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North Africa's Menace

AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response

By Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman

Key Findings

- **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is an amorphous, resilient, and adaptive terrorist organization that has shown extraordinary staying power in the face of counterterrorism operations.**
- **AQIM is focused almost entirely on Algeria and neighboring countries. Further attacks by AQIM in this region are very likely.**
- **These attacks, however, are not evidence of a resurgent global Al Qaeda threat.**
- **Feuding within AQIM's leadership appears to have permanently fragmented the group into at least two distinct factions, with Abdelmalek Droukdal leading the remnants of the original group from the Kabylie Mountains of northern Algeria and Mokhtar Belmokhtar as chief of a breakaway faction in the south.**
- **U.S. military capabilities developed to combat core Al Qaeda will need to be adapted to AQIM's African context. Supporting allies, such as France, will be very important.**
- **The United States should not be the tip of the spear in efforts against AQIM, except in cases involving a direct and imminent threat to the U.S. homeland. Any U.S. use of armed drones against AQIM should be governed by the same principle.**

Since the 9/11 attacks, America's understanding of Al Qaeda has evolved along with the organization itself. In recent years, attention to Al Qaeda's so-called affiliates in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and most recently Syria has overtaken concern about Al Qaeda's core in Pakistan. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is one such affiliate. Many Americans first became familiar with AQIM when media reports linked it loosely to the attacks on the U.S. diplomatic compounds in Benghazi, Libya, on 9/11/12 that killed U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens. The horrific hostage crisis at the Algerian In Amenas gas facility in January 2013, which was far more closely linked to the group, further increased concern about the threat it posed and played into anxieties about what many viewed as a resurgent Al Qaeda threat.

Because both the Benghazi and the In Amenas attacks came after the death of Osama Bin Laden, at a moment when core Al Qaeda appeared to be waning, some analysts cited them as evidence that Al Qaeda was actually growing stronger—simply shifting its center of gravity to new parts of the world. "Timbuktu may sound far away, but it's only two plane rides from Manhattan," wrote former UN ambassador John Bolton in the *New York Post*. Even observers less ideological than Bolton saw the attacks as evidence of a resurgent Al Qaeda threat in Africa, concluding that this now familiar enemy had opened up yet another front with the United States.[1]

The broader counterterrorism implications of both the Benghazi and the Algeria attacks, however, are less clear-cut than they were often made to be in contemporaneous media reports. A possible link with little evidence of command or foreknowledge between the Benghazi attackers and AQIM hardly equates to a direct link between Benghazi and Bin Laden or his successors—however much core Al Qaeda members may have welcomed the carnage. Similarly, the link between In Amenas and AQIM should not be portrayed as evidence of the spread of Al Qaeda—and certainly not as evidence of the spread of the core Al Qaeda organization the United

AQIM is an evolving and increasingly amorphous organization, yet so far, it is much more of a threat to security in Africa than to the United States or even Europe.

States has struggled with since the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings. Troubling as these events are, they are not reasons to immediately shift traditional counterterrorism capabilities abruptly away from other trouble spots to North Africa.

AQIM is an evolving and increasingly amorphous organization, yet so far, it is much more of a threat to security in Africa than to the United States or even Europe. It has seized and murdered Western hostages, launched brutal attacks in the Sahel and the Maghreb, and helped a variety of militant groups in a region prone to crime and militancy alike. But while AQIM could attack targets outside North Africa, it has thus far not shown serious interest in doing so; its rhetoric regularly excoriates France and the United States, but its actions focus more on regional targets.

In this report, We have tried to take a balanced and careful measure of the threat AQIM poses, acknowledging that when it comes to terrorism, worst-case arguments are often safer and easier to marshal than objective analyses. We do not minimize AQIM's dangers. Quite the contrary—AQIM has a proven track record of violence and extremism and, although diminished by recent counterterrorism operations, the group maintains both the capability and the intentions to destabilize the region and threaten U.S. interests there. Formulating constructive and effective policies, however, demands a sober and accurate appreciation of the issue—and that is our goal in this analysis.

U.S. policy for dealing with AQIM must be grounded in something other than worst-case predictions about the group's capabilities; it should be informed not only by an understanding of AQIM's relationship with core Al Qaeda in Pakistan but also by AQIM's broader history, the context within which it operates, its ideology, and its other alliances near and far. In this paper, we parse available public sources to help intelligence officials and national security policymakers understand this organization and develop balanced policies to contend with it in the future.

AQIM'S ROOTS, CAPABILITIES, AND TARGETS

In its earliest manifestation, AQIM was organized around the goal of ousting the "apostate" junta in Algeria. Only in more recent years has it officially joined Bin Laden's global jihad and spilled outside Algeria into the Maghreb and the Sahel. While it has wrapped itself in the banner of global jihad, AQIM remains largely an Algerian organization focused on Algeria and North Africa. Understanding AQIM requires at least a brief historical excavation of its origins in the anti-colonial and anti-French context of Algerian politics of the early 1990s. It also requires understanding the connections of some AQIM leaders to the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The anti-European, local, and anti-colonial dimension of AQIM's history appears to be the group's core driver, but the shared background of its leaders as mujahedeen in Afghanistan links it to a broader global current of Islamist militancy that also encompasses the core of Al Qaeda. These two interwoven strands of its historical origins are essential to understanding the group's current nature and future direction.

Prior to 2007, AQIM went by the name *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC). In the late 1980s, the Algerian government undertook reforms ostensibly intended to open up the largely authoritarian, one-party system that had held power since Algeria won its independence from France in the 1960s. In 1991, when an Islamist political coalition was on the verge of winning control of the parliament, the Algerian military intervened, annulling the election and breaking up the Islamist parties. In reaction, some Islamists formed a terrorist group called the *Groupe Islamiste Armé* (GIA) and began a bloody insurgency against the government that lasted through much of the 1990s. By the mid-1990s, however, the devastation the GIA had inflicted on Algeria's largely Sunni Muslim citizenry had undermined its popular support. It was also viewed as having been thoroughly penetrated by Algerian government agents. In large part to escape from the pall that had grown over it, the GIA broke apart and the primary branch rebranded itself as the GSPC in 1998.

Some GSPC leaders and operatives reportedly fought alongside Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but the overall connections were limited, and the GSPC always remained focused on Algeria rather than global jihad. After 9/11, this initial connective tissue began to grow stronger. For example, Bin Laden attempted to make contact with the GSPC in 2002, but Algerian security forces killed his emissary.[2] Later, the GSPC came into contact with Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the notoriously anti-Shi'a leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).[3]

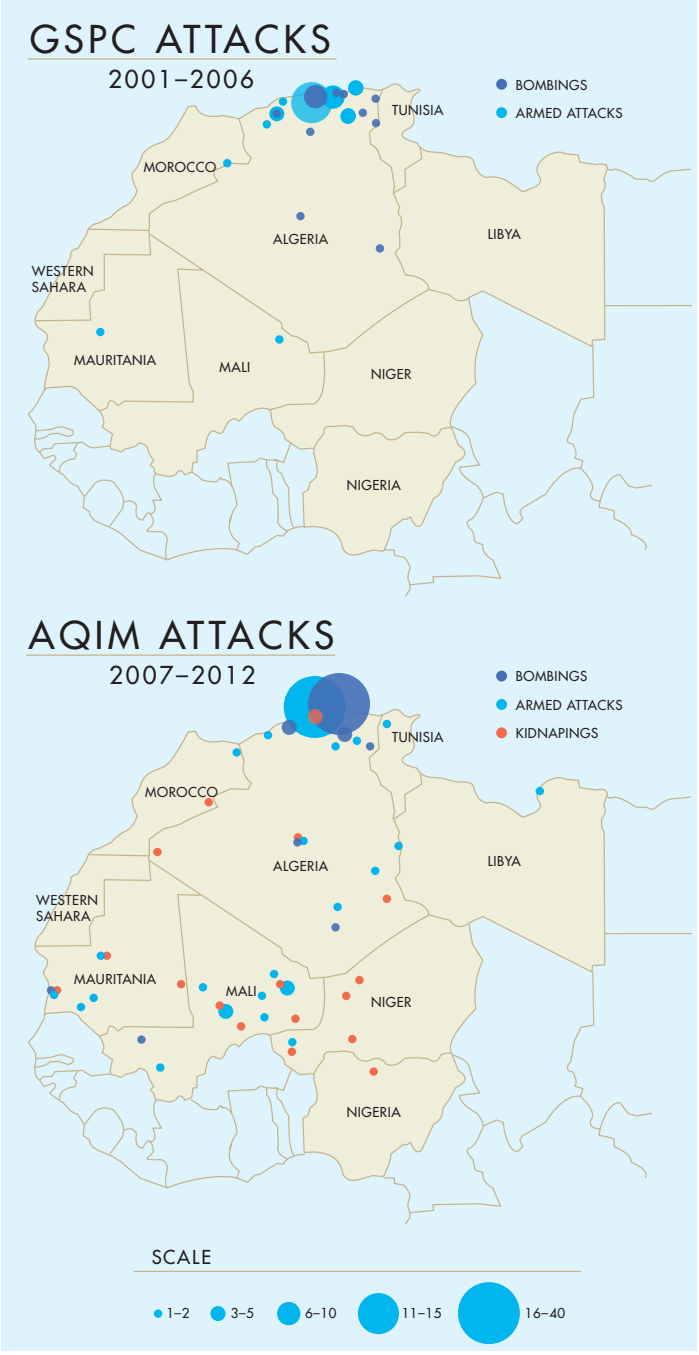
In 2006, several trends converged that would transform the GSPC into AQIM. To begin with, the Algerian army, in part spurred by the broader post-9/11 U.S. global war on terrorism, had begun pressuring the GSPC with new resolve. In 2004, for example, a joint operation involving several countries chased Amari Saifi, a top GSPC figure, across the Sahara; he was ultimately captured and imprisoned in Algeria.[4] In 2005 and 2006 the Algerian government also captured or killed some 500 jihadists, leading several hundred more to request amnesty.[5]

Meanwhile, Bin Laden was increasingly seeking to export his brand and encourage the development of like-minded jihadi offshoots elsewhere in the world. Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan were also seeking to exploit longstanding tensions in France over the rights of French Muslim citizens, many of whom were from Algeria, by denouncing the French government's allegedly anti-Muslim policies. Ayman al-Zawahiri, then Bin Laden's deputy, for example, declared that France's ban on headscarves in public schools and efforts to prevent families from punishing allegedly "debauched women" were insults to Islam. These proclamations appealed to the vehemently anti-French sentiments within the GSPC.[6]

Together, these forces encouraged Abdelmalek Droukdal, who had ascended to the leadership of the GSPC in 2003, to seek a closer relationship with core Al Qaeda. In 2006 he exchanged letters with Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan, and in 2007 he formally renamed the organization Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. A trove of letters discovered in Bin Laden's Abbottabad compound indicate that AQIM subsequently remained in contact with core Al Qaeda.[7]

The group's rebranding and alliance with core Al Qaeda had a discernable impact on its undertakings. Figure 1 shows the location and type of attacks by the GSPC and AQIM in the five-year periods immediately before and after Droukdal changed the organization's name. Starting in 2007, AQIM's targeting and tactics broadened significantly. In the earlier period, many of the group's attacks were hostage takings or guerilla attacks on Algerian government installations, attacks usually involving small bands of militants with small arms. Beginning in 2007, however, AQIM carried out more frequent and more sophisticated bombings. For example, on April 11, 2007, AQIM perpetrated simultaneous car bombings in Algiers, killing 33 people and injuring more than 200 (Figure 1). The guerilla attacks for which the GSPC had become known

Figure 1. Attacks Grew Regionally and in Number After the GSPC Became AQIM



DATA SOURCE: "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, online edition, January 25, 2013.
NOTE: Comparative kidnapping data for years prior to 2007 are missing, so no incidents are indicated on the GSPC map.

also continued. Meanwhile, AQIM attacks spread beyond Algeria to several neighboring states, reflecting Droukdal's new ambition for forging a regional Islamist caliphate rather than simply imposing shari'a law in Algeria alone.

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE WITH AL QAEDA

Nevertheless, it would be a leap to interpret these changes as evidence of global ambitions on Droukdal's part, or to infer that AQIM had swallowed Bin Laden's objectives and strategy hook, line, and sinker. Although he was branching out, Droukdal's most dramatic attacks still focused on Algeria. Even these attacks were local and not directed against the U.S. homeland (as Bin Laden would have preferred). While AQIM activities did cross some borders, frontiers in this part of Africa are often porous and sometimes almost nonexistent. There is a big difference, in other words, between attacks that spread from Algeria to Mali and attacks directed from Pakistan against New York.

AQIM's relationship with core Al Qaeda is essentially a marriage of convenience. The two groups can share the same basic jihadist outlook and gain from cooperation without sharing exactly the same goals or adopting the same strategies to achieve them. The groups can benefit from cooperating without any strict convergence in their intentions. They can share the same basic ideas but have very different capabilities.

It is obviously difficult to analyze the motivations of figures about which so little is known, such as Droukdal and his comrades in arms, but some basic observations seem clear enough. The leaders of the two organizations broadly share a common jihadist ideology and theology. They espouse Salafist, anti-Western ideals; strive for a more pure Islamic community (which entails not only antipathy for the West but also intolerance of other branches of Islam, such as Sufism); and believe violence is justified or even holy in the pursuit of these goals. As noted above, Droukdal and Belmokhtar both spent formative years in Afghanistan fighting the Soviets, as did other North Africanjihadists and some members of core Al Qaeda. This shared experience provides some foundation for the development of closer ties between the two organizations today.

But broadly similar ideologies do not necessarily equate with close cooperation between organizations. Parochial concerns, convenience, and circumstance are equally important, if not more so.[8] To begin with, as a new leader of the GSPC, Droukdal likely hoped that a closer relationship with Al Qaeda would strengthen his own position with his group's rank and file. Aligning with Al Qaeda was also good marketing—something that helped recruit local fighters, many of whom had been energized to fight by the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Al Qaeda "brand name" conferred a certain swagger and ferocity, singling AQIM out amid the region's militant groups.

More fundamentally, even if Droukdal and others share a common background with Al Qaeda in Pakistan, their social and political environment differs in important ways from that of an Egyptian such as Ayman al-Zawahiri or a Saudi such as Bin Laden. From the parochial Algerian perspective of the GSPC, France rather than the United States is the "far enemy"—the primary outside nemesis in the struggle to realize the dream of an Islamist state under shari'a law. AQIM thus frequently plays on anti-colonial sentiment in its propaganda. Core Al Qaeda is a globally oriented organization with a multinational membership and a sweeping target deck, dedicated to removing regimes it considers apostate along with any semblance of Western presence in the Muslim world. For the GSPC, and now for the main body of AQIM,[9] the dominant organizing principle has always been removing the regime in Algiers.

Of course, AQIM members detest the United States and would cheer to see Americans die. But the priorities of someone with Droukdal's background—or that of his main recruiting base—differ from those of core Al Qaeda. Droukdal's decision to side with Al Qaeda came at a moment when core Al Qaeda's propaganda was attacking France—hardly a coincidence.

For Al Qaeda's core leadership in Pakistan, the chance to align with AQIM offered several advantages that had little or nothing to do with ideology. To begin with, the appearance of expansion to a new continent was good for public relations at a time when Al Qaeda faced worldwide counterterrorism operations. Expansion into Africa demonstrated growing reach, continued resilience, and the type of energy that wins recruits. AQIM, in other words, supports Al Qaeda's global aspirations by its very existence; it need not attack the West to do so.

Spawning affiliates also offered Bin Laden the hope of diverting U.S. and allied counterterrorism resources away from Pakistan. For him, as now for Zawahiri, AQIM can burden and distract the United States and its allies from Pakistan (although, of course, AQIM's leaders may be less comfortable playing the role of decoy).

Perhaps the most important and least recognized factor behind the merger was simply money. By 2006, AQIM was

swimming in cash from the kidnapping and smuggling operations that Belmokhtar had mounted across the Sahel—especially cigarette smuggling, which earned him the name "Marlboro Man." This cash was a potential windfall as Al Qaeda's leaders faced a global clampdown on their traditional sources of funding, offering yet another reason for Al Qaeda to cozy up to the GSPC.[10]

One of the most important pieces of evidence that AQIM has different aims and command structures from core Al Qaeda is that AQIM has yet to attack Europe. Given Bin Laden's traditional focus on attacking Western targets, many analysts have expected AQIM to strike in Europe, especially after France intervened against AQIM in Mali in January 2013. France is home to nearly a million Algerians and millions more Muslim immigrants from the Maghreb. Not only had AQIM singled out France as a target, but the GSPC and its predecessor, the GIA, had conducted terrorist attacks in France in the 1990s. But six months after the French commenced military operations against AQIM, there have been no such attacks.[11]

AQIM may have intended to attack Europe but simply lacks the capability. An attack in Europe would require financing, logistics, effective command and control, and willing operatives with the right profile—a far more difficult proposition than attacks in the ill-defended sands of the Sahel. Nevertheless, AQIM is very well off, and compared with the guerilla attacks it regularly mounts against African targets, a bombing in Europe would not be particularly pricey. Logistics are also unlikely to be a significant hurdle for AQIM given its network of North African alliances and the well-established smuggling lines from there into Europe.

AQIM would find it harder to recruit suitable operatives. While AQIM seems to have had no shortage of low-skilled recruits adequate for its typical operations in North Africa, the group would need a different kind of recruit, with more cultural knowledge and sophistication, to operate within Europe without detection. Even here, however, AQIM could probably find a candidate in the large French North African immigrant population if it really wanted to do so.

A more likely explanation for the absence of AQIM attacks in Europe is that the group does not really place a priority on attacking Europe. Droukdal and his cadre despise Europe for its secularism and colonial past, but they still seem dubious about a Bin Laden-style strategy of attacks against the West. The pounding that Al Qaeda has taken, including the death of Bin Laden in 2011, may well have discouraged Droukdal and others from mounting an attack on a European target.[12] He may believe (with good reason) that strikes in Europe would do little to build a North African caliphate and much to put himself in the West's crosshairs.

The record to date and the real incentives they face suggest that [AQIM's] commitment to Bin Laden and Zawahiri's global terrorist vision may be little more than skin-deep.

In short, while both of AQIM's leaders are notorious for their fiery rhetoric, and while their ties to Al Qaeda's core may have pressured them to shout even louder to try to impress the leadership in Pakistan, the record to date and the real incentives they face suggest that their commitment to Bin Laden and Zawahiri's global terrorist vision may be little more than skin-deep.

Despite AQIM's lack of focus on the "far enemy" and Droukdal's apparent reluctance to order additional anti-Western operations, the enduring hatred of the United States and the West among North African extremists means that visible symbols of the West—the UN, diplomatic facilities, and other symbols of the U.S. presence in Africa—remain potential targets. The complex mix of militant groups in the Maghreb and the Sahel and the decentralized (or complete lack of) command and control over the groups makes AQIM's precise targeting and timing of attack virtually impossible to predict. Moreover, attribution in the aftermath of an attack (similar to the post-Benghazi situation, where no credible claim of culpability was made and where initial assertions and assumptions proved false) will likely be complicated and messy.

THE REGIONAL MILITANT ECOLOGY

For a somewhat different lens on AQIM and its recent attacks, consider the broader ecology of militancy in North Africa. Regional socioeconomic conditions, especially in the Sahelian

states of Mauritania, Niger, and Mali, offer an excellent environment for the growth of militant groups. Vast distances, weak states, dispersed populations, and deep poverty all leave these lands susceptible to cross-border crime and insurgency. Opportunities for smuggling and other illegal activities are widespread, and regional powers' capacities—and sometimes motivation—for combatting them are very limited. Some of the same conditions also hold to the north in the Maghreb, especially in Libya, whose post-Qaddafi state has been extremely weak (despite somewhat better economic conditions).[13]

The 2011 Libyan civil war opened new opportunities for violent militant groups to pursue extremist agendas in Libya itself. At the same time, it unleashed vast stores of weapons that now circulate on the regional weapons market. Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid, the other powerful figure in AQIM's southern operations, were flush with funds from years of ransom payments and had compiled a considerable arsenal in southern Libya after the war. These weapons were primarily small arms of Eastern European origin, the kind that have circulated widely in Africa since the end of the Cold War. But AQIM's arsenal may also now include more sophisticated antiaircraft weapons, as indicated in the table below.

Analysts are right to worry that terrorists such as Belmokhtar could gain possession of MANPADs (Man Portable Air Defense weapons) from Libya. There are numerous reports of AQIM commanders visiting Libya for weapons purchases, with shopping trips beginning as early as 2011.[14] Belmokhtar may have also established training camps near the town of Ubari, which lies east of In Amenas, and used the region as a staging area for his 2013 attack.[15] Meanwhile, AQIM's coffers helped buy—or at least rent—the services and short-term loyalty of many in the local communities. Control of smuggling routes and weaponry also ensured a certain level of support.

Yet if the regional environment is dangerously ripe for insurgency, the general conditions are somewhat less conducive for Al Qaeda's specific brand of violence, although not altogether bad. The Sahel is largely Muslim, but much of the region rejects Al Qaeda's violent Salafist creed. For example, Al Qaeda has recruited selectively in Mauritania, a conservative, Muslim country, but enjoys little support from the general population there. Views of the United States are quite positive among West Africans, including in Mali, Niger, and even Mauritania.

Similarly, Mali's mostly tolerant, Sufi culture hardly meshes with Al Qaeda's extremism, which considers Sufism idolatrous. Many local communities in Mali clearly bristled at efforts to impose a harsh, Salafi version of shari'a law in AQIM-held areas in northern Mali, although they were helpless (or unwilling) to prevent AQIM's advance into their territory. Even if Al Qaeda's ideology were more compatible with the local culture, its racist tendencies would almost certainly undermine its long-term prospects for co-opting local populations in the region.

Table: AQIM's Arsenal in Mali

Many	Some	Reported
AK-47 assault rifles	Semtex	SA-7 surface-to-air missiles
7.62mm ammunition	HE detonators/ trigger devices	.50 Caliber DSHK (AA)
Various nondescript handguns	PK 7.62mm GPMG	F2000 assault rifles
Storage cases/ strong boxes	RPG-7	AK-103 assault rifles

NOTES: **Many**: Verified open source, AQIM pictured with actual weapons, unknown quantity; **Some**: Reported open source, AQIM pictured with some weapons, evidence of weapon utilized in Sahel region, unknown quantity; **Reported**: Suspected open source (not-verified), AQIM/Tuareg Rebels pictured with few weapons, AQIM statement of acquisition, no evidence of weapon use, unknown quantity.

AQIM RELATIONS WITH OTHER EXTREMIST GROUPS IN NORTH AFRICA

AQIM has nevertheless benefitted from regional conditions and pursued alliances with other regional groups to achieve its objectives, strengthening them financially and technically in the process. It has also sought to exploit the security vacuum in post-Qaddafi Libya and has made overtures to militant groups as far away as Egypt. AQIM will almost certainly look to Syria as the most important emerging new arena for jihad, much as the current AQIM leadership viewed Afghanistan in the 1990s and Iraq in the 2000s as proving grounds for their fighters and recruiting pools for new members.

AQIM influence moves along three related axes—one to the West, one to the East, and one to the South. Another axis, for now predominantly rhetorical, is to the North, aimed at France and its western allies. Of the three active axes, the

southern has been by far the most significant to date, but the western and especially the eastern axes have become much more significant since the revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, as depicted in Figure 2.

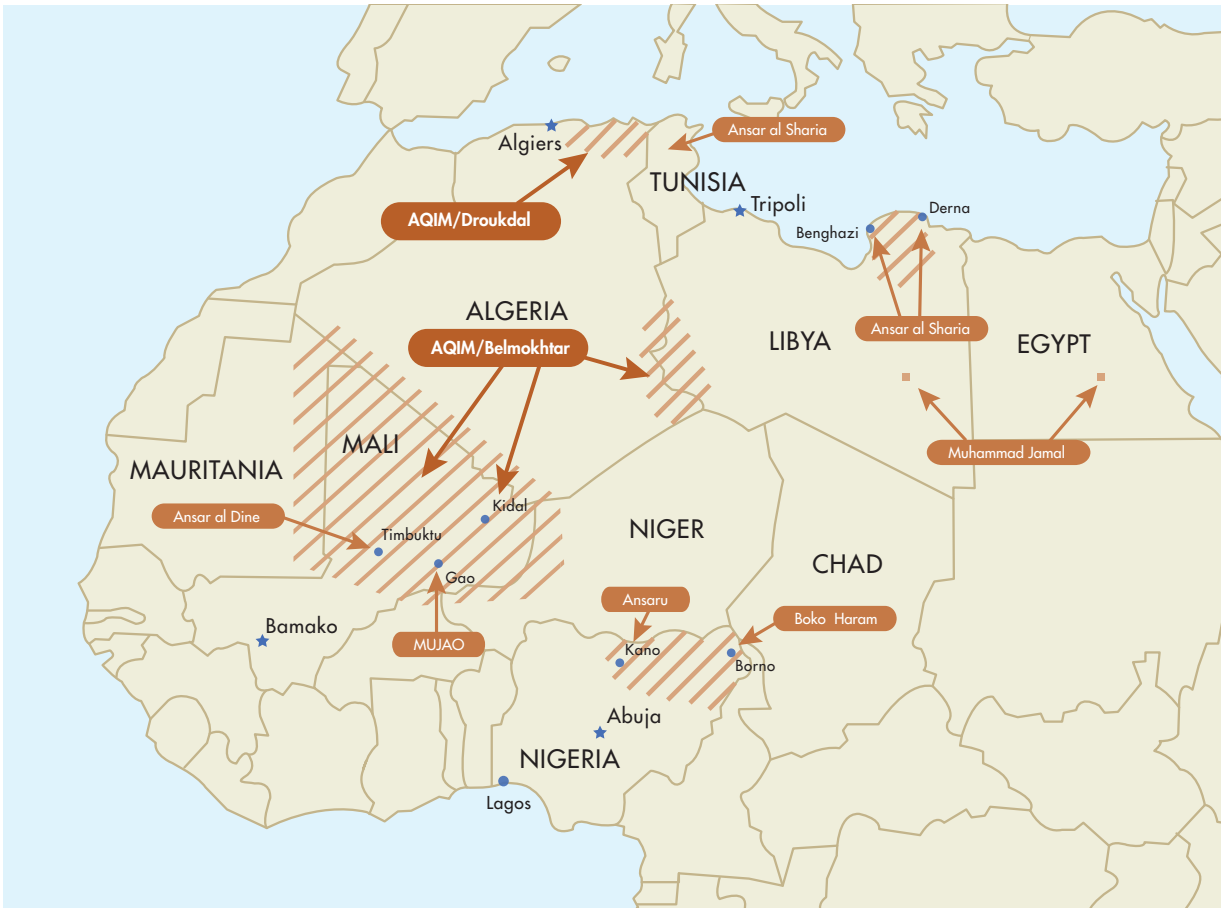
The Southern Axis

For several years, the southern, Sahelian axis has been far and away the most important to AQIM. The Sahel is one of the world's poorest regions; poverty, corruption, and privation in the endemically weak states of Mali, Mauritania, and Niger have left them highly vulnerable to criminal activity. For decades, legal goods such as cigarettes and contraband such as cannabis resin and cocaine have been smuggled through the region to North Africa and Europe. Kidnapping in the region helps fund regional criminal gangs. One recent study estimated that ransom fees between 2008–12 were as high as $65 million—a particularly large sum for the impoverished Sahel.[16]

AQIM has grown and thrived in this criminal milieu for more than a decade. Indeed, the activities of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who pioneered the organization's southward growth, were in many ways indistinguishable from those of other criminal gangs operating there.[17] Belmokhtar was given command of the GSPC's southern operations in the late 1990s and soon developed an extensive network of links to local political structures and criminal organizations. In 2003, he managed one of the most daring kidnapping episodes in the region's history, taking 32 European tourists hostage in southern Algeria. In subsequent years, Belmokhtar expanded the scope of his operations to include smuggling and other activities. He did not just profit from this lawless environment; he helped grow it.

Belmokhtar sent some of his proceeds from these activities back to GSPC leaders holed up in the Kabylie region in the north of Algeria, and after 2006, some of these funds could even have made it back into the coffers of core Al Qaeda in Pakistan.[18] But the arrangement proved a double-edged sword for AQIM's traditional leadership: As Belmokhtar's financial means and prestige grew, so did his independence. Droukdal's ability to control Belmokhtar's activities from more than a thousand miles away on the Mediterranean coast was

Figure 2. AQIM's Relationships with Other Jihadist Groups



SOURCES: Siobhan Gorman, "Egypt Nabs Suspected Terrorist Ringleader," *Wall Street Journal*, December 7, 2012; "Mali Crisis: Key Players," BBC News, March 12, 2013; Mary Ying Welsh, "Making Sense of Mali's Armed Groups," Al Jazeera English, January 17, 2013.

limited largely to moral suasion, the legitimacy of his position as AQIM's leader, and the personal loyalty of Belmokhtar and other allies in the region. Connections between the two branches were made all the more difficult to maintain by French and Algerian military pressure. Paradoxically, Droukdal's decision to align formally with Al Qaeda could have diluted his control over his southern emirs by broadening the objectives of the organization beyond Algeria itself.

Belmokhtar's success and independence eventually created a rift with Droukdal. Droukdal tried to restore some control over the activities of his southern commander by appointing his ally Abu Zeid head of another AQIM battalion in the region and giving overall regional responsibility to Yahia Djouadi, thereby effectively demoting Belmokhtar. In 2012, as Belmokhtar extended control further into Mali, the feud intensified. In December, Droukdal officially ousted Belmokhtar, who promptly announced he had formed his own group, the Signed in Blood Brotherhood. (This group attacked the In Amenas gas facility in January 2013.)[19]

AQIM's senior *shura* (or leadership council) supported Droukdal in his excommunication of Belmokhtar, publicly reprimanding Belmokhtar for not following orders, for pursuing his adventure in Mali, and for not sharing his illicit proceeds.[20] The split formalized the de facto division of labor and interests emerging between the two groups. AQIM's northern leadership has long been skeptical about Belmokhtar and critical of his headlong lurch into Mali. Droukdal feared Belmokhtar was alienating the local population and inviting foreign intervention—thus working against AQIM's long-term interests.[21]

AQIM today is thus increasingly fragmented. Similarly, the nature of its relationship with other militant and criminal groups in the region is fluid and changing with circumstance. AQIM's cooperation with the Nigerian jihadist group Boko Haram and its offshoot Ansaru has attracted recent attention—in large part because the perpetrator of the attempted 2009 "Christmas bombing," Omar Farouk Abdulmutallab, was a Nigerian. Abdulmutallab, however, was linked to Al Qaeda via AQAP (Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula) and the relevance of his Nigerian background is limited. AQIM's cooperation with Boko Haram and Ansaru also appears to have focused more on kidnappings and roadside attacks than on sophisticated terrorist techniques.

Nevertheless, the Nigerian militias' connections with AQIM offer them the chance to improve their fighting techniques and gain knowledge necessary for terrorist attacks. The two groups may have different objectives—AQIM cares only

Figure 3. AQIM-Linked Rebel Control of Northern Mali Prior to the French Intervention, January 2013

Source: Arieff, Alexis, *Crisis in Mali*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 14, 2013.

tangentially about Nigeria—but their cooperation strengthens both sides, making them more lethal. This is obviously a problem from a regional security perspective.

Of greater significance, however, have been AQIM's alliances in northern Mali. By the end of 2011, Belmokhtar had spent close to a decade building influence and establishing close relationships with the communities of the Azawad desert, intermarrying and proselytizing among them (albeit mostly among the Arab communities, not the Tuaregs), even as he continued to grow his smuggling networks.[22] When Qaddafi-aligned mercenaries retreated from Libya in 2011 and helped fuel a revolt in Mali, Belmokhtar seized the chance to push forward the dream of a regional Islamic caliphate there.

Joining forces with a radical Islamic Taureg group Ansar al Dine, Abu Zeid's AQIM battalion, and a recent Azawad offshoot of AQIM that went by the name the Movement for Tawhid and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Belmokhtar pushed out the Taureg National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), which was the more secular nationalist group that had been the original spark for the revolt.[23] By March, the weak Malian state fell to a coup d'etat as AQIM and its Taureg allies captured a large swath of northern Mali that included the towns of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. By the end of 2012, AQIM and its allies were in firm control of most of the north (see Figure 3).

Ansar al Dine and MUJAO, respectively local Tuareg and black African groups with similar militantly Salafist outlooks as AQIM, imposed strict shari'a law in some areas and boasted

that the Azawad would soon become the "Tora Bora of Africa," presumably with the world's highest geographical concentration of jihadists committed to destroying the west. Alarm in Western capitals grew as reports came in that outsiders—including Pakistanis and Afghans—were arriving on the scene ready to wage jihad.

In January 2013, the insurgents began to advance quickly on the poorly defended capital, Bamako. International plans for an African-led stabilization force were scrapped, and France intervened with airstrikes and ground force deployments, backed with limited support from the United States, Britain, and other allies. The French operation, dubbed *Serval*, stopped the jihadist advance toward Bamako, and by the end of January, French forces had retaken Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. France believed it had killed as many as three hundred militants, which they estimated to be more than a third of the core militant fighters in the area.[24]

Operation *Serval* was a blow to AQIM. It halted the group's rapid march toward Bamako and dealt a blow to AQIM's goal of establishing a safe haven in the sparsely populated reaches of northern Mali. At the very least this has slowed, if not blunted, AQIM's ambitions to spread into the Sahel.

After French forces retook the north, reports proved initial concerns that the region had become a magnet for global jihad were exaggerated.[25] In some isolated cases, foreign (e.g., non-African) fighters were found among the ranks of the jihadist insurgents, but the numbers were very small. Nevertheless, had Bamako fallen, the number of outsiders would probably have increased—along with the threat to Europe and the United States.

Few analysts, however, would argue that AQIM's regional strength was permanently undermined by the French operation, much less that the organization was decisively defeated. Many AQIM fighters simply dispersed throughout the Sahel and the Maghreb, including in Tunisia and Niger, both of which have seen a recent uptick in violence. Moreover, the underlying structural issues that allowed AQIM to capture so much of Mali in the first place—its feeble state, weak neighbors, low development, ethnic disputes, etc.—obviously remain. Until they are fixed (if ever), further interventions may be necessary either in Mali or elsewhere to stop radical jihadi groups like AQIM from gaining a stronghold. Given the weakness of the region's militaries, European powers will need to undertake these interventions, likely with the military backing of the United States.

The Eastern Axis

While AQIM has had the most direct impact along its southern axis, its influence to the east—in Libya and Tunisia—is also growing, and is in some ways more alarming, if only because those countries are closer to Europe.

Libya and Tunisia have been home to extremist groups for decades. Under Muammar Qaddafi, eastern Libya was home to a group known as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), which also fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In the 1990s, LIFG revolted against Qaddafi but was squashed. Some LIFG members fled and ended up in Afghanistan or Iraq, where they waged jihad against the United States and its allies. Several LIFG members joined up with Bin Laden in Pakistan, and some attained senior and influential leadership positions in core Al Qaeda. Many of these militants were eventually killed, and some were caught and imprisoned back in Libya. Eventually, however, most were either released from prison as part of a liberalization effort undertaken by Qaddafi's son Saif in 2009 or set free when the 2011 civil war broke out.

When Qaddafi fell, some members of LIFG renounced violence and swore allegiance to the post-Qaddafi state. Abdel Hakim Belhaj, an important rebel commander during the civil war, was perhaps the most prominent. Reportedly imprisoned by MI6 for his Al Qaeda-linked activities in 2004, Belhaj underwent something of a transformation during his subsequent years in a Libyan prison, forming an Islamist political

> Despite the fervent American debate over the potential involvement of Al Qaeda in the Benghazi attacks, the relationship between these Libyan groups and AQIM has been more aspirational than anything else.

party after the war. That party fared poorly in Libya's first parliamentary elections, and Belhaj mostly disappeared from politics.

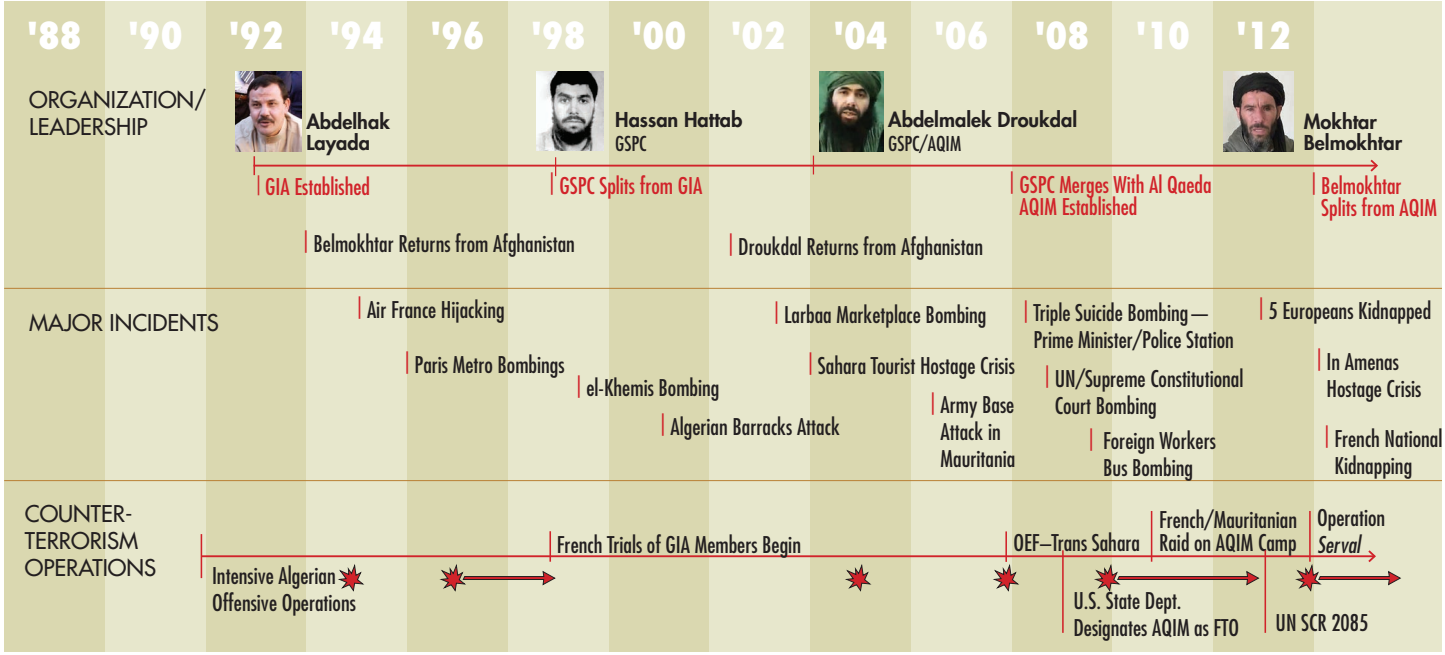
Other former jihadists had more success in gaining influence in the swirling currents of post-Qaddafi Libya and as of this writing hold positions in the veterans' affairs ministry, on key military councils, and in other state and quasi-state organizations. Other jihadists have simply kept their arsenals. The weak state of post-Qaddafi Libya has allowed them to use violence and intimidation to pursue their aim of establishing an Islamic state instead. While many of these individuals did time in Qaddafi's notorious Abu Salim prison, the overarching scene is a pastiche of Islamist activities of varying capabilities, objectives, and degrees of intensity. The most radical appear to be operating from the eastern town of Derna, long a hotbed of violent extremism. There, a group known as Ansar Al Sharia in Derna is led by Sufian bin Qumu, who was once Bin Laden's driver and later a prisoner at the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Another group going by the name Ansar al-Sharia is very strong in Benghazi, where it is believed to have played a key role in the infamous attacks on the U.S. compound.

The relationship between Ansar Al Sharia in Derna and other groups in the region that go by the same name remains murky. Ansar Al Sharia in Benghazi has gained some popular support by providing limited public services in a city where the Libyan state is unable to operate (in part because militias like Ansar Al-Sharia make it too dangerous to do so). Both of these groups, but especially the Derna group, may be training jihadist fighters to attack the Assad regime in Syria. In addition, other jihadist groups are operating in the East, including the Egyptian-based Muhammed Jamal Network, whose leaders have personal ties to Al Qaeda leader Zawahiri.[26]

Nevertheless, despite the fervent American debate over the potential involvement of Al Qaeda in the Benghazi attacks, the relationship between these Libyan groups and AQIM has been more aspirational than anything else. Some of the September 2012 Benghazi attackers attempted to call AQIM leaders to boast about their handiwork, but this is not evidence that AQIM, much less core Al Qaeda, had any role in the attack.[27] To be sure, Droukdal offered moral support to jihadists in Libya as the 2011 war broke out, declaring, "This is a new crusade against Islam, and freedom fighters have to engage in a long war against Americans and the NATO until they are defeated."[28] AQIM can provide legitimacy and encouragement for the activities of groups such as bin Qumu's and if AQIM procures weapons from Libyan Islamic groups, it can also serve as a source of funding for them.

Droukdal offered moral support to jihadists in Libya as the 2011 war broke out. "This is a new crusade against Islam, and freedom fighters have to engage in a long war against Americans and the NATO until they are defeated," he said.[29] In the post-Qaddafi era, AQIM's leaders have clearly tried to expand their influence, especially in northeastern Libya, where Tripoli's

AQIM: A TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS



control was nonexistent after the war. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, some of the Benghazi attackers attempted to call AQIM leadership to boast about their work.[30]

AQIM's relationship with these groups is even more tentative than its relationship with Belmokhtar and the groups of the southern axis. Although many of these groups' members have had personal ties of one kind or another with core Al Qaeda members at some point in their history, none is formally linked with AQIM. They draw on a local pool of recruits with similar backgrounds and views who themselves could just as easily be attracted to AQIM. Members of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi might also be members of AQIM. Membership in Ansar al-Sharia, however, does not necessarily mean affiliation, formally or ideologically, with AQIM, much less Al Qaeda. There is overlap, as there so often is in the shadowy netherworld of criminal or terrorist networks, but not strict congruence.

Because Tunisia's 2011 revolution, unlike Libya's, was peaceful, the situation there is somewhat different—though only mildly less troubling. The Tunisian state, while still weak, has proven much stronger than the essentially nonexistent state in its Libyan neighbor. The revolution nevertheless offered an opening for Tunisian jihadists.

The key group in Tunisia also goes by the moniker Ansar Al Sharia. Formed in the aftermath of the 2011 revolt, it is headed by Seifallah Ben Hassine, a known jihadist who was released from prison during the uprising. Prior to his imprisonment, Ben Hassine was involved with core Al Qaeda in Pakistan in 2001 and may have helped in the assassination of the legendary Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud on September 9, 2011. One of Ben Hassine's associates, Sami Ben Khamais Essid, was once accused of heading an Al Qaeda cell in Italy.

Ansar al Sharia in Tunisia has likely stockpiled weapons. The group is widely thought responsible for the February 2013 assassination of Tunisia's secular opposition leader, Chokri Belaid. Although the Tunisian state is in far better shape than the Libyan one, the ruling Islamist party, Ennahda, has still hesitated to crack down on jihadist violence for fear of eroding its power base and risking attacks within Tunisia itself—a fate the country has so far largely managed to avoid. The Tunisian jihadists, however, have so far shown no indication that they are prepared to ally with their more practical, politically minded conservative counterparts.

In many ways, therefore, the relationship between AQIM and jihadist groups in Tunisia and Libya resembles the relationship between core Al Qaeda and AQIM itself. Their interests obviously overlap, and while they share some limited degree of cooperation, they lack a strict alliance. The growth of Islamist radicalism in both countries is cause for real concern, but these groups are not part of a monolithic Al Qaeda. Seeing them that way gives undue credence to their competence, capabilities, and unity of purpose. These groups will surely continue to target U.S. and European interests in the region, but with sound policy we can hope their activities will proceed no further afield.

The Western Axis

The western axis has been the least important and fruitful for AQIM. Moroccan security forces broke up an alleged AQIM cell in the Western Sahara in January 2011, but AQIM activity in Morocco and Western Sahara has been comparatively limited.[31]

The western axis matters more as a potential area for future expansion. Longstanding discontent and social displacement from the conflict in Western Sahara makes it fertile ground for AQIM recruitment. Many refugees from Western Sahara are housed in Algerian camps run by the rebel group Polisario. These camps in particular offer opportunities for AQIM to find recruits for criminal or terrorist activities in the region.

That said, much divides AQIM from the rank-and-file Polisario, an intensely nationalistic, decidedly free market and largely secular organization that not only focuses exclusively on Morocco as its enemy but also counts among its allies Qaddafi's Libya and the current regime in Algiers—both hated enemies of AQIM.[32]

WILL AQIM OVERSTRETCH?

To understand the direction of AQIM's future development, consider the fortunes of other Al Qaeda spin-off groups. Whether Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), or Al Shaba'ab in Somalia, Al Qaeda–linked groups have nearly all experienced an initial success followed by a major retreat. The strength of some of these has been sine-wave like, with rise, fall, and then some degree of return. Al Qaeda–inspired groups often sow the seeds of their own demise by overplaying their hands, underestimating the strength of the resistance they face, and overestimating the fervor of the local populations on which they rely. The safer these groups start to feel, the more their ambitions grow, and the more likely they are to overplay their hand.

In Iraq, AQI entered the scene with a dramatic splash in 2004, launching waves of suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks that killed large numbers of coalition troops. Initially well funded and extremely well armed, its influence and power grew quickly and frighteningly. AQI rocketed to the vanguard of Iraq's violent insurgency and became a figurehead for opposition to the United States.

Soon, however, the group's record of murder and mayhem turned ordinary Iraqis against it—costing AQI the local populations upon which it relied for money, safe haven, and recruits. AQI failed to appreciate the full force of the coalition now massing against it. Shia Iraqis were appalled by AQI's bloodthirsty, divisive, and sectarian attacks on their mosques and neighborhoods, and Sunni tribal chiefs also came to reject AQI's overreaching nihilism. From Pakistan, even Zawahiri noted the damage Zarqawi's AQI was doing to the Al Qaeda image.[33] The result was dramatic: a rapid decline in AQI manpower, area of control, and local adherents.

Similarly, in Yemen, after gathering initial strength and local control, AQAP started murdering local officials, imposing its own ruthless version of shari'a, targeting the West with direct attacks, and waging an English-language media campaign headed by the Yemeni-American militant Anwar Awlaqi. Perhaps more than any other Al Qaeda–associated group, AQAP hewed to Bin Laden's strategy of global jihad and direct attacks on the United States.

But it, too, soon overreached. By taunting the West and seizing control of parts of Yemen, AQAP galvanized local and international efforts against it, provoking a bruising counterterrorism campaign that has left it reeling. AQAP still poses a significant threat to the United States and has by no means been exterminated from Yemen, but it is much weaker today. Nevertheless, holding firm to fight another day is another hallmark of Al Qaeda–affiliated organizations. What we now call AQAP was once based in Saudi Arabia, and only after a bloody multiyear offensive did Saudi forces push the group across the border into Yemen.

In Somalia, the Al Qaeda–linked Al Shaba'ab group also overstepped. African Union troops, initially a laughingstock of a fighting force, formed an alliance with the transitional Somali government and pushed Al Shaba'ab out of the capital, Mogadishu, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, with surprising persistence and growing skill. Kenyan forces pushing from the west and Ethiopians from the north combined to form a highly effective surrounding force, helping push Al Shaba'ab out of its safe haven in lawless Somalia. Al Shaba'ab was complicit in its own defeat—infighting, ruthless application of Islamic law, and a refusal to allow international assistance to a starving Somali population turned the public against it, which gave the African troops the space they needed to defeat it.[34]

In recounting these patterns, we are not implying that these Al Qaeda offshoots are not dangerous. Quite the contrary. They pose major threats to regional and international security and require constant vigilance. AQI's resurgence both in Iraq and in the form of the Al Nusrah Front in Syria is particularly problematic. The closures of more than 20 embassies throughout the region in the summer of 2013 on the basis of credible threats from AQAP in Yemen serve as a vivid reminder of these groups' lasting menace. Moreover, they have yet to be defeated without some form of counterveiling military action, and normally some degree of support from the West. But their rise and decline is also in part self-inflicted.

AQIM leaders may have learned from this history. Droukdal is keenly aware of the repeated and avoidable missteps made by his Al Qaeda brethren. In documents discovered in Timbuktu after AQIM was chased out of that Malian city in early 2013, he expressed deep concern about the risks of pushing shari'a too hard on the Malian population.[35] After all, even with its affiliates, AQIM is not a large and powerful force and thus needs cooperation from the local population to succeed. Unlike Bin Laden, who saw the interference of outside powers as beneficial for his cause, Droukdal viewed French intervention with trepidation, recognizing that it would not necessarily turn the local populations against the outsiders, as had been the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Belmokhtar does not share Droukdal's caution, so even if parts of the organization incorporate lessons of the past into their strategy and tactics, others may yet stumble. Moreover, AQIM as a group (and Droukdal as a leader) have struggled to learn from their own failures. Its history is replete with overstretching. Many in the GIA saw the damage its bloody and largely pointless massacres were inflicting, yet the slaughter continued. Droukdal was implicated in the past with perpetrating the very practices he now preaches against, including killing civilians. And in Mali, AQIM leadership saw the dangers of moving too far too fast, but they could not stop others in their coalition from pushing an aggressive and ultimately counterproductive agenda.

AN AMORPHOUS, EVOLVING, AND PRIMARILY REGIONAL THREAT

AQIM is hardly destined to follow in Bin Laden's footsteps, planning 9/11-like attacks on U.S. and European targets. Nor would it necessarily be able to carry out such attacks even if it wanted to (although smaller-scale attacks on Western targets are probably within its reach). The organization espouses fealty to Al Qaeda but does not appear to share its strategy, much less to have taken orders from Bin Laden or to heed the direct bidding of his successor Zawahiri. It can thus be very misleading to think of AQIM as a *branch* of Al Qaeda, assuming that Droukdal and Belmokhtar are marching in lock-step, ready and willing to attack targets at the behest of core Al Qaeda's leadership in Pakistan.

To be sure, the two organizations have a mutually beneficial arrangement that strengthens each. Even if AQIM's operational priorities are primarily regional, its leaders certainly mouth Al Qaeda's global jihadist theology, which makes the threat more complex, dangerous, and contagious. But—and this is the key message of this paper—misconstruing the nature of AQIM risks misdirecting resources toward a strict counterterrorism approach to the problem. It also risks muddling our understanding of Al Qaeda's own trajectory by making that problem appear more menacing that it is.

Instead, the current threat of Al Qaeda in Africa is predominantly a local, African problem, manifested in very different and very local ways, with an African flavor that changes from spot to spot. 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*. The jihadist factions operating in Northern Mali, for example, have different priorities and strategies, although they cooperate closely and work toward a common goal: displacing the Malian government presence with their own and instituting an Islamist regime in the region. Similarly, to view Droukdal and Belmokhtar as part of the same organization in any strict sense is wrong, despite their affiliation.

Despite AQIM's amorphousness, it remains a serious danger in the region. Its presence may not represent the new face of the global jihad or have much in common with core Al Qaeda, but its growth and strength certainly threaten security in North Africa. Even if AQIM is still focused on establishing Islamic law in the territories they control rather than directly attacking Europe or the United States, AQIM and its partners are growing stronger and gaining recruits amid often favorable local conditions. AQIM also acts as a force multiplier for other extremist groups in the Maghreb, sharing knowledge, weapons, and financing, and also affording a certain degree of legitimacy to what are often no more than crude criminal activities. Moreover, unless action is taken against AQIM, it is likely to develop further. The instability and lack of security in broad swaths of northern Africa—much of Libya, parts of Tunisia, increasingly Egypt and large parts of the Sahel—offer AQIM rich opportunities to transit, recruit, raise funds, plot, and conduct operations.

Though damaged by the French and Algerian responses to its advances in Mali and the attack on In Amenas, the organization remains likely to regain strength. An equivalent of Pakistan's Waziristan or Northwest Frontier provinces never materialized, but something like it could well have if the French had not taken action when they did—and if vigilance wanes, it still could. The favorable conditions for recruitment and crimi-

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nal activity that have buoyed AQIM in recent years are unlikely to recede anytime soon.

If AQIM's growth is genuine cause for concern, it also has upsides from a counterterrorism perspective. AQIM will be more prone to infighting and internal divisions, upon which the United States and its allies can play. Emphasizing the rifts within the group, publicizing the invective they fling at each other, and generally portraying the group as dysfunctional, criminal, and devoted more to its leaders' egos than a grand ideological struggle with the West will help deprive AQIM of recruits and undermine its reputation in the region.

A POLICY MIX TO KEEP LOCAL DISPUTES LOCAL

Of course, AQIM requires a U.S. and allied policy response. But the resources dedicated to the problem need to be weighed against other global counterterrorism needs, and the resources dedicated to military, economic, and political efforts need to be properly proportioned.

Economic development that results in employment opportunities for would-be criminals and jihadists in the region should unquestionably be part of any strategy for countering a challenge such as AQIM. Rampant corruption and poor governance play directly into the hands of groups with militant, anti-Western agendas. But generating broad-based development even in a relatively wealthy country like Libya will be difficult, and development success stories can take decades to develop. So development activities cannot be the sole solution to the AQIM problem, and other measures are needed.

Entire communities in the Sahel have for generations made their living smuggling goods between Algeria and Mali. Clamping down on this trafficking without offering any alternative source of income could antagonize a population that is not yet broadly pro-AQIM.

Direct military action will sometimes be necessary. Persistent, targeted pressure against other Al Qaeda affiliates—especially their leadership—has been very beneficial in the past. Such strikes make them feel unsafe, force them to move more often and question their own security, and interrupt their training, recruitment, and fundraising. This strategy has proven most effective in Pakistan, albeit with significant fallout among local residents, where the sophistication, frequency, and viability of terrorist plotting have plummeted over the past decade. But such efforts have also been effective against the AQI leadership in Iraq, the long-awaited and still uneven Yemeni reprioritization from internal squabbles to fighting AQAP, and the Western-assisted African efforts in Somalia. Such pressure is probably the most effective short-term measure to disrupt the AQIM threat.

Whether these efforts should include drone strikes is another question. In early 2013, the United States established a base in Niger to conduct drone surveillance of the broader region.[36] Given the controversy surrounding U.S. strikes in other parts of the world launched from armed Predator unmanned aerial vehicles, many locals viewed the base with deep suspicion, despite U.S. protestations that its purpose was limited to regional surveillance missions. (The difference between a surveillance drone and a drone armed with a Hellfire missile are minimal from a technical perspective, making the distrust understandable.)

In any case, the question of whether the United States should conduct targeted drone strikes against AQIM in Africa may well eventually arise. Our view is that U.S. drone strikes are not appropriate in Africa unless carried out in response to a direct and immediate threat to the U.S. homeland. Strikes against AQIM leaders today would be more desirable from the perspective of local partners than from that of the United States itself. And given that AQIM seems neither focused on directly attacking the United States nor capable of providing a safe haven to core Al Qaeda operatives who might do so, the national-security benefit of drone strikes would be very limited. Indeed, drone strikes against local targets could increase rather than decrease the AQIM threat if they resulted in civilian deaths and thereby increased the supply of local jihadists or encouraged existing fighters to see their struggle in more global terms. Collateral damage among civilian communities that are neither anti-Western nor actively supportive of AQIM could result in serious blowback that increases the risk of regional instability and spurs opposition to U.S. policies in the area.

In general, counterterrorist military operations should have a local face. Local forces tend to fight terrorist groups more effectively than outside powers. In Iraq, the Sunnis themselves (and secondarily the Shi'a-led government troops, both military and internal security forces) figured prominently in diminishing AQI. In Somalia, Al Shaba'ab took a drubbing from African Union forces reinforced with local Somali militias and a surprisingly committed and effective Somali government. In Yemen, finally disentangling the Yemeni military units (following Ali Abdullah Saleh's departure and Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi's arrival) allowed Yemen to bring some, if not decisive, military force to bear against Al Qaeda fighters.

A continued focus on building partner capacity in the region is therefore essential to long-term and effective counterterrorism. U.S. AFRICOM has primary responsibility for building the military capacity of states in the region, and it should continue and (if feasible) expand its partnering activities, including with training exercises such as its annual exercise in the Sahel, FLINTLOCK. Efforts to build partner capacity should also extend to ensuring that the right legal and technical arrangements are in place to share intelligence when needed.

But expectations must be well managed given the rudimentary capabilities resident with most militaries in the region. Working through the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, the United States has spent more than $1 billion on building up the security capabilities of states in the region since 2005, and this funding must continue, despite the modest results thus far (which are largely due to the low point from which most countries in the region are starting). As evidenced by the U.S. experience building partner capacity in Iraq to counter AQI, such efforts are long-term endeavors that require persistence.

Real risks come with partnering with local forces, which sometimes inflict more violence on the local populace than the jihadists themselves. For example, Nigeria's responses to the Islamist group Boko Haram's atrocities have too often been ham-handed and insensitive to local collateral damage, garnering more support for Boko Haram than the group ever could on its own. The Algerians, as well, are known for their brutal, take-no-prisoners approach to counterterrorism operations.[37] This approach may have a devastating effect on their intended militant targets, but at the huge cost of alienating the local population.

The U.S. military should play a constructive, supporting role not only for local forces but also for those European allies—France and Britain in particular—that have the greatest interest in containing this threat. U.S. support for the French operation in Mali was in many ways perfect for both parties: The French maintained control over operations and objectives, but their task execution was facilitated by U.S. logistical support. For its part, the United States managed to avoid yet another possibly protracted and unpopular ground deployment in an unfamiliar and unfriendly part of the world.

Winning the support of the local population remains key. In Iraq, the local Sunni community (reinforced by the Sunni Awakening) was essential to defeating AQI. In Yemen, local clans needed financial and political alternatives to AQAP largesse before they swung against the terrorists. In Somalia, Al Shaba'ab mistakes (such as disallowing famine relief from the international community) cost it the support of local power brokers and the Somali populace and made it easier for the counterterrorist effort to recruit other powerful clan allies.

> The resources dedicated to the problem need to be weighed against other global counterterrorism needs, and the resources dedicated to military, economic, and political efforts need to be properly proportioned.

AQIM faces similar challenges maintaining support among a diverse and desperately poor local community. When it can provide more resources than strapped, largely incompetent governments, AQIM will enjoy some loyalty from local residents. But AQIM's ability to maintain local support is by no means a sure thing, as we saw in Mali, where the group failed to parlay its financial advantages into long-term loyalty among the populace. Unless AQIM can rein in its more militant and aggressive members such as Belmokhtar in northern Mali, its record of insensitive governance will be an Achilles' heel that the United States and local officials should exploit.

More broadly, we will need continued investments in strengthening regional institutions and cooperation, as well as continued development efforts, if we ever want to see an end to the regional security threats. This includes facilitating and promoting cooperation among Maghreb and Sahel states on border security, countertrafficking, and countercrime efforts in general. These building blocks can form an important pillar supporting the sovereignty of regional states and reducing the financial opportunities for the expansion of AQIM-like activities. ■

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About This Report

This assessment of the threat from the North African terrorist organization Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is based on a RAND analysis of available open-source documentation. The authors argue that AQIM is a serious regional problem but that its similarity to the Al Qaeda of Osama Bin Laden should not be exaggerated; AQIM does not currently seem bent on the type of global jihad that Bin Laden waged. In most situations, the wisest policy responses to the AQIM threat will focus on supporting local actors and U.S. allies in Europe.

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