle alone...no dialogue."<sup>73</sup> Thus, AQIM has taken the perspective that it will not compromise, negotiation, or association in any way with the Algerian government. Salafists believe there are some loop-holes in the restrictions on targeting, including Qutb's concept of "guilt by association." Qutb "argued for the culpability of Muslims who associate themselves, even peripherally, with a jāhilī ('pre-Islamic', 'pagan') institution – thus laying the groundwork for collateral Muslim casualties." Additionally, he put forth the idea of *tatarrus* ("shielding"), which justifies using Muslims who in other circumstances would not be legitimate targets as shields, "if there was the definitive certainty of the predicted benefit for the Muslims."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Council on Foreign Relations, Backgrounders*, January 8, 2014, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations-and-networks/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim/p12717> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Grillo.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ulph, 54.

## Leadership

AQIM so far has proved unable to become significantly more "Maghrebi" than the GSPC. Despite rumors about the incorporation of Moroccan or Tunisian cadres, the senior leadership remains homogenously Algerian.<sup>75</sup> However, notably, leadership of the brigades in Mali is almost exclusively Mauritanian. This could be reflective of both an attempt to broaden the scope of AQIM's recruiting, as well as being reflective of the lack of support for AQIM within the Malian population.

To fully understand AQIM's evolution of objectives, it is important to understand the progression of its leadership, from Hassan Hattab leading the GSPC to today's leader in the North, Abdelmalek Droukdel. Currently, AQIM's leadership structure is unclear, with the division between the North and South widening through 2013, and a major split occurring when Mokhtar Belmokhtar left (or was expelled from) the group in September 2013. An analysis of its leaders — their backgrounds, ideologies, rhetoric, and operations — gives insight into the group's strategy. And a (as clear as possible) mapping of the group's current structure is critical to informing all further analysis.

### *Hassan Hattab*

Hassan Hattab joined the GIA after the 1992 cancelation of elections and soon rose to become Emir of the "second zone" which included Kabylie and eastern parts of Algiers.<sup>76</sup> In

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<sup>75</sup> Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Spring 2009), 225.

<sup>76</sup> "What Happened to Hassan Hattab and Amari Saïfi (alias Abderrezak El Para)?" *Algeria Watch*, December 20, 2008, [http://www.algeria-watch.org/en/hr/followup\\_hrc.htm](http://www.algeria-watch.org/en/hr/followup_hrc.htm) (accessed December 28, 2014).

1996, he split off from the GIA, denouncing the group's harsh targeting of civilians, and became Emir of the GSPC, with the goal of creating an Islamic state in Algeria.<sup>77</sup> He was "one of the first who defected from the GIA...and disassociated themselves from the massacres it had claimed."<sup>78</sup> In the early 2000s, the GSPC suffered internal disputes over the groups' objectives and focus. Hattab was on the "losing" side of the GSPC divide, due to his belief and advocacy for the GSPC to continue to focus exclusively on the "near enemy," the jihad in Algeria, rather than the "far enemy," sending fighters to the insurgency in Iraq.<sup>79</sup> America's 2003 invasion of Iraq intensified the debate, which further escalated when Hattab began advocating that the GSPC negotiate with the government. The GSPC council voted for "Active support to the brothers Iraqis," thus, Hattab was forced to abdicate (there are conflicting reports of whether or not this abdication was voluntary<sup>80</sup>) GSPC leadership to Nabil Sahrawi in August 2003.<sup>81</sup> As previously mentioned, some analysts suggest that this decision to support the international jihad was a face-saving measure, as many group members believed that the war in Algeria was lost.<sup>82</sup>

Into 2007 Hattab refused to surrender and take advantage of reconciliation deals offered by the government, and continued to hide in the mountains outside of Algiers.<sup>83</sup> Hattab is "cautious by nature" and feared trusting promises made by the security services, especially

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<sup>77</sup> "Murder in the Maghreb," *The Economist*, February 15, 2007,

[http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story\\_id=8706454](http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=8706454) (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>78</sup> Camille Tawil, "Salafists Invade Algiers - Part I," Camille Tawil, October 30, 2007,

<http://camilletawil.blogspot.com/2007/10/salafists-invade-algiers-part-i.html> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>79</sup> Hajji.

<sup>80</sup> Camille Tawil, "New Strategies in al-Qaeda's Battle for Algeria". *Terrorism Monitor*, issue 7 (22), July 27, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Filiu, 221.

<sup>82</sup> Hajji.

<sup>83</sup> Tawil, "Salafists Invade Algiers - Part I."

because any cooperation might damage his credibility as an Islamist.<sup>84</sup> However, eventually he did give in to the security services. Hattab is still alive today, and lives in Algiers under their protection in exchange for continuing to attempt to convince jihadists to lay down their arms.<sup>85</sup>

### *Nabil Sahrawi*

The new leader of the GSPC, Nabil Sahrawi (alias Mustapha Abou Ibrahim), had been Hattab's deputy but differed from him in that he supported continued violent jihad in Algeria, plus global expansion.<sup>86</sup> Sahrawi took over leadership of the GSPC in August 2003. He only led the GSPC for one year, and in that time he pledged allegiance of the group to the Taliban and Al Qaeda, making the group's first concrete moves towards formal alignment with the international jihad.<sup>87</sup> He was killed in a shoot-out with government forces in June 2004, and succeeded by Abdelmalek Droukdel.<sup>88</sup>

### *Abdelmalek Droukdel*

After Sahrawi's death in June 2004, Abdelmalek Droukdel (alias Abu Musab Abdul Wadud) took over as Emir of the GSPC and continues to lead AQIM today. In the post-9/11 debate of whether the group should directly support pan-Islamic expansion (i.e., the insurgency in Iraq) or focus their resources on the jihad in Algeria, Droukdel led the pan-Islamist side against Hattab, eventually "winning" the debate and thus changing the group's goals. While the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> "Algérie, les repentis," *Jeune Afrique*, February 23-March 1, 2014.

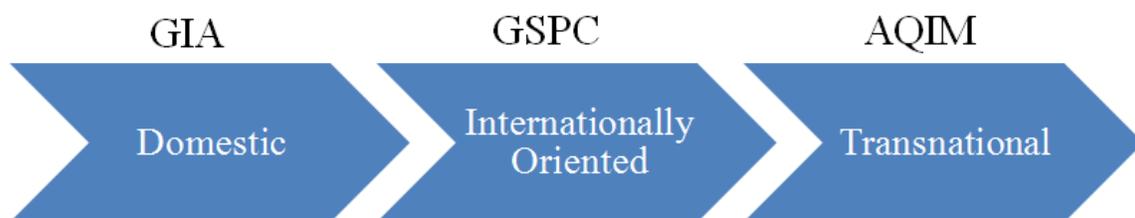
<sup>86</sup> Tawil, "New Strategies in al-Qaeda's Battle for Algeria."

<sup>87</sup> Guido Steinberg, "Towards a "political turn" in the fight against Jihadist terrorism," *Politique Etrangere* (2008): 175–187.

<sup>88</sup> "Algerian armed forces say rebel leader is killed," Reuters, June 21, 2004, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2004/06/21/2003175948> (accessed April 4, 2015).

GSPC at its start can be understood as internationally-oriented, due to their focus on jihadist ideology and connections with other national jihadi groups abroad, this decision to support the insurgency in Iraq was an inflection point when the group truly became transnational. The name-change a few years later was a formalization of this reality.

**Figure 2: Evolution of Rhetoric**



Droukdel was born in 1970 in Meftah, just south of Algiers.<sup>89</sup> Drawn to the Islamist cause, he became involved in Islamist activism after high school, acting upon FIS members' recommendation that he should study chemistry. He graduated in 1994, a year after he'd formally joined the GIA, and used his education to become a bomb maker and followed Hattab when he left the GIA to create the GSPC. Before becoming leader of the GSPC, Droukdel was known for co-leading (with Belmokhtar) 150 GSPC members to attack a Mauritanian military base in June 2005, killing 15 soldiers.<sup>90</sup>

Droukdel diligently built a relationship with Al Qaeda, seeing the opportunity to increase his own group's influence through alignment with a powerful international ally. After the formal

<sup>89</sup> Camille Tawil, "Algeria gas facility attack fuels jihadist rivalry," Camille Tawil, January 31, 2013, <http://camilletawil.blogspot.com/2013/01/algeria-gas-facility-attack-fuels.html> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Grillo.

declaration of alignment in January 2007, Droukdel explained, "The group had to change its name to show the truth of the connection." He then commanded his followers to conduct a campaign of suicide bombings, consistent with Al Qaeda's preferred tactics.<sup>91</sup>

As leader of the GSPC, Droukdel's experience as a bomb maker, as well as his courtship of Al Qaeda's favor, are reflected in the groups increasingly sophisticated tactics. In its first two major acts under its new name, Droukdel led AQIM to conduct two attacks via remote-controlled car bombs in February and April 2007. In the February attack, AQIM operatives exploded six cars simultaneously near the police center in Algiers,<sup>92</sup> and in the April attack, sent three cars full of 500-700kg of explosives each to the presidential palace, the Interpol headquarters, and the headquarters of the Special Forces police in Algiers. The car targeted at the presidential palace was operated by a suicide bomber, while the two were conducted via remote control. This level of sophistication in conducting simultaneous attacks indicates "the degree of its professional ranks."<sup>93</sup>

AQIM was on the rise from 2007 onwards, carrying out extensive operations throughout Algeria's southern regions and into neighboring countries. AQIM kidnapping revenues from 2009-2012 are estimated at \$65 million USD, with some reports claiming that over the course of 10 years -- 2003-2013 -- the group made over \$200 million USD. In that time period, the group was

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<sup>91</sup> L. Touchard, B. Ahmed, and Ch Ouazani, "Aqmi : Abdelmalek Droukdel, l'émir caché," *Jeuneafrique.com*, October 1, 2012, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/JA2698p024-033.xml2/algerie-mali-terrorisme-aqmiaqmi-abdelmalek-droukdel-l-emir-cache.html> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>92</sup> Hajji, 50.

<sup>93</sup> Hajji, 51.

known as the richest Al Qaeda affiliate.<sup>94</sup> AQIM reached (and some might say overreached) its height in 2012, when it gained a significant foothold in northern Mali through partnering with Tuareg rebels. In response, France deployed Operation Serval, and Algeria intensified its counterterrorism operations. Today, Droukdel is on the run from both the Algerian government and other Islamists. He is currently under trial, along with 40 of his fighters, (in absentia) for "intentional homicide premeditated ambush, membership in an armed terrorist group whose aim is to spread terror among the population and create a climate of insecurity," and "the harm to public safety, defense of terrorism and financing of an armed terrorist group."<sup>95</sup> Additionally, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has expressed interest in expanding ISIS's influence into the Maghreb, and Droukdel's AQIM is the primary obstacle. "In early fall 2014, al-Baghdadi's media spokesman called online for a fatwa against the AQIM emir, accusing him of kufr for refusing to swear allegiance to the self-styled caliphate."<sup>96</sup> Droukdel continues in his loyalty to Al Qaeda, and ISIS is considered too extreme even for them, though former (and possible continuing) affiliates, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya, Algeria's *Djound Al-Khalafa* under the leadership of former AQIM commander Abdelmalek El Gouri (alias Khaled Abou Souleiman), and Nigeria's Boko Haram have declared allegiance to ISIS.<sup>97</sup> Droukdal's resistance to pledging to al-Baghdadi could be, in part, more a personal issue — the two rose in the ranks of Al Qaeda

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<sup>94</sup> Tobias Feakin, "The New Frontiers of Islamist extremism: Understanding the threat that al-Qaeda affiliates pose to African Security," Australian Strategic Policy Institute Special Report, September 2014.

<sup>95</sup> "Terrorisme : Procès de Droukdel et Gouri à Alger," *Algérie-Focus*, December 22, 2014, <http://www.algerie-focus.com/blog/2014/12/terrorisme-proces-de-droukdel-et-gouri-a-alger/> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>96</sup> "North Africa: Daesh Looks to Usurp AQIM," *Maghrebia*, December 19, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201412220774.html> (accessed April 4, 2014).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

affiliate groups as peers and for Droukdel to recognize the superiority of al-Baghdadi might be to harmful to his pride and prestige within international terrorist movements.

Today, Droukdel's location is unknown, and the capacities of what is left of AQIM after the splintering of first Belmokhtar then Gouri, is unknown.

### *Mokhtar Belmokhtar*

Mokhtar Belmokhtar (which is the nom du guerre of Khaled Abu al-Abbas) is the former leader of AQIM south and currently leads his own group, Al-Mourabitoun. His nicknames include "One-Eye" (he lost an eye in Afghanistan in the 1990s), and "Mr. Marlboro" due to his fame for commanding smuggling routes throughout the region.

Belmokhtar was born in Ghardaia in central Algeria in 1972.<sup>98</sup> He went to fight in Afghanistan (and possibly Yemen) at the age of 19, then returned to Algeria to fight government paramilitaries for the GIA through the 1990s.<sup>99</sup> Through these experiences he learned "that wars do not necessarily end, that victory is achieved through the humiliation of your enemies, rather than military conquest."<sup>100</sup>

Like Droukdel, Belmokhtar followed Hattab when he left the GIA to start the GSPC. Belmokhtar was leader of one of the southern brigades in the GSPC, and (along with Amari Saifi) maintained a "steady flow of funds" to the GSPC headquarters through smuggling goods

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<sup>98</sup> Tawil, "Algeria gas facility attack fuels jihadist rivalry."

<sup>99</sup> Robert Fisk, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the new face of al-Qa'ida (and why he's nothing like Osama bin Laden)," *The Independent*, January 24, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/mokhtar-belmokhtar-the-new-face-of-alqaida-and-why-hes-nothing-like-osama-bin-laden-8466057.html> (accessed April 4, 2015).

<sup>100</sup> Fisk.

and drugs, setting up fake roadblocks to extract "taxes," and demanding protection money from Tuareg traders. Some reports suggest that by 2005, the southern brigades "had overshadowed the northern division to control all of GSPC."<sup>101</sup> He moved easily through the deserts of southern Algeria, northern Mali, and parts of Mauritania, creating ties through marrying the daughters of local leaders and distributing "money to buy the silence of some and the complicity of others."<sup>102</sup> Thus, "while popular support could not always be guaranteed, it is likely that Belmokhtar has a network of supporters and sympathizers across the Sahel he can call on in times of need."<sup>103</sup>

Belmokhtar and Droukal had a rivalry that began when Droukdel was chosen over Belmokhtar to replace Sahrawi as leader of the GSPC in 2005,<sup>104</sup> and ultimately led Droukal to force Belmokhtar out of AQIM in September 2013. Allegedly, "Droukdel welcomed the flow of cash into the group but became concerned that his own leadership was under threat. Droukdel...also developed theological objections to Belmokhtar's criminal enterprises."<sup>105</sup> Belmokhtar was admonished by AQIM North for being "corrupt" and focusing more on trafficking than the jihad. The official line of AQIM was to present itself "as a virtuous and strict group," and Belmokhtar's forays into trafficking besmirched this image.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Grillo

<sup>102</sup> Touchard, Ahmed and Ouazani.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Camille Tawil, "Hot Issue: Was the Attack on Algerian Oil Facilities a Symptom of AQIM In-Fighting?" January 19, 2013, <http://camilletawil.blogspot.com/2013/01/hot-issue-was-attack-on-algerian-oil.html> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>105</sup> Tawil, "Algeria gas facility attack fuels jihadist rivalry."

<sup>106</sup> Jemal Oumar and Bakari Gueye, "Belmokhtar, Droukdel spar over Sahara," *Magharebia*, May 9, 2014, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2014/05/09/reportage-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2014/05/09/reportage-01) (accessed December 29, 2014).

In early 2012, concurrent with the Malian Tuareg rebellion, AQIM movements led by Yahya Abu Amar Abid Hammadou (alias Abdelhamid Abou Zeid) and Jemal Oukacha (alias Yahya Abu al-Hammam) took control of Timbuktu at the same time as Belmokhtar's group, which was still AQIM at the time, established an operational presence alongside AQIM splinter group the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest/Jamaat Tawhid wal Jihad fi Gharb Afrika, or MUJAO) in Gao, Mali. Relations between Belmokhtar and AQIM leadership had been deteriorating for months when in October 2012, Droukdel gave orders to strip Belmokhtar of his position.<sup>107</sup> In response, Belmokhtar released a video statement that he was splintering off to form Katibat al-Muqaoon bil-Dumaa (aka the Battalion of Those Who Sign with Blood, or Brothers of Blood, or Signatories in Blood) in December 2012. On December 3, Belmokhtar associate Oumar Ould Hamaha claimed that Katibat al-Muqaoon bil-Dumaa would operate "separate from AQIM but still under the ultimate command of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri."<sup>108</sup> Almost all of Belmokhtar's men followed him to join this "new trans-Saharan franchise of al Qaeda."<sup>109</sup>

Belmokhtar has a reputation as a "headstrong maverick" and is notorious for regularly falling out with AQIM leadership when he was part of the group, and now with Al Qaeda. "In an extraordinary 10-page letter, the jihadist was criticized by the Shura Council, the 14-man governing body of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, in which it called him a 'bleeding wound'

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<sup>107</sup> Tawil, "Hot Issue: Was the Attack on Algerian Oil Facilities a Symptom of AQIM In-Fighting?"

<sup>108</sup> "Band of brothers - Militant merger underlines ongoing Sahel security risks," JTIC Brief, Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor, October 11, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Tawil, "Algeria gas facility attack fuels jihadist rivalry."

among the then thriving Islamist factions in North Africa when he threatened to form a breakaway group."<sup>110</sup>

In its first public action, Katibat al-Muqaoon bil-Dumaa “claimed responsibility for a three-day siege of a gas facility...killing at least 49 people,”<sup>111</sup> most of which were foreign nationals, in January 2013 at the

Tigantourine gas plant near In Amenas,

Algeria.<sup>112</sup> This action was consistent

with the group’s objective to “attack French interests wherever they may be found.”<sup>113</sup> However, the group, which

later merged with MUJAO and was renamed Al-Mourabitoun (aka The Sentinels, or the Almoravids<sup>114</sup>), has not

claimed any attacks since its formation in August 2013.

Map 3: In Amenas, Algeria



The actual coordination of Belmokhtar’s group with Al-Mourabitoun is unclear. French forces claim to have killed two Al-Mourabitoun leaders in April 2014, neither of which was

<sup>110</sup> Robert Verkaik and Robert Mendick, "Al-Qaeda leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar sparks new jihadi terror threat," *The Telegraph*, July 13, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/10964077/Al-Qaeda-leader-Mokhtar-Belmokhtar-sparks-new-jihadi-terror-threat.html> (accessed April 4, 2014).

<sup>111</sup> "OSINT Summary: French army forces kill prominent Islamist militant commander in Mali," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - North Africa*, March 17, 2013.

<sup>112</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Bridget Moreng, and Kathleen Soucy, "Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia’s Shift to Jihad," (The Hague: International Centre for Counterterrorism) February 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Dario Cristiani, "Al-Murabitoun: North Africa's Jihadists Reach into History in Their Battle against European 'Crusaders'," *Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor Volume: 11 Issue: 19*, November 17, 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5295e2af4.html> (accessed December 30, 2014).

<sup>114</sup> Cristiani.

Belmokhtar. Now, the group numbers less than 100 mostly Malian combatants and operates in northern Mali and possibly into Libya. Its objectives are transnational, to unify jihadist groups "from the Nile to the Atlantic," and the Algerian government is still concerned that Al-Mourabitoun poses threats to energy targets in Illizi and Tamanrasset.<sup>115</sup>

After surviving a shoot-out with Chadian security forces in Northern Mali in 2013, as of July 2014 Belmokhtar is believed to have fled to Libya, with a \$5.1 million bounty on his head. He is currently suspected to be recruiting jihadis returning from the fight in Syria.<sup>116</sup> He "does not use modern mechanisms for communication, such as telephone and computer, but instructs verbally to a particular person and the latter circulates his instructions to a series of agents. It is the cluster method that has enabled him so far to evade arrest."<sup>117</sup>

#### *Abdelmalek El Gouri*

Abdelmalek El Gouri (alias Khaled Abou Souleiman) is from Boumerdes, a city about 25 miles east of Algiers. Like Droukdal and Belmokhtar, he fought for the GIA and GSPC, and before his September 2014 defection was the central regional commander of AQIM,<sup>118</sup> Droukdal's "right hand man."<sup>119</sup> He believed that AQIM should abandon their alignment with Al Qaeda and declare allegiance to ISIS and because Droukdel disagreed on this point, El Gouri

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<sup>115</sup> "Mauritania > NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS," Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - North Africa, March 4, 2015.

<sup>116</sup> Verkaik and Mendick.

<sup>117</sup> Jemal Oumar, "West Africa: ISIS Eyes Sahel," *Maghreb*, October 17, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201410201111.html> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>118</sup> Lamine Chikhi, "Splinter group breaks from al Qaeda in North Africa," *Reuters*, September 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/14/us-algeria-security-idUSKBN0H90G820140914> (accessed December 29, 2014).

<sup>119</sup> "Algerian army 'kills jihadist behind Herve Gourdel beheading,'" *BBC News*, December 23, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30587765> (accessed December 28, 2014).

split off and created his own group, Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria (*Djound Al-Khilafa en Algerie*, or Djound) in October 2014. "Their potential and capabilities are unclear, but security sources say the group may number as few as 20 hardcore former AQIM fighters."<sup>120</sup> The group's only action was to kidnap and behead on video a French hiker in the mountains of eastern Algeria in September 2014, in reaction to French support of US airstrikes in Iraq. "The new group will try hard to make some noise, but it will be very difficult to execute big terrorist actions as Algerian security forces have knocked out most of the armed groups in Algeria."<sup>121</sup>

### Organizational Structure

AQIM is believed to be very loosely organized, more like a federation of small groups tied together by one name and a broad set of goals than a coordinated network. In 2013, American General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated, "The way to think about North Africa and West Africa is (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."<sup>122</sup> He mentioned, but did not go on to explain, a regional "connective tissue" between Al Qaeda groups, which could be a combination of ideological and financial interests (i.e. the preservation of trafficking networks). Similarly, according to a 2013 Rand report,

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<sup>120</sup> "Factbox: Fractured mosaic of North Africa's militant groups," Reuters, October 1, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/factbox-fractured-mosaic-north-africas-militant-groups-052046831.html> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>121</sup> Chikhi, "Splinter group breaks from al Qaeda in North Africa."

<sup>122</sup> Leon S. Panetta, "Press Briefing by Secretary Panetta and General Dempsey from the Pentagon," U.S. Department of Defense, January 24, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5183> (accessed December 28, 2014).

"Within North Africa, AQIM is both increasingly large and increasingly amorphous. In general, as AQIM has expanded over the last five years, it has also grown far more diffuse. Although some observers still refer to AQIM as a single organization directed by a coherent leadership cadre, this image seems less and less to reflect the situation on the ground. As we highlighted earlier, the relationships between core AQIM in Algeria, its offshoots in the Sahel, their partners, and the broader jihadist currents in Libya and Tunisia are neither fixed nor hierarchical. Many of these groups are *sui generis*."<sup>123</sup>

However, there is no evidence that former spin-offs have chosen to realign with AQIM to carry out operations. Going back to the 1990s, the GIA continued to exist after the GSPC was established, but the groups never worked together. In 2012 and 2013 there were concerns that Belmokhtar's group might rejoin AQIM to coordinate operations, but thus far that has not been the case. It is too soon to tell whether the most recent spin-off, which had been led by now deceased El Gouri, will realign with AQIM. Considering they fundamentally differed on the subject of international alignment, and that ISIS has called for a fatwa against Droukhal and his followers (who have refused to pledge allegiance to the Caliphate), it seems unlikely that either side would welcome a reintegration.

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<sup>123</sup> Chivvis and Liepman, "North Africa's Menace, AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response."

Another recent spin-off, led by Abdessalam Tarmoune in Illizi (near the Algerian-Libyan border) and called The Movement of the Sons of the Sahara for Justice, entered into negotiations with the government, eventually accepting a truce and declaring its separation from AQIM in June 2014.<sup>124</sup> Tarmoune's group was founded in 2004 to defend the rights of people in the South. Though it was not originally aligned with AQIM, the groups eventually reconciled (likely sometime between 2011 and 2014), until the recent split.<sup>125</sup>

According to Jason Burke, Al Qaeda is "less an organization than an ideology...There is no longer a central hub for Islamic militancy. But the al Qaeda worldview, or 'al Qaedaism,' is growing stronger every day. This radical internationalist ideology...has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his precepts, models, and methods. They act in the style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense."<sup>126</sup> Shifts in AQIM strategy must be considered in the context of broader shifts in Al Qaeda strategy and ideology. Through the early 2000s, Western governments were horrified to discover (but eventually adapted to react to) terrorists organizations' networked structures, which enable cell or field commanders the mobility and independence to conduct operations with minimal contact with Al Qaeda central. Today, with increasable sophisticated communications and media campaigns

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<sup>124</sup> Mohammed Jaabouk, "'Daesh' s'approche du Maroc: L'Etat Islamique a désormais son antenne en Algérie," *Yabiladi*, September 16, 2014, <http://www.yabiladi.com/articles/details/29477/daesh-s-approche-maroc-etat-islamique.html> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>125</sup> "Ils demandent à l'ANP de ne plus bombarder les maquis de Tassili," *Algerie-Focus.com*, February 7, 2013, <http://www.algerie-focus.com/blog/2014/02/ils-demandent-a-lanp-de-ne-plus-bombarder-les-maquis-de-tassili/> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>126</sup> Jason Burke, "Think again: Al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, May 1, 2004, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/05/01/think\\_again\\_al\\_qaeda](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2004/05/01/think_again_al_qaeda) (accessed December 28, 2014).

coming out of Al Qaeda and ISIS, the violent jihad is becoming even more decentralized, to the point that it may *intentionally* have no center at all. Whether or not there is a direct command structure is becoming increasingly irrelevant as individuals or self-sustaining cells carry out their own versions of the jihad. Especially in the Maghreb, where lucrative kidnapping and trafficking activities enable financial independence, it is even more difficult to assert whom is connected with whom.

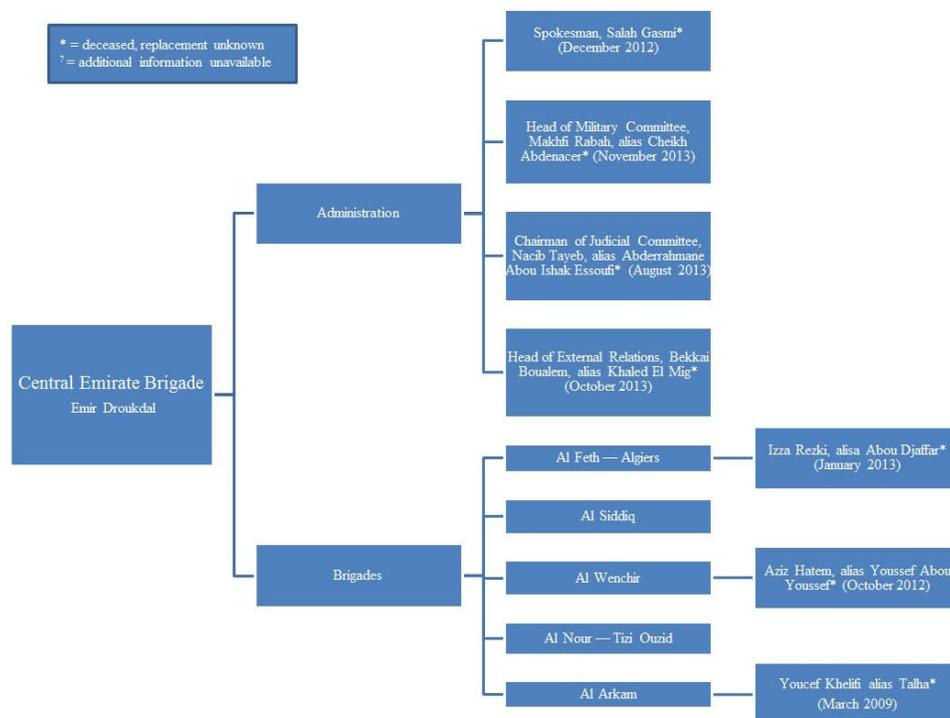
The following organizational charts depict AQIM's current organizational structure, created drawing on open source information.<sup>127</sup> AQIM leadership is made up of the Emir (currently Droukdal), the Council of Notables (majlis al 'ayan), and the Shura Council (majlis al shura). The Council of Notables includes the Emir, some regional commanders, heads of committees (military, judicial, political, and media), the chief financial officer, and communications officials. The Shura Council is the Council of Notables, plus heads of the

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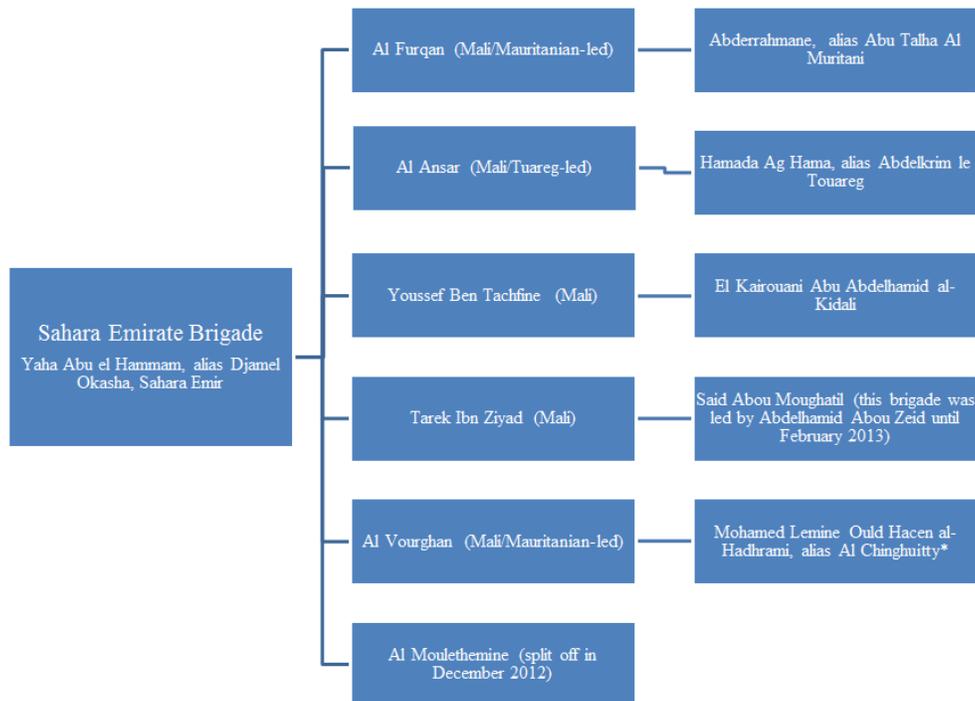
<sup>127</sup> "Al-Qaeda African branch replaces slain commanders in Mali," *AFP*, September 27, 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2013/09/27/Al-Qaeda-African-branch-replaces-slain-commanders-in-Mali.html> (accessed December 28, 2014); Greg Botelho and Laura Akhoun, "Military: French troops kill jihadist leader in northern Mali," *CNN World*, December 11, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/12/11/world/africa/jihadist-leader-killed-mali/> (accessed December 28, 2014); "Abou Zeid Dead: AQIM Confirms Death Of Al Qaeda Leader," *Reuters*, June 16, 2014, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/16/abou-zeid-dead-aqim-confirms-death-of-al-qaeda-leader\\_n\\_3450611.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/16/abou-zeid-dead-aqim-confirms-death-of-al-qaeda-leader_n_3450611.html) (accessed December 28, 2014); Mohamed Boufatah, "L'infirmier du Gspc abattu à Boumerdès," *L'expression*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.lexpressiondz.com/actualite/62736-L%E2%80%99infirmier-du-Gspc-abattu-%C3%A0-Boumerd%C3%A8s.html> (accessed December 28, 2014); Salim Bey, "Noureddine Yazid Zerhouni, Ministre de l'Intérieur Révèle '120 terroristes abattus en 7 mois,'" *L'Expression*, March 2, 2009, <http://www.lexpressiondz.com/mobile/mobile/actualite/63125-%C2%AB120-terroristes-abattus-en-7-mois%C2%BB.html> (accessed December 28, 2014); Andrew Hagen, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and their Networks," AEI Critical Threats Project, March 27, 2014, <http://www.slideshare.net/CriticalThreats/aqim-leaders-and-their-networks> (accessed December 28, 2014); Alain Rodier "Note D'Actualité N°349 Nouveaux Objectifs D'Al-Qaïda Au Maghreb Islamique," Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement, April 1, 2014, <http://www.cf2r.org/fr/notes-actualite/nouveaux-objectifs-al-qaïda-au-maghreb-islamique.php> (accessed December 28, 2014); Nazim Fethi, "Algeria arrests AQIM 'number two'" *Magharebia*, December 18, 2012, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/12/18/feature-03](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/12/18/feature-03) (accessed December 28, 2014).

military, political, media, and medical committees, and AQIM judges.<sup>128</sup> These organizational charts highlight two key points. The first is the decentralized nature of AQIM. As the charts show, there is minimal hierarchy in AQIM's structure, with the brigades operating immediately under the leadership. The second important takeaway is the number of deaths within AQIM brigade leadership. This is indicative of the success of Algerian and French counterterrorism operations throughout the region, as well as the lack of public knowledge about the fate of these brigades after their leaders' deaths.

**Figure 3: AQIM Organizational Structure**



<sup>128</sup> Andrew Hagen, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and their Networks," AEI Critical Threats Project, March 27, 2014, <http://www.slideshare.net/CriticalThreats/aqim-leaders-and-their-networks> (accessed December 28, 2014), slide 21.



## Patterns of Activity

The information in the following section is based on data compiled from Jane's Counterterrorism Database,<sup>129</sup> the Global Terrorism Database, and Algerian Ministry of Defense Press Releases from January 2011 through July 2014. The time period was chosen because January 2011 was when Ben Ali fled Tunisia, heralding the Arab Spring and forever changing the security apparatus and context in which terrorist groups operated in the region. In this analysis, the term "terrorist" is used loosely, and is based on the categorizations of the aforementioned sources. The "perpetrators" category include the following labels: terrorist,

<sup>129</sup> IHS Jane's Defense and Security, Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Events Database; National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2013). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>; "Official Statements," Ministry of Defense, Government of Algeria, [http://www.mdn.dz/site\\_principal/accueil\\_an.php#undefined](http://www.mdn.dz/site_principal/accueil_an.php#undefined) (accessed April 4, 2014).

AQIM, Ansar Al-Sharia, MUJAO, and unknown/not attributed. In this circumstance, "terrorist" refers to attacks perpetrated by alleged terrorists when it is not known which group they are affiliated with. This is because much of the data was derived from news reports, which often do not specify the associated group. In the following analyses I often assess AQIM and "terrorist" attacks together, as it can be assumed that many of the attacks within Algeria are related to AQIM affiliates. However, it should be noted that the Algerian government liberally tags any opposition as "terrorist activity." It is unlikely that the data presented is perfect, as tracking and reporting of terrorist activities and counterterrorism operations is unlikely to be completely accurate; however, as the following is largely an analysis of national and regional trends, the data is accurate enough to conduct the analysis and come to relevant conclusions.

### *Patterns of Activity: Algeria*

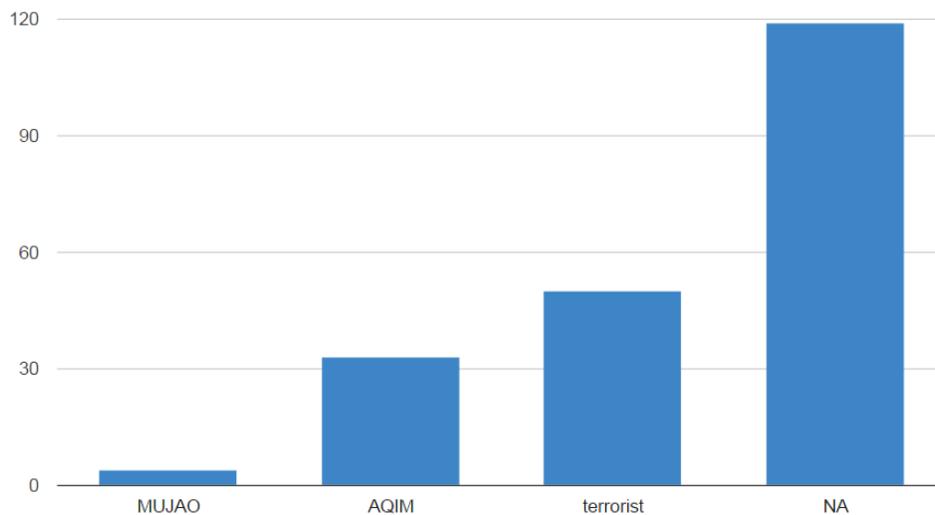
In Algeria, 401 terrorist-related incidents occurred from January 2011 through July 2014. Of these, 206 were perpetrated by "terrorists" (50), AQIM (33), MUJAO (4), and unknown attackers (119) targeting security forces, military personnel, or civilians (usually in the case of IED or suicide attack incidents). Most attacks in Algeria occur in and around Algiers, especially in Kabylie, the mountainous area east of the city that

**Map 4: Algerian Provinces**



covers parts of Tizi Ouzou (61 attacks), Boumerdes (48), and Bouria (31) provinces. Almost all alleged activity specifically attributed to AQIM occurred in this region, except for two incidents in Illizi in 2011 and one in Tebessa (near the Tunisian border) in 2014. Overall, most terrorist attacks targeted government security forces (148), but sometimes civilians were targeted (54 incidents).

**Figure 4: Terrorist Attacks in Algeria, January 2011-July 2014**



Reports claim that in 2010, AQIM launched fewer attacks than in past years, attributing this counterterrorism success to Algerian security forces' periodic sweeping operations targeting AQIM in the Kabylie region southeast of the capital.<sup>130</sup> "During the year, open source reports indicated that security forces killed or captured approximately 1,175 suspected

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<sup>130</sup> "Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb," National Counterterrorism Center, <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqim.html> (accessed April 4, 2015) ; Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria," *CTC Sentinel*, September 26, 2011, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/aqim-returns-in-force-in-northern-algeria> (accessed April 4, 2015).

terrorists.”<sup>131</sup> Since 2010, these sweeping operations have been ongoing and continue to the present with the most recent reported sweep occurring in November 2014.<sup>132</sup>

AQIM's operational tempo dropped through 2011 and into early 2012, due in part to successful counterterrorism operations conducted by Algerian security forces. However, low-level guerilla operations continued in northeast and eastern Algeria, and kidnapping continued as well, with reports claiming that due to kidnapping AQIM was the richest of Al-Qaeda's affiliate organizations.<sup>133</sup> In 2011, 78 terrorist attacks occurred, 16 of which were attributed to AQIM. In response, 53 counterterrorism operations occurred, interestingly much more broadly distributed across the country than the terrorist attacks. Periodic sweeps in Kabylie continued through 2011, and “over the course of the year, press reports indicated that security forces killed or captured approximately 800 suspected terrorists.” In addition to conducting operations in the northern-central provinces, security forces also carried out operations in the center of the country (El Oued and Tindouf) and in provinces bordering Tunisia (El Taref and Tebessa), and bordering Libya (Illizi and Tebessa).

Despite claims of a decrease in terrorist activity, the total number of attacks in 2012 (77) was almost exactly the same as in 2011 (78). Eighteen of these attacks were targeted at civilians, while the remainder targeted various security forces (military and police). The 45 fatalities and 104 injuries sustained by security forces in 2012 were mostly due to bombings and IED attacks,

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<sup>131</sup> "Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview," U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, Country Reports on Terrorism 2010, August 18, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170257.htm> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>132</sup> "Algeria: Army Kills One Terrorist in Jijel," Algeria Presse Service, November 28, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201412011266.html> (accessed December 30, 2014).

<sup>133</sup> Laub and Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)."

reflective of AQIM's preferred tactics (allegedly adopted from Al Qaeda<sup>134</sup>), and were mostly in Kabylie, thus they did not exhibit any unexpected patterns of distribution throughout the country. The attacks on civilians (5 fatalities and 40 injuries) occurred mostly around Algiers, but also one in each Tamanrasset and Boumerdes.

In 2013, Algeria's robust counterterrorism operations, as well as Operation Serval in Mali, began to effect change, with terrorists perpetrating only 43 attacks: 10 in Bouria, 13 in Tizi Ouzou, and the rest relatively distributed evenly among 15 other provinces (1-3 attacks in each). Another factor in the decrease in attacks was that the group was having difficulties with recruitment, "AQIM has not only suffered heavy losses among its top leaders in Mali, but also seems to be suffering from a shortage of North African jihadi recruits, many of whom appear to prefer to fight their jihad in Syria instead of joining AQIM ranks in their own Maghreb region."<sup>135</sup> In response, counterterrorism operations numbered 70, with 37 of those carried out by The Algerian People's National Army (APNA) and 33 by "security forces," which might include military, police, or national guard personnel. The highest count occurred in Tizi Ouzou (14), which is consistent with reports of regular sweeping operations in the area, but overall again we see that counterterrorism operations are more evenly distributed across the country than terrorist attacks. This could be due to a preventative strategy on the part of the Algerian government, or reflective of the Algerian security services tendency to legitimize any violent action under the umbrella of counterterrorism. In 2013 counterterrorism operations were carried out in provinces

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<sup>134</sup> William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Homeland Security & Counterterrorism Program Transnational Threats Project, Case Study No. 4 (September 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Camille Tawil, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Calls on North African Jihadists to Fight in Sahel, Not Syria," The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor Vol. 1 No. 6 (March 20, 2013).

bordering Mali, Niger, and Libya, likely in response to the January 2013 French intervention (Serval) that defeated Islamists in Mali and may have driven terrorists to flee their strongholds for refuge in bordering countries.

In the first half of 2014, terrorists perpetrated 8 attacks, killing 37 (35 security forces and 2 civilians), and injuring 6 civilians. All of these attacks occurred in the country's north, with one in March in Tebessa province, which borders Tunisia. This is in direct contrast to claims that terrorism in Algeria is moving to the peripheries, but could possibly reflect that AQIM has moved into Tunisia and Algerian counterterrorism operations are being conducted across the border.<sup>136</sup> In the same time period, security forces carried out 15 counterterrorism operations (14 of which were directly attributed to APNA). These included an operation along the Libyan border, where APNA seized two trucks carrying "40 Katyusha rockets and an unspecified number of SA-7 missiles in the Djanet town of Algeria's Illizi Province on 25 February;" the Malian border, where APNA stopped a "smuggling operation caught intercepting Seven (07) trucks transporting more than 174 tons of flour and other foodstuffs as well as one hundred eleven wide beds. Seventeen (17) Algerian and African people were also arrested during this operation. Recover and seizure four (04) automatic rifles Kalashnikov, one (01) semi automatic rifle and an amount of ammunitions and magazines over the commune's borders with Mali in the Operational Sector of Bordj Badji Mokhtar/ 6th military Region;" and one bordering Tunisia,

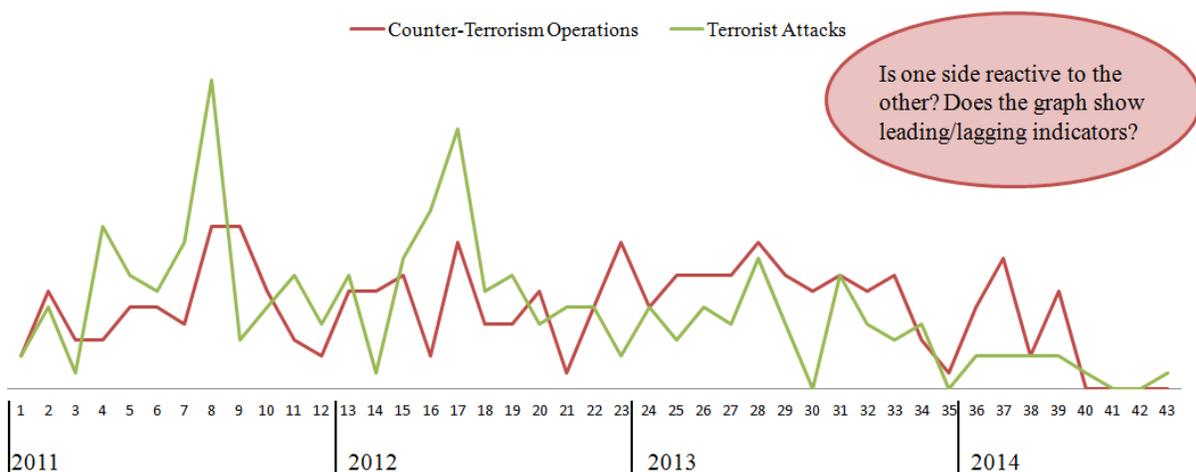
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<sup>136</sup> Omar Shabbi, "Jihadists coordinate on Tunisian-Algerian border."

where APNA uncovered a “small-arms, weapons caches, equipment, vehicles and ammunitions.”<sup>137</sup>

In assessing reported terrorist incidents in Algeria, however, it is important to note that the Algerian government labels virtually any dissident or criminal as a “terrorist.” Thus it is very likely that overall reporting overemphasizes the actual number of incidents, and it unlikely that all reported terrorist events involve members of official terrorist groups.

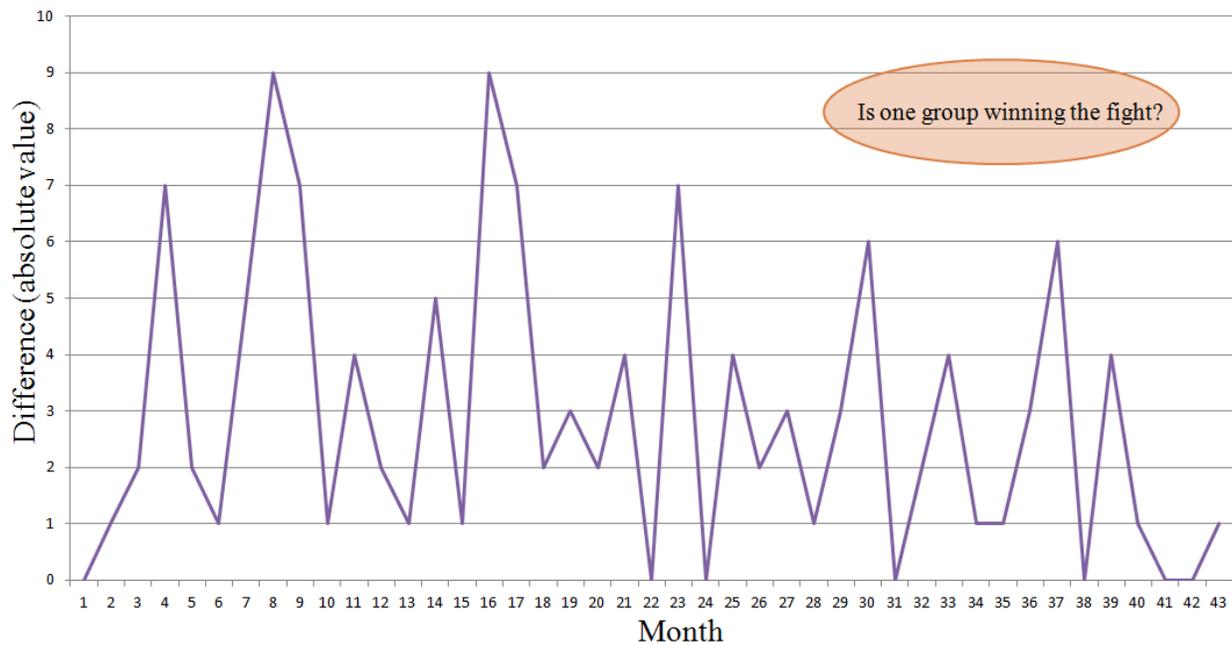
**Figure 5: Monthly Terrorist Attacks and Counterterrorism Operations in Algeria**



➤ No – There isn’t a relationship between CT operations and terrorist attacks – one is not noticeably responsive to the other month by month (i.e. we do not see a leading/lagging indicator situation).

<sup>137</sup> IHS Jane's Defense and Security, Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Events Database.

Figure 6: Difference between Counterterrorism Operations and Terrorist Attacks



➤No – Security forces and terrorist are relatively evenly matched over time and locked in to a tit-for-tat balanced relationship. Neither is gaining ground in the fight for Algeria.

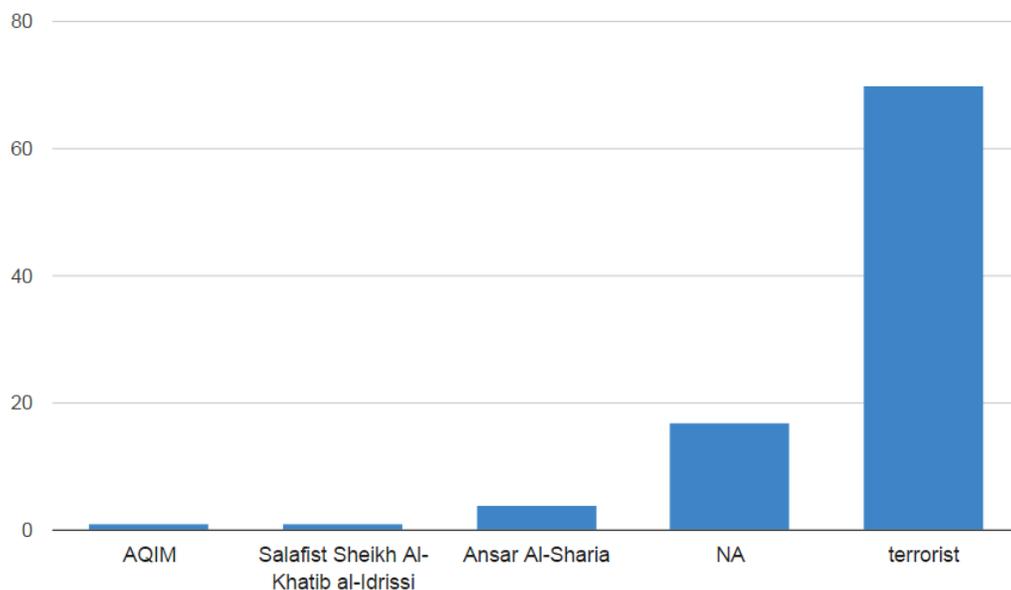
The above graphic shows that counterterrorism and terrorism operations are relatively equally matched over time – meaning that we do not see a leading/lagging indicator situation of attacks and counterterrorism operations (i.e. neither is directly related to the other along the vector of time). Because of the up-and-down nature of this graph we can infer that the tit-for-tat nature of their relationship is relatively balanced over time.

### *Patterns of Activity: Tunisia*

In late 2010/early 2011, Tunisia was the first country to undergo a revolution as part of the Arab Spring, and has been experiencing some terrorist activity since then, enabled by the weak government and security sector. Ansar Al-Sharia-Tunisia (AST) is allegedly tied to AQIM; however the degree of connection is unclear.

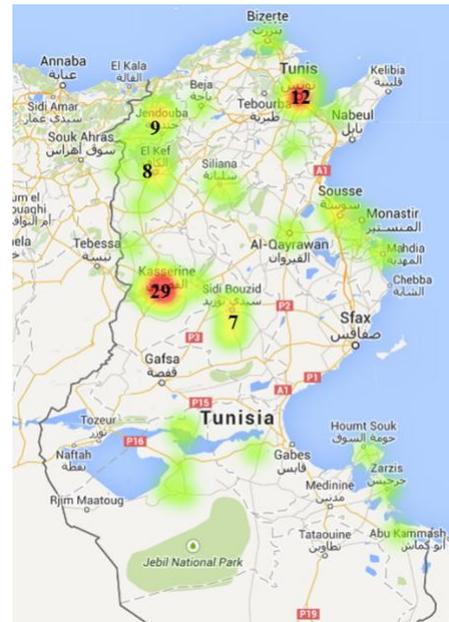
In Tunisia, 188 terrorist-related incidents (including terrorist attacks and counterterrorism operations) occurred from January 2011-July 2014. Incidents dramatically increased over this time period, from just eight in 2011, to 27 in 2012, to peak at 129 in 2013, then back down to 24 in the first half of 2014. The peak in activity in 2013 is due to the establishment of AQIM bases around Jebel Chaambi near Kasserine and the subsequent Tunisian and Algerian counterterrorism operations in that area. Since 2012 the concentration of incidents has shifted west, from the center of the country (Sidi Bouzie Governorate) and Tunis towards the Algerian border (Kasserine and Jendouba Governorates) in 2013, then remaining focused on both Kasserine and Tunis in 2014. Terrorist-related incidents taking place in governorates along the Tunisian/Algerian border include: Jendouba (6 in 2012, 6 in 2013, 5 in 2014 – 17 total), El Kef (1 in 2012, 7 in 2013 – 8 total), Kasserine (3 in 2012, 45 in 2013, 7 in 2014 – 55 total), and Kebili (2 in 2011, 1 in 2012, 1 in 2013 – 4 total).

**Figure 7: Terrorist Attacks in Tunisia, January 2011-July 2014**



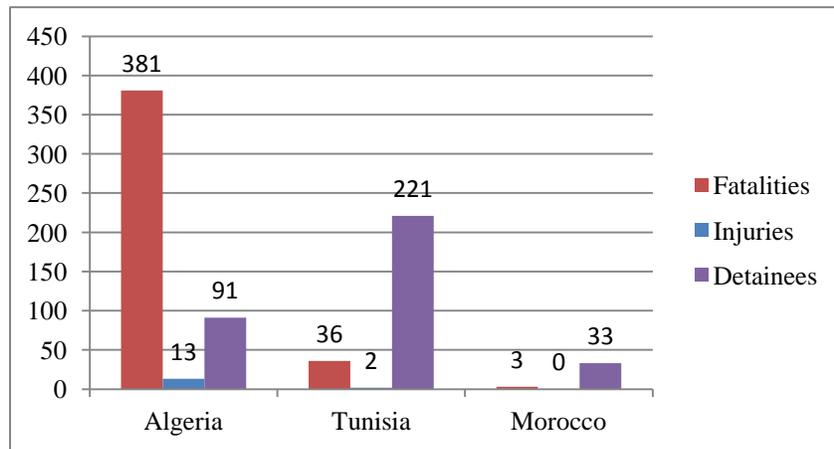
Of the 188 total incidents, 93 were perpetrated by terrorists (70), Ansar Al-Sharia-Tunisia (4), AQIM (1), Salafist Sheikh Al-Khatib al-Idrissa (1), and unknown attackers (17) targeting security forces, military personnel, or civilians (usually in the case of IED or suicide attack incidents). The majority of attacks in the 4.5 year period occurred in Kasserine Governorate along the Tunisia-Algeria border, with the number of attacks reaching a significant peak in 2013, which is expected based on reported terrorist activity in Jebel Chaambi.<sup>138</sup>

Map 5: Terrorist Attacks in Tunisia



On the counterterrorism side, “security forces” (including both police and military) carried out 95 operations from 2011-2014. There were just five operations in 2011, all resulting in arrests (33) and no fatalities and occurring in the central regions of the country, which is reflective of the locus of terrorist attacks in that year. This pattern differs from Algeria, where the majority of counterterrorism operations result in fatalities rather than detentions.

<sup>138</sup> Omar Shabbi, "Jihadists coordinate on Tunisian-Algerian border."

**Figure 8: Fatalities, Injuries, and Detainees Resulting from Counterterrorism Operations**

In 2011, three incidents of terrorism occurred in Ben Guerdene, Siliana, and Zaghouan governorates, two targeting security forces and one targeting a gas pipeline. According to the USG, "Competing militia elements – some of which engaged in banditry – vied for control of border posts and on several occasions exchanged fire with Tunisian security forces."<sup>139</sup> The primary concern at that time was Libya, as small arms flows in the wake of the fall of Gaddafi raised concerns for its western neighbor. According to an Algerian minister in 2011, "Libya has become an open-air arms market," and "According to several experts, the state of disarray in Libya would enable members of the Islamic Maghreb to obtain a variety of weapons, the most destructive of which are solar missiles."<sup>140</sup> Additionally, the Tunisian government was irked by a series of post-revolution demonstrations, mostly led by hard-line Islamist groups. To respond to

<sup>139</sup> "Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview."

<sup>140</sup> "Algerian Minister: 'Libya has become open-air arms market'," *International Business Times*, June 2, 2011, <http://www.ibtimes.com/algerian-minister-libya-has-become-open-air-arms-market-288005>, (accessed December 30, 2014).

these incidents, and to secure the country after Ben Ali's departure, security forces concentrated in the country's center, drawing resources away from the border areas not directly under threat.

Incidents directly citing AQIM in 2011 include the May 14 arrest of "two men of Libyan and Algerian origin, carrying Afghan identity papers and suspected of being members of AQIM," in Siliana Governorate while allegedly transporting explosive belts and bombs and a clash between the Tunisian army and armed militants on September 21. The militants, driving 4x4 vehicles, were tagged as "possibly AQIM members...300 miles southwest of Tunis, near Algeria. The Tunisian army destroyed seven of the vehicles and stopped the remaining two."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> "Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview."

In 2012, 14 terrorist attacks occurred. Unlike in Algeria, where terrorist activity almost exclusively targets government and security forces, 12 of the 14 attacks in Tunisia targeted civilians. These incidents were relatively well-distributed across the country, with three occurring in Tunis, two in each Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, and Jendouba, and the remaining five being one-offs in various areas of the country. Notably, none of these incidents occurred near the Tunisian-Libyan border, and just four occurred in governorates bordering Algeria. “The most significant attacks were the September 14 events at the U.S.

Embassy and the American Cooperative School of Tunis, which highlighted to the Government of Tunisia and Tunisian citizens the extent of the internal threats to security and stability.”<sup>142</sup> In response to the locus of attacks, counterterrorism operations also shifted north in 2012. There were 13 operations total, with four occurring in Jendouba and three in Bizerte, a port outside of Tunis.

The first reported incident of a conflict with terrorists in Jebel Chaambi, a mountainous national park in Kasserine Governorate along the Tunisian/Algerian border, was in 2012. “A Tunisian policeman was killed in clashes with gunmen in Kasserine on the border with Algeria

**Map 6: Tunisian Governorates**



<sup>142</sup> "Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview."

on Monday, a security source said, adding that military reinforcements were sent to the region. ‘The clashes are continuing,’ he told AFP, adding that two helicopters and armoured vehicles were dispatched to the border area.”<sup>143</sup> This is not, however, the first reported sighting of AQIM in the area. On the Algerian side of the border four people were killed—two soldiers and two jihadists—after a violent clash at the Rouhia command post in May 2011. Among those killed was Abdelwaheb Hmaied, a known AQIM operative.<sup>144</sup> This area would later become the focus of terrorist activity and joint Algeria-Tunisia counterterrorism operations.

The only incident directly attributed to AQIM in 2012 took place in December, when “Tunisian officials announced they had uncovered and dismantled a terrorist cell in western Tunisia that had been recruiting violent extremists to serve in strongholds controlled by al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Several AQIM members were killed. They also announced that another seven had been arrested and indicted before the Tunis Court of First Instance on December 13.”<sup>145</sup>

In 2013, Tunisia experienced a surge in terrorist activity, as 64 attacks occurred, the strong majority of which (23) were in Kasserine Governorate. Three attacks in 2013 were attributed to Ansar Al-Sharia, though notably, those three attacks did not occur in Kasserine. Algerian security service sources claim that “fighters from various organizations, including

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<sup>143</sup> “Tunisia policeman killed in clashes on Algeria border,” *AFP*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.morocoworldnews.com/2012/12/69401/tunisia-policeman-killed-in-clashes-on-algeria-border/> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>144</sup> Isabelle Mandraud, “How A Tunisian Mountain Became A New Home Base For Al-Qaeda,” *Worldcrunch*, June 30, 2013, <http://www.worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/how-a-tunisian-mountain-became-a-new-home-base-for-al-qaeda/aqim-jihadist-tunisia-army-combatant/c1s12390/#.U5HpsiiGft8#ixzz33sT6GOck> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>145</sup> “Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview.”

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, are moving across the Tunisian-Libyan border areas to bring arms in and recruit young men to fight in Mount Chaambi."<sup>146</sup> This relatively ungoverned region, similar in terrain to the Kabiyle Mountains where AQIM is based, was established as a stronghold for terrorist groups. Attacks in the Chaambi region, mostly landmines (18 out of 29 attacks total) affected civilians and their livestock (5 of the 16 landmine explosions affected civilians, though no civilians suffered fatalities), despite the fact that they were intended for security personnel. According to a Tunisian Defense Ministry spokesman, "They are using anti-personnel mines made out of ammonium nitrate," which is a chemical compound common in the area, "The mines are placed in plastic containers that are very hard to spot."<sup>147</sup>

Consistent with the increase in attacks, in 2013, 65 counterterrorism operations were undertaken. Twenty-two of these attacks were in Kasserine, and resulted in 9 fatalities and 868 detainments (one operation detained 800). Three of these operations—all in August—involved air and artillery strikes, and thus the fatality/injury counts were not available. After Kasserine, the majority of counterterrorism operations in 2013 occurred in Tunis, and resulted in 6 fatalities and 25 detainments. At the beginning of 2013, in an attempt to prevent terrorists gaining footholds in their border regions, "the prime ministers of Libya, Algeria and Tunisia agreed...to enhance security along their common borders in an attempt to fight the flow of arms and drugs

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<sup>146</sup> Omar Shabbi, "Jihadists coordinate on Tunisian-Algerian border," *Al-Monitor*, August 13, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/tunisia-algeria-coordinate-fight-terrorism-border.html#> (accessed December 30, 2014).

<sup>147</sup> Mandraud.

and organized crime in the politically turbulent region,”<sup>148</sup> and in August Tunisian Prime Minister Moncef Marzouki announced the creation of security zones along both the Algerian and Libyan borders.<sup>149</sup>

From January through July 2014, 12 attacks occurred, four of which were in Kasserine, three in Jendouba, three in Kef (all governorates along or near the Tunisia-Algeria border), plus one attack each in Siliana and Sidi Bouzid. The only attack directly attributed to a group was the one in Siliana, in which "extremists" allegedly associated with Ansar Al-Sharia clashed with security forces, injuring six.<sup>150</sup> In the first half of 2014, 12 counterterrorism operations occurred: three and four in Kasserine and Jendouba, respectively. The operations in Kasserine were all carried out in January (no information on fatalities/detainments is available), while those in Jendouba were in March and June (8 fatalities).

### *Other Countries in the Region*

Patterns of attacks in wartime are different from in peacetime, and it is nearly impossible in such cases to disaggregate terrorist incidents from combat. For this reason, this paper does not compile and analyze data on incidents in Mali or Libya as both experienced (and/or continue to experience) significant civil wars in the time period in question. Additionally, though AQIM is known to operate in Mauritania, data on incidents was unavailable. While this paper deals solely

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<sup>148</sup> Ali Shuaib, "Libya, Algeria and Tunisia to step up border," *Reuters*, January 12, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/12/us-libya-borders-idUSBRE90B0G220130112> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>149</sup> Nissaf Slama, "Restricted Security Zones to be Created Along Libya, Algeria Borders," *Tunisia-Live*, August 30, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/08/30/restricted-security-zones-to-be-created-along-libya-algeria-borders/> (accessed December 28, 2014).

<sup>150</sup> Bilel Sfaxi, "Six Security Officers Injured in Rouhia Clashes," *Tunisia-Live*, April 10, 2014, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/04/10/six-security-officers-injured-in-rouhia-clashes/> (accessed December 28, 2014).

with AQIM's operations in North Africa, it would be useful to understand the group's southern operations to assess whether AQIM is becoming more of a Sahelian group, or to what degree Sahelian operations influence the group's central operating structure. It has been speculated that the objectives of AQIM and its affiliates' southern operations are more criminal than terrorist; thus, towards the goal of understanding the future of AQIM vis-a-vis ISIS and the international community, a focus on operations in Mali and Mauritania is less critical for this analysis.

## CHAPTER 4: Analysis of Competing Hypothesis

To return to the question posed in the introduction, and evaluated over time in the literature review, I will now use the information presented in the Chapter 3 "AQIM Today" to conduct an Analysis of Competing Hypothesis<sup>151</sup> to answer the question, *Is AQIM primarily an Algerian nationalist movement or a transnational ideologically driven terrorist organization?*

Today, in the face of increasingly decentralized strategies on the part of terrorist organizations and decreasing border security capacities on the part of governments, there are two competing widely held perceptions of the security situation in North Africa vis-à-vis AQIM. One school of thought centers on Algeria, perceiving AQIM as ultimately dedicated to its initial focus of replacing the current "apostate" Algerian government with an Islamic state. This perspective portrays AQIM's activities outside of Algeria as secondary to its primary interests (overthrowing the Algerian government), and necessitated by Algeria's recent robust counterterrorism

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<sup>151</sup> Richard J. Heuer, Jr. "Psychology of Intelligence Analysis," Central Intelligence Agency, March 16, 2007, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/art11.html> (accessed December 30, 2014).

operations. In this model, AQIM activities outside Algeria serve economic and political needs (i.e. kidnappings in Mali fund AQIM attacks across the region and ties to other terrorist organizations are forged to bolster AQIM's efforts within Algeria), all centering back on Algeria.

The second model suggests that the ultimate goal of Islamic extremists (specifically AQIM) is the establishment of a regional, or even international, Islamic state. This concept is based on the weak states theory, which explains that Islamists will seek to gain footholds in any area possible towards their ultimate international goals. The commonly held belief that terrorists will fill any and all spaces lacking government control, using them for training camps and recruiting from impoverished local populations, portrays the trend of terrorism in North Africa as looking away from Algeria and forward to other (less governed) countries. Under this model, AQIM would be assumed to leave Algeria in favor of taking control of territory and conducting operations in weaker neighboring states: Mali, Tunisia, and Libya.

Comparing these models and assessing to what degree the available evidence points to either can help clarify and shape how regional governments and the international community perceive terrorism trends in North Africa. Understanding the similarities and differences between the two can inform assessing how counterterrorism strategies have been implemented in the past, and how those strategies can and should be reworked looking forward.

The flaw in using ACH to assess these two theories is that there are capacity considerations affecting the group's operations, which can be difficult to assess. For example, in 2006/2007, did the GSPC align with Al Qaeda in reflection of broadening goals, or as a last grab at legitimacy in the face of declining recruitment and inability to operate effectively within Algeria? As was previously described, the answer to this and similar questions is debated.

I have chosen two categories, each with sub-questions, to assess in this ACH: locus of operations and targeting. The figure below details the expected outcomes that would point toward each hypothesis for each sub-question. Populating this model will assist in understanding the trajectory of AQIM operations since 2011 and answer yet again the question of whether the group is expansionist or nationalist.

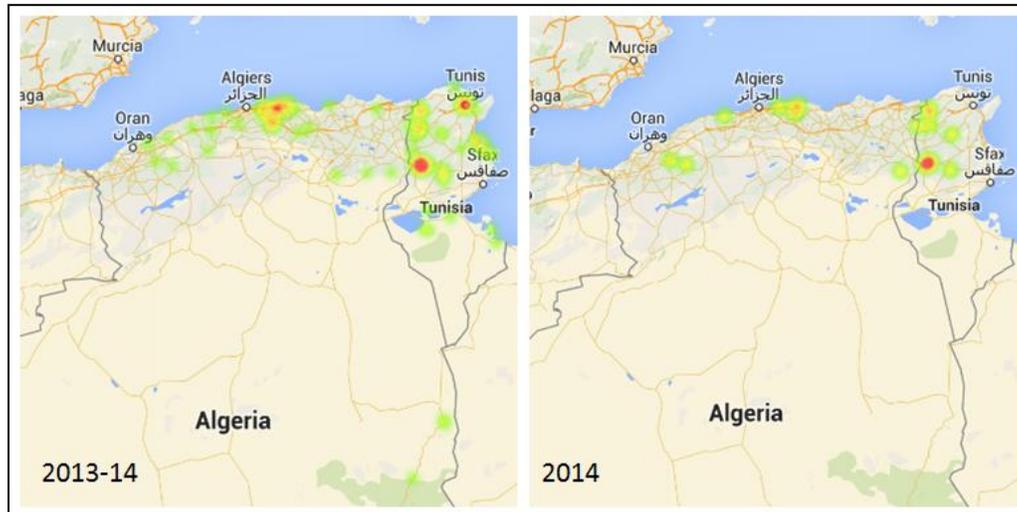
**Figure 9: Analysis of Competing Hypothesis Framework**

Lines of Inquiry	AQIM is Algeria-focused	Expected supporting evidence	AQIM is expansionist	Expected supporting evidence2
<b>Locus of Operations</b>				
Where are attacks located?	?	Attacks are primarily in Algeria	?	Increasing trend of attacks outside of Algeria
<b>Targeting</b>				
Who and what is targeted?	?	Algerian security forces and government targets	?	Increasingly targeting civilians and Western actors
What are the most prevalent types of attacks?	?	Low-budget locally available weapons and attack types; i.e. IEDs and kidnapping.	?	Attacks also used by international groups, i.e. suicide attacks.
Who is mentioned as targets in rhetoric?	?	Algerian security forces and government targets	?	Increasingly mentioning Western actors; rhetoric taking on similarities with Al Qaeda

## Locus of Operations

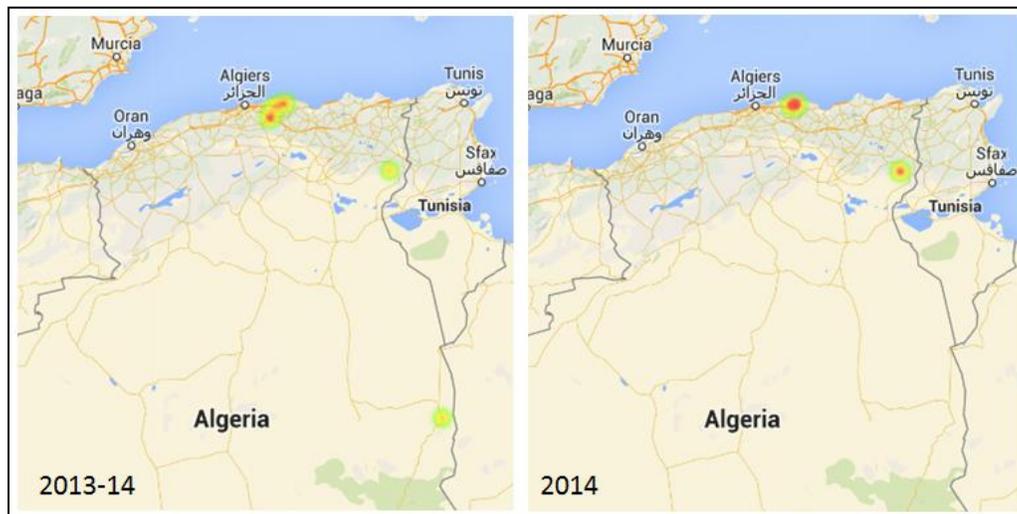
Assessing the locus of terrorist attacks in 2013-2014 (these years were chosen to reflect the most current operations) shows that overall there were 129 attacks in Tunisia and Algeria, concentrated primarily in Kasserine, then Tunis, and finally in Algiers. Narrowing the scope to just 2014, there were a total of 21 attacks, but the distribution (i.e. primarily in Kasserine) remains consistent. This accounts for all attacks tagged AQIM, Ansar Al-Sharia, unknown, and terrorist. If the largest categories, "unknown" and "terrorist," are mostly AQIM-related incidents, then this data points to the expansionist hypothesis. However, those categories could instead be dominated by other groups or individuals, in which case that conclusion is far less certain.

Map 7: Attacks by AQIM, Ansar Al-Sharia, unknown, and terrorist



Ignoring the issue of "unknown" and "terrorist" and assessing attacks solely attributed to AQIM yields the following results: seven attacks total in 2013-14 and three attacks in just 2014, all in Algeria.

Map 8: Attacks by AQIM



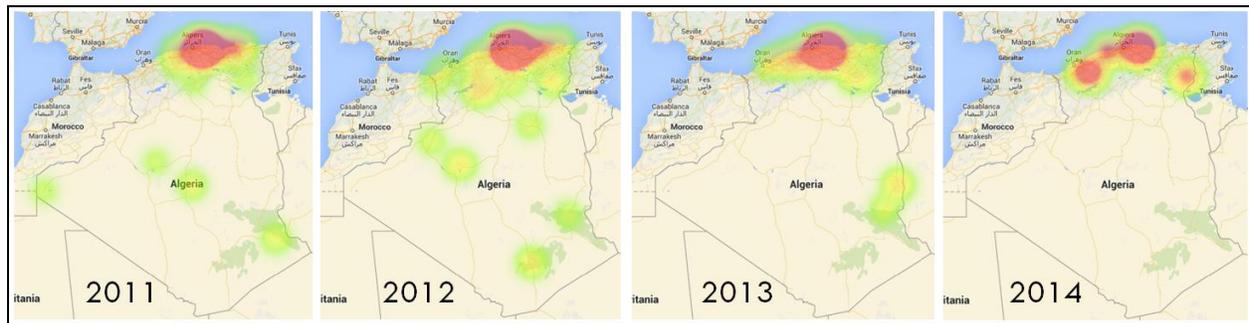
This could indicate two conclusions. The first is that AQIM, for reasons of strategy or capacity is currently restricting operations to remain within Algeria. The second is that, while

AQIM may be perpetuating or supporting other attacks, the group is not *claiming* attacks in the Maghreb outside of Algeria. In a letter from Droukdal to his followers, written sometime between March 2012 (when AQIM and Ansar Al-Dine turned on their allies in northern Mali) and February 2013, Droukdal discouraged his followers from claiming attacks, for fear that it might invite unwanted international attention, "Better for you to be silent and pretend to be a 'domestic' movement that has its own causes and concerns. There is no call for you to show that we have an expansionary, jihadi, Qaeda or any other sort of project."<sup>152</sup>

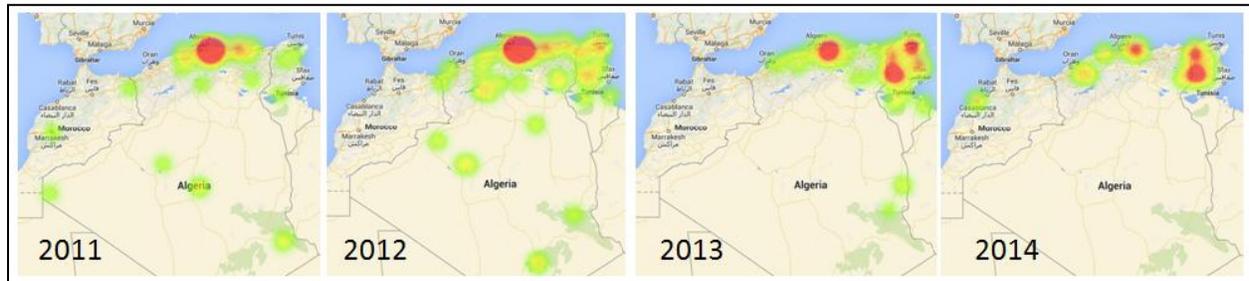
The next step in assessing the locus of operations line of inquiry is to look at the trend of attacks within and outside of Algeria from 2011-2014. Weak states theory purports that armed groups will fill any and all spaces lacking government control. Under this model, groups facing intense counterterrorism operations would be assumed to move to Algeria's peripheries and eventually leave Algeria in favor of taking control of territory and conducting operations in weaker neighboring states: Mali, Tunisia, and Libya. Looking first at attack patterns within Algeria, we see that contrary to the expansionist hypothesis, terrorist attacks are in fact becoming more concentrated in the center of the country, rather than moving toward the peripheries.

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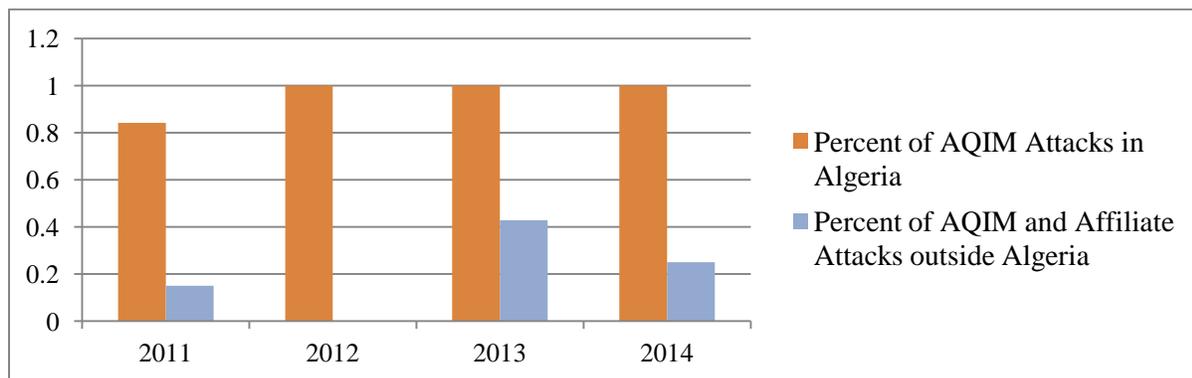
<sup>152</sup> Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Mali Sought to Hide Foreign Designs," *The Long War Journal*, February 15, 2013, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/al\\_qaeda\\_in\\_mali\\_sou.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/02/al_qaeda_in_mali_sou.php) (accessed April 4, 2015).

**Map 9: Terrorist Attacks within Algeria (time sequence)**

The same time-series of images, this time looking at Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, reflect a similar trend but spread across countries. Again we see a general movement of terrorist activity north, towards population centers in Algiers and Tunis, and along the Algerian-Tunisian border. Despite concerns about terrorism coming from Libya, there are few attacks along the Tunisian-Libyan border (none in 2014). Due to lack of data from Mali and Mauritania, it is impossible to tell whether general terrorist activity (or AQIM-attributed activity) is increasing in those countries; however, if it is, that means that what we're seeing is an increasing dichotomization of the group. In 2011 and 2012, while Droukdal and Belmokhtar had their disagreements, AQIM was still officially one unit. Reflected in Map 9 below, in those years there were more attacks in central Algeria and closer to its southern and eastern borders. If AQIM is today increasing operations in Mali and Mauritania, those operations are not along the borders, and are occurring in isolation from AQIM Central's base around Algiers.

**Map 10: Terrorist attacks in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco (time sequence)**

The images above refer to attacks perpetrated by AQIM, Ansar Al-Sharia, unknown, and terrorist. Looking at solely AQIM, the group has claimed 17 attacks in Algeria, 2 in Morocco, and 1 in Tunisia since 2011. The three attacks outside of Algeria all occurred in 2011. Over the same time period, AQIM affiliates (AST) claimed attacks outside of Algeria. Non-AQIM attacks within Algeria are exclusive attributed to MUJAO (a Malian group closely associated with AQIM). Note that the dataset includes 120 “terrorist” attacks throughout the region, not attributed to any specific group – 50 of these are in Algeria and 70 are in Tunisia. The data in Figure 10 is exclusively attacks claimed by or attributed to AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al Sharia. MUJAO and Ansar al Sharia are known AQIM affiliates.

**Figure 10: Attacks Inside v. Outside of Algeria**

Though the evidence presented above could be interpreted to support either hypothesis, the fact that AQIM has been on a trend of and is now exclusively claiming attacks within Algeria, and that national center of terrorist activity has moved north to the area around Algeria where AQIM is based, I will conclude that the locus of operations points to the first hypothesis, that AQIM is a national terrorist movement.

## Targeting

There are three lines of inquiry within the targeting category: who is targeted, what is targeted, and what are the most prevalent types of attack? Similar to the locus of attacks category, I will analyze each question both in terms of current activities as well as trends over time since 2011.

### *Who is targeted?*

In terms of fatalities, as Figure 11 (left) shows, security force fatalities due to attacks perpetrated by AQIM in Algeria have risen and fallen over time, while civilian fatalities have remained relatively constant since they rose in 2012. By mid-2014, civilian fatalities far outpace security force fatalities.

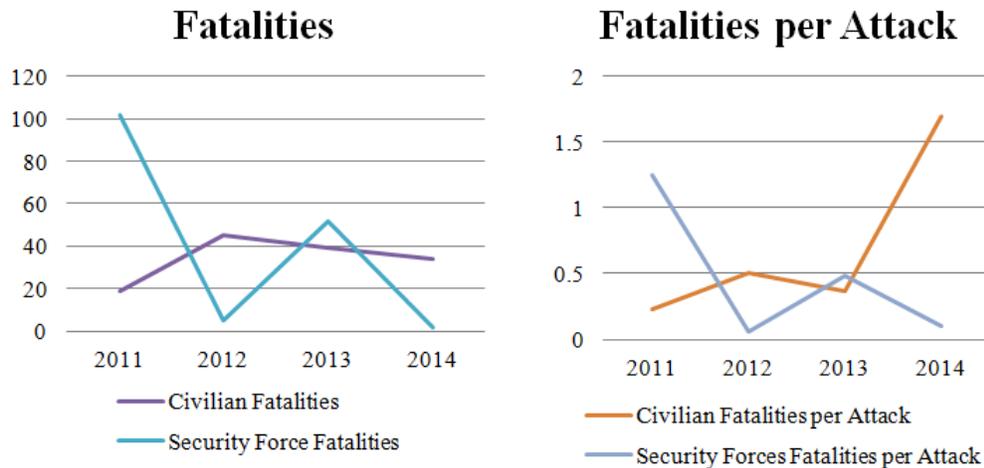
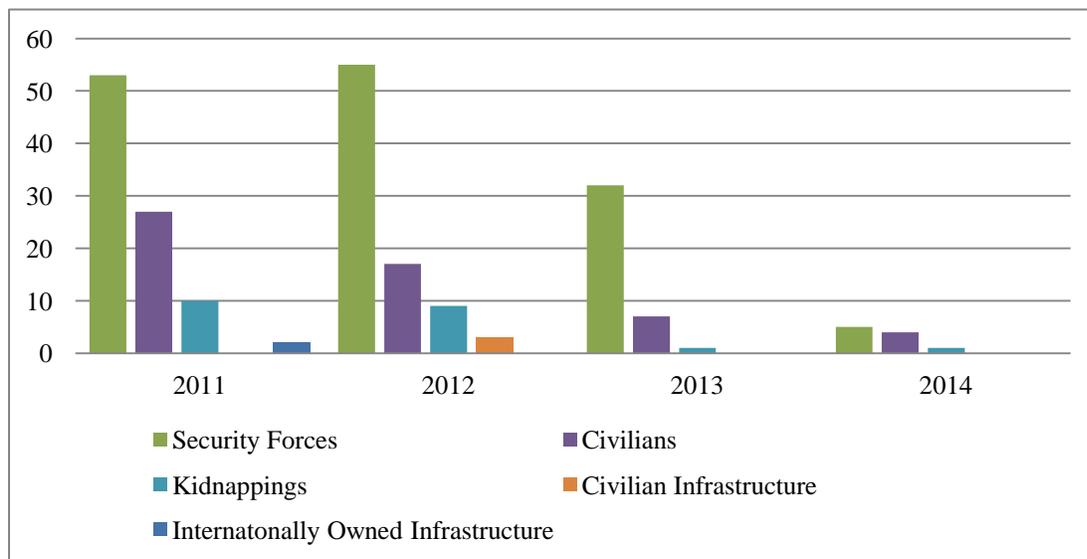
**Figure 11: Total Fatalities Compared to Fatalities per Attack**

Figure 11 (right) illustrates severity of attacks by showing fatalities per attack for both civilians and security forces. These graphs together show that at least in the immediate past (the first half of 2014), AQIM is increasingly targeting civilians, and the severity of attacks (i.e. fatalities per attack) is also increasing. Due to the up-and-down nature of these graphs, it is impossible to determine if the increasing targeting of civilians and brutality of attacks is a one-off phenomena or a trend in the group's operations. Looking at overall fatalities per attack, AQIM tactics are becoming increasingly sophisticated, effective, and brutal, potentially as a result of coordination with and strategic advising from Al Qaeda. The overall rise in targeting of civilians from 2011 to 2014 is relevant in that it runs contrary to AQIM's original mode of operations (when it was the GSPC) of not targeting civilians, and the group's promise to focus on security force and government targets (recall the discussion of *takfir*, p. 11). If the group sought to gain local support, as would be expected of a movement with nationalist goals, it would not target civilians, especially not with the severity we see in 2014. Thus, this line of evidence points to hypothesis two, that AQIM is expansionist.

### *What is targeted?*

The second line of inquiry in this category asks, what is targeted? If AQIM's operations are reflective of an international agenda, we expect that AQIM would increasingly focus on international targets both within and outside Algeria. As Figure 12 reflects, most AQIM attacks are targeted at Algerian security forces. Internationally owned infrastructure was only targeted in 2011, contrary to expectations that AQIM would increasingly focus on Western targets in alignment with international Islamist ideology.

**Figure 12: Number of Attacks per Target Type**



Within the data, "kidnappings" are not disaggregated by victim nationality. However, it should be noted that AQIM is known for pioneering kidnapping for ransom schemes targeted at foreigners beginning in 2003. Today, AQIM avoids high-value targets and usually kidnaps foreign journalists, aid workers, and tourists, and is estimated to have earned more than \$90

million USD in ransom profits from 2003-2013.<sup>153</sup> This may not be reflected in the data because "AQIM outsources the kidnapping itself to local criminals. Once they have the hostages, they drive them deep into the desert, where they have hidden food, fuel, and spare tires that can be relocated using GPS...The kidnapers use satellite phones to start negotiating with families, employers, and governments — a process that takes months or even years, and often ends with the delivery of a suitcase of cash."<sup>154</sup> The ransom price today is up to \$10 million USD.<sup>155</sup> The fact that criminal groups frequently conduct the kidnapping and later sell their hostages to AQIM might account for deflated kidnapping figures within the data. Additionally, the drop-off in kidnapping after 2012 is likely in part due to the split-off of Belmokhtar's group. Belmokhtar was known for kidnapping, and when he left AQIM and shortly thereafter fled into Libya, it is likely that his operations were constrained.

While the targeting of international assets is evidence of a more internationalist agenda, in the case of kidnapping these actions might be interpreted differently. According to Aronson's analysis, which it should be noted focuses almost exclusively on Belmokhtar's group, Ansaru (a Boko Haram spin-off), and MUJAO stated, "It appears that Belmokhtar is a savvy businessman who manipulatively leverages purported jihadist ideology to inspire supporters and solicit ransom payments by governments and private organizations. Whether his political motivation may be insincere is largely peripheral to mitigating the threat of kidnapping in the Sahel. Nevertheless, it underscores that Belmokhtar is a businessman who is willing to adapt as

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<sup>153</sup> Aronson.

<sup>154</sup> "Kidnapping for jihad," *The Week*, September 6, 2014, <http://theweek.com/article/index/267485/kidnapping-for-jihad> (accessed December 30, 2014).

<sup>155</sup> "Kidnapping for jihad."

necessary to engage in kidnap-for-ransom." The fact that AQIM avoids high-value political targets, and rarely kills its captives, indicates that its targeting of non-Algerians is likely due more to their access to funding than to ideological drivers. Today, "At most risk are the extractive industries (mining, oil and energy, and construction) operating near border regions." While attacks such as the one on the In Amenas gas facility in 2013 and the simultaneous attacks in Niger (allegedly conducted by MUJAO and al-Mulathamini) in the same year on a French uranium mine near the Algerian border as well as a French military camp in central Niger,<sup>156</sup> might be a result of anti-Western (specifically anti-French) ideology, the fact that "companies in the extractive industry are likely to retain kidnap-for-ransom insurance and have a set precedent for paying ransoms, compared with NGOs and private citizens who may lack financial resources," might be a stronger reason for groups to attack the international private sector. Additionally, "Conducting attacks near borders often allows militants and kidnapers to cross into a neighboring country undetected."<sup>157</sup>

To conclude the analysis of this line of inquiry, the question of target type does not conclusively point to either hypothesis. Based on its targeting of international assets, it appears that AQIM does attack them but perhaps more as a question of convenience and potential monetary gain than ideological reasons. When considering kidnapping, the lines become increasingly blurred between criminal activity and politically motivated terrorist activity. Most of the kidnappings occur in the south, and are currently being conducted by groups loosely connected (if at all) to AQIM. Finally, because overall attacks have decreased, it is difficult to

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<sup>156</sup> Aronson.

<sup>157</sup> Aronson.

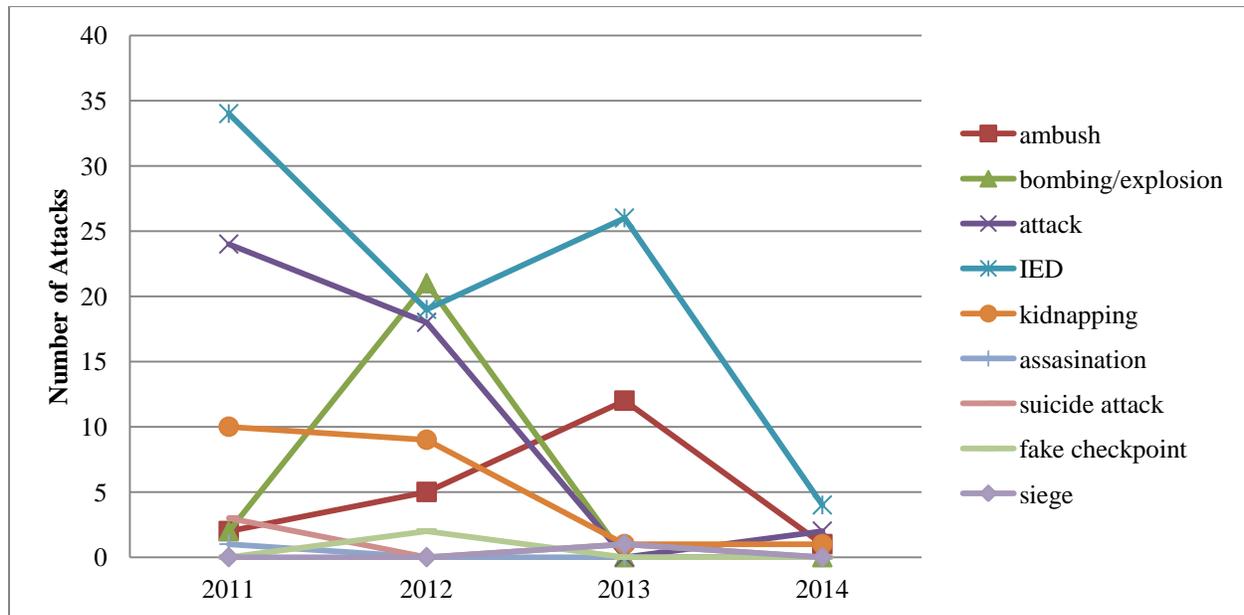
tell whether current attack target choices are reflective of the group's goals or more a reactionary result of capability. Data on total kidnapping incidents in southern Algeria and its bordering states would be useful to compare to total attacks in those areas to determine if they are rising in tandem or if one is supplanting the other.

#### *What are the most prevalent types of attack?*

Understanding attack types used by AQIM, and how they have shifted over time, gives useful insights into both the group's operations, as well as potentially indicating their emulation of Al Qaeda. Though adopting similar attack types does not necessarily indicate organizational coordination or an international focus, it makes sense that as the group becomes more internationally oriented it would take on the attack styles of its leadership. We saw this occur directly after the GSPC declared its alignment with Al Qaeda — the first 2 attacks in 2013 were coordinated simultaneous attacks using explosives, remote controls, and a suicide bomber on high value political targets (as detailed in the section on Droukhal, p. 34). Though suicide attacks are not historically used in North Africa, and were never employed by the GIA or GSPC, it is proposed that AQIM members learned this tactic in Iraq and brought it back to Algeria. In 2005, between 25 and 30 percent of suicide bombers there were of North African descent, and writing in 2009, Grillo stated, "The technological sophistication in weaponry and bomb-making leads one to believe that Algerian veterans of the Iraq War have made their way back to the Maghreb." He went on to describe AQIM attacks imitating the Iraqi insurgency, focusing on a mix of hard

and soft targets, military and civilian casualties.<sup>158</sup> The attacks in early 2007 were "the first suicide attacks in Algeria connected with GSPC or AQIM and signified a change in tactics."<sup>159</sup>

**Figure 13: Attack Types Per Year**

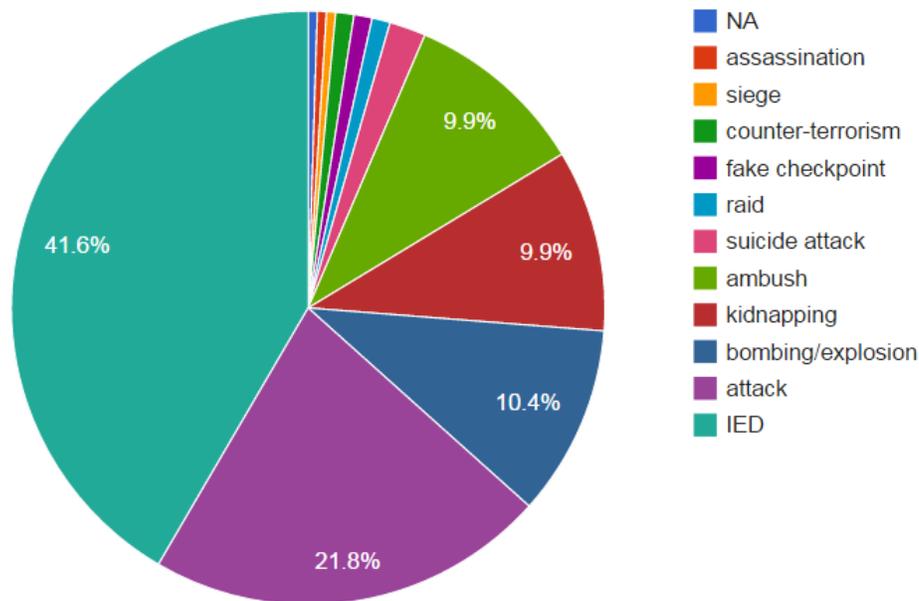


Despite the hype around suicide attacks, they do not make up the majority of attack types overall. As Figure 13 illustrates, AQIM favors using IEDs for attacks within Algeria. While ambushes increased in 2013, they reached an all-time low in 2014 and from 2013-2014, all types of attacks decreased (note, however, that data from 2014 is only through July). The number of bombings/explosions was highest in 2012, and has since dramatically decreased. Kidnappings have also steadily decreased, as discussed in the previous section, likely due to the split off of Belmokhtar's group in 2013 and outsourcing of kidnapping to criminals.

<sup>158</sup> Grillo.

<sup>159</sup> Scott Stewart and Fred Burton, "Algeria: Taking the Pulse of AQIM," Stratfor Global Intelligence, June 21, 2009, [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090624\\_algeria\\_taking\\_pulse\\_aqim#axzz3NR6ap0kB](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090624_algeria_taking_pulse_aqim#axzz3NR6ap0kB) (accessed December 30, 2014).

Figure 14: Distribution of Total Attack Types 2011-July 2014



It should be noted that within the data, the plurality of attacks are simply categorized as "attacks" ("NA"), not specifying any type, and thus not included in analysis of Figure 13 (but included in Figure 14). Based on the data available, and due to the fact that all attacks decreased into 2014, it is difficult to discern which hypothesis it supports. The qualitative analysis, however, points to AQIM increasingly taking on Al Qaeda's tactics, including simultaneous attacks using sophisticated technology. Thus I will conclude that analysis of the type of attack points to the second hypothesis, that AQIM is expansionist.

#### *ACH Conclusion*

Though most of the evidence was not definitively conclusive, the above analysis leads to the conclusion that AQIM is an internationally-oriented movement. This conclusion is based on proportionality of various activities and attacks. However, it should be noted that in all cases, AQIM is decreasing in strength (as evidenced by its declining total operations) and perhaps the

more accurate conclusion is that AQIM is struggling to remain relevant as key player, regardless of its ideology. A recurring theme in this analysis is that AQIM's capabilities are likely constraining its operations, which means that the conclusion arrived at through this analysis may not be accurate and leads to some critical follow-up questions. What is the future of Salafist terrorism in North Africa? Will AQIM fade away? Will they align now with ISIS, again as in 2006/7 seeking affiliation with an international group that can give them strength and legitimacy?

**Figure 15: ACH Conclusion**

Lines of Inquiry	AQIM is Algeria-focused	Expected supporting evidence	AQIM is expansionist	Expected supporting evidence2
<b>Locus of Operations</b>				
Where are attacks located?	Supports	Attacks are primarily in Algeria		Increasing trend of attacks outside of Algeria
<b>Targeting</b>				
Who and what is targeted?		Algerian security forces and government targets	Supports	Increasingly targeting civilians and Western actors
What are the most prevalent types of attacks?		Low-budget locally available weapons and attack types; i.e. IEDs and kidnapping.	Somewhat Supports	Attacks also used by international groups, i.e. suicide attacks.
Who is mentioned as targets in rhetoric?		Algerian security forces and government targets	Somewhat Supports	Increasingly mentioning Western actors; rhetoric taking on similarities with Al Qaeda

The overall decrease in AQIM activity, however, does not render this analysis void. The group could be lying dormant, waiting to build up sufficient resources and personnel to begin operations again. "The group may be down, but it is certainly not out," according to an analyst at the Moroccan American Center for Policy. As evidence she cited recent kidnappings (September 2014) in Mali, and another bombing in northern Algeria that killed five Chadian soldiers.

"Reports about AQIM links to drug traffickers have also been increasing in recent weeks, suggesting that the group will not be short of funding anytime soon."<sup>160</sup>

### *Cycles of Foreign Fighters and Affiliate Alignments*

Consider the following narrative. Islamists travel abroad to lend their services as foreign fighters to a cause. They return and bring their experiences back with them to wage jihad in their homeland. Government and security forces respond by ramping up counterterrorism operations and in response and due to attrition, the group becomes more extreme. A few years later, that same group, in decline due to decreasing domestic and international support and facing strong counterterrorism operations, is divided internally over its future. Side A of this internal debate favors maintaining the status quo of alignment and operations, while Side B believes that the only way to ensure a viable future for the movement is to ally with an international group to garner support.

That narrative has fully played out twice now in Algeria, and is currently into its third go-round.

The first cycle involved foreign fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s, who returned to Algeria and participated in the GIA's black decade. As previously explained, the group's violent tactics and the government's mirrored brutal response led to decreases in domestic and

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<sup>160</sup> Caitlin Dearing Scott, " North Africa: The Present and Future of Security in the Maghreb and Sahel - AQIM, Isil, and the Rest," Moroccan American Center for Policy, September 22, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201409261325.html> (accessed April 4, 2015).

international support. The group then split, with the prevailing side aligning with bin Laden and forming the GSPC, while the opposing side remained the GIA and eventually faded away.

The second cycle led to the GSPC's renaming as AQIM. In this iteration, the foreign fighters were fighting US coalition forces in Iraq in the early 2000s. They returned to Algeria to fight with the GSPC, which was in decline due in part to major counterterrorism operations carried out by the Algerian government with US funding. The internal debate in this case was whether the GSPC should focus on sending fighters to Iraq or concentrate its activities at home. The former (under Droukdal) won out, resulting in the GSPC renaming itself AQIM and at least rhetorically focusing on the global jihad.

In the third cycle, underway now, Algerian foreign fighters have been traveling to Syria. AQIM is now in decline due to the loss of the southern contingent under Belmokhtar, major counterterrorism operations on the part of the Algerian government around Algiers, as well as major regional counterterrorism efforts led by France. The internal debate that played out in fall 2014 was whether the group should remain allied to Al Qaeda, or shift allegiance to ISIS. This debate concluded in December with an unknown number of AQIM members following Gari and declaring alignment with ISIS.

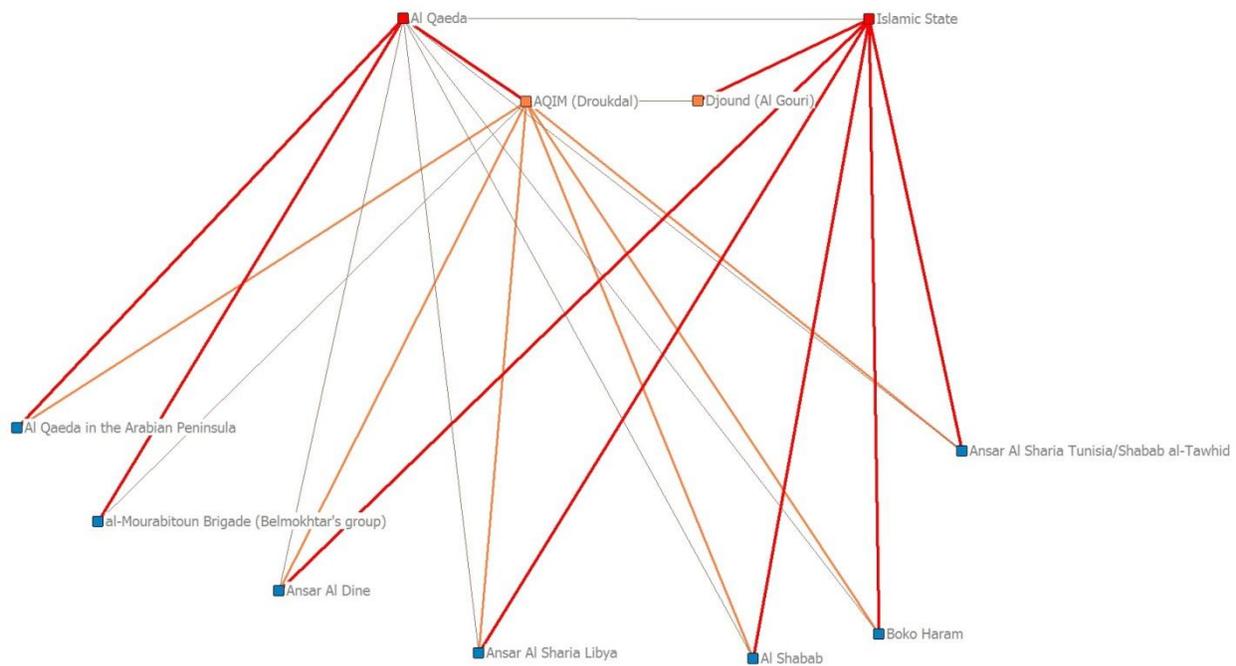
Of course, the above is an extreme simplification of the group's history and activities. However, it can be instructive in recognizing how the group has been affected by and reacted to international and domestic events, and could point to predictions for its future activities. The question today is, will the current cycle end in the way of the others, with bulk of the group shifting allegiances to ensure its survival? Or will the cycle break, with Gari's splinter being subsumed back into AQIM Central under Droukdal?

Droukdal's weakness as a leader and the group's declining power leads me to conclude that the latter is unlikely. However, the intensity of the debate over alignment with ISIS means that the former may be equally unlikely. Droukdal, like all leaders of Al Qaeda affiliates, has sworn an individual oath of fealty, or *bayat*, to Zawahiri on behalf of AQIM. Breaking this religiously binding oath would severely hurt his credibility and draw into question the oaths his underlings have sworn to him. However, "[b]ayat extends from leader to leader, not from organization to organization, so in the event that one of the leaders of the affiliates were killed or otherwise removed from play, the new leader of the affiliate would be required to make a new oath to Zawahiri and have that oath acknowledged in order to stay in the network."<sup>161</sup> Thus, one possible outcome is that as long as Droukdal is in charge, AQIM will remain with al Qaeda. But upon his death, his successor may very well decide to switch allegiances to ISIS. An analysis of AQIM's various affiliates and their alignments yields the conclusion that most of those groups today, except for those with previous ties to Al Qaeda, are aligning with ISIS.

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<sup>161</sup> J.M. Berger, "The Islamic State versus Al Qaeda," September 2, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/02/the-islamic-state-vs-al-qaeda/> (April 4, 2014).

Figure 16: Network Analysis of AQIM Affiliates



This network map visualizes Islamist groups' connections with AQIM, Djound, Al Qaeda, and ISIS.<sup>162</sup> Blue nodes are groups that have at some point been affiliated with AQIM. Orange nodes are AQIM and its most recent spin-off (the status of which is still in question), Djound. Red nodes are the international Islamic extremist poles: Al Qaeda and ISIS. The lines depicting ties are three thicknesses and colors — the thinnest (gray) shows groups that were

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<sup>162</sup> Ludovica Iaccino, "Boko Haram 'will Link up with Isis and Al-Shabaab', Expert Warns," *International Business Times*, April 28, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/boko-haram-will-link-isis-al-shabaab-expert-warns-1463012> (accessed April 6, 2015); Aaron Y. Zelin, "Shabab al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia?" The Washington Institute, Policywatch 2250, May 9, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shabab-al-tawhid-the-rebranding-of-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia> (accessed April 6, 2015); Erin Banco, "ISIS Establishes Stronghold In Derna, Libya," *International Business Times*, November 11, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-establishes-stronghold-derna-libya-1721425> (accessed April 6, 2015); Berger, "The Islamic State vs Al Qaeda."

affiliated in the past (i.e. AQIM and Djournal), the middle weight line (orange) shows groups that are currently affiliated, and the thickest line (red) shows a tie of allegiance (i.e. between AQIM and Al Qaeda). Ties between the blue node groups are not depicted in this image; for example, while it is known that Al Shabab and Boko Haram are connected, in the interest of clarity that tie is not shown.

This network shows that there are five groups with all three ties: Ansar Al Dine, Ansar Al Sharia Libya, Al Shabab, Boko Haram, and Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia. These groups have all at one point been affiliated with AQIM, were formally aligned with Al Qaeda in the past, and are currently loyal to ISIS. The only groups in this network not conforming to that trend are Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al- Mourabitoun Brigade. As discussed previously, it is unknown whether or not al-Mourabitoun Brigade still exists, thus their lack of involvement in international Islamist movements comes as no surprise.

AQAP is a very different case. Like Droukhal, AQAP's leader, Nasir al Wuhayshi, has extensive ties with bin Laden and Zawahiri dating back to the time of the Afghan jihad in the 1980s. Al Wuhayshi is the operational manager for Al Qaeda Central,<sup>163</sup> and after ISIS declared a caliphate, al Wuhayshi re-swore allegiance to Mullah Omar, reaffirming its loyalty to Al Qaeda.<sup>164</sup> Interestingly, Droukhal, al Wuhayshi, and ISIS leader al Baghdadi all rose in the ranks of Al Qaeda as peers, which could be a factor in AQIM and AQAP leaders' unwillingness to

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<sup>163</sup> Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "AQAP's emir also serves as al Qaeda's general manager," *The Long War Journal*, August 6, 2015, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/aqap\\_emir\\_also\\_serve.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/aqap_emir_also_serve.php), (accessed April 6, 2015).

<sup>164</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP rejects Islamic State's 'caliphate,' blasts group for sowing dissent among jihadists," *The Long War Journal*, November 21, 2014, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/11/al\\_qaeda\\_in\\_the\\_arab\\_1.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/11/al_qaeda_in_the_arab_1.php) (accessed April 6, 2015).

recognize al Badhdadi as Caliph. A more important point however, is the groups' differing views on targeting civilians. AQAP has denounced ISIS's targeting of civilians because al Qaeda's guidelines for waging jihad, released in September 2013, call for jihadis to "Refrain from targeting enemies in mosques, markets and gatherings where they mix with Muslims or with those who do not fight us."<sup>165</sup> The GSPC was founded on similar principles; however, as the ACH analysis above demonstrated, in actual practice AQIM is increasingly targeting civilians.

## Conclusion

To fully understand AQIM today, this paper has shown the evolution over time of Islamic extremism in Algeria, highlighting how AQIM's predecessors — the GIA and GSPC — and international jihadi movements have influenced the group as it exists today. The ACH exercise concluded (with many caveats and reservations) that AQIM is an internationally-oriented movement. As further explained in the Social Networks Analysis, it will be critical to monitor developments on the issue of who AQIM targets and where those attacks occur. Whether or not AQIM aligns with ISIS and who the group decides to target will either further support my ACH conclusion, or provide evidence to the alternative. If AQIM continues in its trend of increasingly targeting civilians, running contrary to Al Qaeda's guidelines for waging jihad, it is likely that AQIM will follow the trend of other groups in its network and align with ISIS. However, as seen in the past with the GIA and GSPC, targeting has a strong effect on domestic support and thus could be a critical factor in determining the longevity of the group. Overall, given that terrorists

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<sup>165</sup> Shaikh Ayman al Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for Jihad," As-Sahab Media, September 2013, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/dr-ayman-al-e1ba93awc481hirc4ab-22general-guidelines-for-the-work-of-a-jihc481dc4ab22-en.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2015).

often thrive in weak states, it seems to be a consistent trend that AQIM seeks the path of least resistance in location of attacks (i.e. conducting fewer attacks around Algiers because of strong security force presence) and that survival is probably their most important priority today. Looking at the group over time, its ebbs and flows in activity due to external and existential threats are consistent with a group that is worried about survival.

Considering that AQIM appears to be primarily focused on survival, and survival is likely impossible without strong external support, there are three possible options for its future: follow the trend of many Islamist groups and align with ISIS, remain loyal to Al Qaeda, or cease to exist as an ideologically-driven movement and maintain some power and influence as a transnational criminal organization.

One issue AQIM may be weighing in considering aligning with ISIS is the sustainability of the group's global influence. Members of AQIM today who fought through the 1990s are very familiar with a population's tendency to stop supporting a group with excessively harsh tactics. If the rest of AQIM follow were to follow Gari's lead and align with ISIS, it would run the risk of suffering the effects of any such backlash. Additionally, the Algerian population still remembers the Black Decade and has demonstrated its low tolerance for excessively harsh Islamism movements on its soil. Finally, the vision of ISIS — that groups will create an Islamic state in the Arab Maghreb<sup>166</sup> — is similar to past attempts to internationalize Islamic extremism in the region that have failed. While at its inception, AQIM was intended to be an umbrella

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<sup>166</sup> Walid Ramzi, "'Caliphate' Claims Spark New Jihadist Infighting," *Maghreb*, July 4, 2014, <http://moroccoonthemove.com/2014/07/04/caliphate-claim-sparks-new-jihadist-infighting-maghreb/#sthash.Gz6wWbB2.dpbs> (accessed April 4, 2014).

organization for the entire region, in practice it only succeeded in rhetorically aligning with other groups.

Conversely, if AQIM remains aligned with Al Qaeda, its future is equally uncertain. Al Qaeda itself is suffering from its conflict with ISIS, and is grappling with its own future prospects. If AQIM maintains the status quo, and the current counterterrorism trends continue, it will soon enough be too weak to carry out attacks at all. If part of the group joins ISIS while the rest remain as AQIM, both groups could be so weakened as to be ineffective (recall that almost half the group has already split off with Belmokhtar in 2012, so any split now is about a quarter of AQIM at its peak). Finally, ISIS's goal is to create an African Caliphate; thus, if AQIM remains outside this group, is it possible that another terrorist organization will take on the mantle of Islamizing the Maghreb?

While any of the above options is possible, based on the trend of the GIA/GSPC/AQIM aligning with whichever international organization lends them the most power and legitimacy, I believe that parts of AQIM will eventually forgo Al Qaeda and declare allegiance to ISIS. The rest of the group, however, will abandon the international jihad entirely, and follow the lead of Belmokhtar, transitioning from a network of nominally terrorist cells carrying out criminal activities to a network of criminal organizations loosely associated by some remnants of Islamic ideology. In this scenario, the group (or series of groups) will continue to secure trafficking routes throughout North Africa and the Sahel, while carrying out the occasional terrorist attack.

The takeaways from this report should inform counterterrorism strategy in the region. While AQIM today lacks the capacity to effectively carry out regional operations, this does not necessarily indicate the group's, or the group's ideology's, demise. If AQIM does shift towards

operating increasingly as a criminal group, this will serve as a source of funding that could be channeled into a new wave of North Africa operations, or go to supporting jihadist movements outside of Africa. From a Western counterterrorism perspective, North Africa is one of the primary sources of foreign fighters in ISIS today, and AQIM's alignment with that group would further strengthen an already major threat. From the North African government perspective, the pattern enumerated above points to a potential major threat to home country's national security if/when those fighters return home. Thus, understanding AQIM is critical not only to Algerian security, but also to regional and international security. The means of analysis applied to this group could be replicated for other African threats to determine the applicability of the theories applied in practice, and to gain a clearer picture of national, transnational, and international terrorism today and projected into the future.

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