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The Many Faces of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

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Key Points

- Since its reinvention as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) in 2007, the Algerian Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (GSPC) has sought and managed to expand its regional domain of action throughout North Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa, and in targeting France has pursued a strategy of steady internationalization of its threat.
- Having actively sought to acquire the imprimatur of Osama Bin Laden's global organization, the former GSPC has, however, paradoxically displayed few of the political characteristics of the "mother" Al Qaeda group, and AQMI has been acting increasingly independently on a primary *modus operandi* of kidnapping Western citizens in the Sahel region and releasing them in exchange of ransoms (fifty-four abductions between 2003 and 2011). This independence is bound to expand in the wake of Bin Laden's death.
- With an estimated membership of some five hundred individuals, AQMI has managed to recruit a number of radical Islamists in the wider North African and Saharan areas but these foot soldiers have featured at lower ranks, while the group's leadership remained in Algeria (Hassan Hattab, Nabil Al Sahraoui, and Abdelmalek Droukdel).
- Tactical opportunism and operational ambiguity have consistently characterized the activities of the group, and AQMI has distinctively merged criminality and terrorism into a significant transnational network able to oversee a "political economy of terrorism" with terrorist operations pursued in support of large-scale illicit financial activities and drug-trafficking routes.
- Whereas the group had been on the defensive in 2010-2011 due to stepped-up counter-terrorism operations, the armed conflict in Libya has provided AQMI with an unexpected opportunity to augment its threat by dispatching convoys to acquire higher-grade weaponry than its existing small arms stock, and expand geographically into an uncontrolled coastal Mediterranean terrain from which it can conduct substantially more lethal and spectacular operations (possibly on the Marrakech model), with regional and international implications.

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Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (“Tandhim Al Qaeda fi Bilad Al Maghrib Al Islami”, commonly referred to by its French acronym AQMI) is a reformed version of an Algerian terrorist group formed in September 1998, Al Jama’a Al Salafiya lil Da’wa wal Qital (Salafist Group for Predication and Combat, GSPC). Born in the context of the waning Algerian civil war that had raged in that country between 1992 and 1998, with an estimated 150,000 dead, the GSPC carried with it three consequential elements:

- the violent legacy of the civil war and its heavy toll on Algerian society;
- an entrenched radical Islamist identity prone to armed violence; and
- a design on the part of this group to not disarm and perpetuate its armed insurrection.

High-level violence and mutation were, thus, the initial defining features of this entity – itself an off-shoot of the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, GIA) harkening back to the early 1980s Armed Islamic Movement of Mustapha Bouyali and Said Makhouloufi – as they would remain persistent ones.

The GSPC had been set up in 1998 by Hassan Hattab, who led the group until being replaced by Nabil Al Sahraoui in August 2003 who, in turn, was killed by the Algerian army in June 2004 and replaced by Abdelmalek Droukdel as “national emir” (see Box 2). For the organization, the period 1998-2003 was one of strategic repositioning following the end of the Algerian civil war. Manifold Islamist groups acting loosely were being fused into the newly-formed GSPC. The resurgence of the GSPC then began in earnest in 2003 when its southern region leader, Abderrazak Lamari known alternatively as Amari Saifi and Abderrazaq “El Para” (a former paratrooper of the military school of Biskra) led the kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists released months later after a European government reportedly agreed to pay a ransom of 4.6 million Euros. On the heels of this major operation, the group was divided into six sectors, with the most active being the ones headed respectively by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and “El Para” (subsequently accidentally apprehended in mid-March 2004 by a Chadian rebel group, the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT), and handed the following October to the Algerian authorities).¹

The 2003 kidnapping hence initiated the first phase of the GSPC’s expansion of its action, namely its *regionalization*. It similarly triggered important regional military deployment and prompted counter-terrorism maneuvers conducted by the United States army in cooperation with the countries of the region under the 2004 Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) which expanded an existing regional cooperation framework, the 2002 Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI). (In October 2008, the TSCTI was folded in the US Africa Command).

Such unprecedented display of coordinated military force did not, however, alter the situation, and, over the following years, between early 2003 and mid-2011, the Islamists would kidnap a total of fifty-four Westerners – German,

French, Canadian, Swiss, Spaniard, British, Austrian, and Italian – and three African nationals from Burkina Faso, Togo, and Madagascar. Four of these individuals would die in detention, while five others (four Frenchmen and an American) would be killed in separate operations.

The attraction that Al Qaeda exerted on the North African group was first expressed through a statement made in early 2003 by its then-leader Nabil Al Sahraoui expressing unilateral support to Osama Bin Laden. Subsequently, the group’s new leader Droukdel (now in Al Qaeda-emulating fashion known as Abou Moussab Abdelweddoud) secretly sent a letter in the fall of 2004 to the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abou Moussab Al Zarqawi, and in July 2005, the GSPC publicly congratulated Al Zarqawi for the killing of two Algerian diplomats based in Baghdad. Though they did not fully desire formal engagement in the area, Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Al Dhawahiri had long been in discussion with North African militant Islamists. A first contact had been established through the regional head of the GIA in Europe, Omar Mahmoud Othman (aka Abu Qotada al Filistini). Earlier, a Yemenite Islamist, Abdelwahab al Wani, visited Algeria in 2000 on behalf of Bin Laden, and was killed there in September near the city of Batna. Al Wani had had discussions with his local contacts – in particular “El Para” who by then had moved further south in Algeria – about the establishment of an Al Qaeda fi Bilad al Berbar (Al Qaeda in the Land of the Berbers), an early version of AQMI. In that respect, the cross-fertilization of Al Qaeda and North African Salafists was first and foremost a mutually beneficial arrangement.²

From the Maghreb to the Sahel

In 2006 then, the GSPC moved into the second layer of its expansion strategy by *internationalizing* its action through a formal association with Al Qaeda. Following the repeated approaches towards the organization of Bin Laden, the GSPC was eventually granted a regional representation of Al Qaeda when number two Ayman Al Dhawahiri announced on 11 September 2006, that the GSPC had joined Al Qaeda “to lead the fight in the Maghreb”. The following 11 January, the GSPC itself declared that in line with its integration into Al Qaeda it was adopting a new name: Tandhim Al Qaeda fi Bilad Al Maghrib Al Islami, the Organization of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Subsequently, in a videotaped message aired on 3 November 2007, Al Dhawahiri announced that a Libyan group, the Fighting Islamic Group (a little-known organization which briefly emerged in 1995 vowing to overthrow Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi) had joined Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. A month after Al Dhawahiri’s call, four French tourists were murdered in southern Mauritania. Two days later, three Mauritanian soldiers were killed in an ambush in the northern area bordering Algeria, and the following 1 February, the Mauritanian capital was targeted. The attacks were all claimed by AQMI.

The November 2007 announcement by Al Dhawahiri had also been prompted by the increasing perception that, for all its regional mission, AQMI had remained up to that point mostly a local affair. In Morocco, besides a May 2003 operation in Casablanca against several Western-related buildings, there had been scattered radical Islamist activity

as illustrated by the death of suspected kamikazes (Mohammed Mentalla and Mohammed Rachidi) who had been about to be apprehended by the Moroccan police on 10 April 2007. A month later, another suicide bomber (Abdelfateh Raydi) was killed in a Casablanca cybercafé, and an alleged accomplice (Youssef Khoudri) injured. Yet besides these developments and statements by Islamists in Mauritania (five individuals had been arrested in Nouakchott on 19 October 2007 and accused of links with AQMI), the North African Al Qaeda scene remained dominated by the former and now reformed GSPC.

In unilaterally pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda, the GSPC had also meant to put forth and share an anti-French strategy with Al Zargawi after the latter threatened that country on 18 May 2005 for its treatment of Muslims. Indeed, in a memorandum dated 16 December 2005, the French Anti-Terrorist Struggle Coordination Unit (*Unité de Coordination de la Lutte Antiterroriste*, UCLAT) had estimated that the Al Qaeda threat against France had become “particularly elevated” as a result of these pronouncements.

Initially, AQMI displayed Al Qaeda’s *modus operandi*, in particular (i) high-profile coordinated attacks against symbolic targets, (ii) active use of the media and the Internet and (iii) investment in lengthy preparations and timing. Hence, AQMI’s twin bombings in Algiers on 11 April 2007 had targeted a government building and a police precinct housing special police forces. Much like the operations conducted by the Hamburg or Madrid cells, the attacks were the work of a small commando, in this case three individuals – known by their war monikers Al Zubair Abu Sajeda, Mu’az Ben Jabal, and Abou Dejna – whose videotaped wills were circulated immediately by the group. Furthering that pattern and echoing Al Qaeda in Iraq’s own 2003 attacks on the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, AQMI struck anew on 11 December 2007 with near-simultaneous bombings in Algiers targeting the United Nations representation and the Constitutional Council. The same day, the group announced that the attacks had been conducted by two of its members, Ibrahim Abu Othman and Abdulrahman al Asimi.

Even in the context of a chronically violence-beset country such as Algeria, the difference in scale and method used by the new entity was noticeable. In that sense, no such spectacular bombings had been resorted to by the various factions at war during the 1990s civil war in the country (with the exception of an 26 August 1992 bombing at the Algiers airport).

Still, in spite of the publicized name change, the new North African group arguably never fully mutated from its GSPC identity to an Al Qaeda one, and in a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, Droukdel himself imparted that the bulk of his organization was made of Islamists from the Algerian *maquis*.³ By 2008, the pan-Maghrebi assertion campaign having proved limited in its overall impact on the region, AQMI redirected its operations further south in the Sahel and stepped up its abductions in Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. Over the next three years, it would also conduct attacks on military bases in Mauritania, in Tourine

in September 2008 (12 killed), and target as well Algerian security forces in the Tebessa region in February 2009.

In that context, counter-terrorism was stepped up. On 22 July 2010, France and Mauritania conducted a joint raid on an AQMI base in northern Mali. Meant to free a French hostage held since the previous 19 April, the assault failed, the hostage was killed and four AQMI fighters escaped. The French Prime Minister then declared that his country was “at war with Al Qaeda” thus opening a new more muscular phase of frontal confrontation between AQMI and France, which might have been what the organization itself had been desiring in order to augment its visibility internationally. Indeed, two months later, the group conducted its biggest operation since 2003 with the kidnapping of seven workers of the Areva firm in Niger (four of whom are still being held), and in January 2011 its attempted abduction of two other Frenchmen ended in the latter’s death when French and Niger forces led a failed rescue attempt.

From Terrorism to Criminality

The persistence and increase of AQMI’s level of threat in the region has raised a number of questions, in particular as regards its resilience and spread. In that respect, the nature of AQMI’s terrorism itself and its association with transnational criminality networks prevalent throughout the region have indicated a specificity whereby the group has often appeared to act in the name of lofty ideological and religious ideals only to reveal a more immediate interest in ransoms, which are in turn reversed in such “political economy” of terrorism. A case in point is the one of the September 2010 kidnapping of the Areva workers in Niger. Initially, AQMI demanded that France orders its troops out of Afghanistan (a request it restated on 27 April 2011) and abrogates its law prohibiting the wearing of the Islamic veil in public institutions. Yet it then released three of the seven abductees when a ransom of several million Euros had reportedly been paid, and increased its financial demands by further requesting ninety million Euros for the four hostages still in custody.⁴

Such operational ambiguity has by now become a distinctive feature of AQMI’s “Islamist terrorism” wherein hostage-hustling, car-smuggling, drug-trafficking, money-counterfeiting, arms-dealing, cigarette-reselling, and gasoline-bootlegging are more present than political or religious pronouncements. An indication of the magnitude of this political economy was provided with the October 2009 discovery of a Boeing 727 that had landed secretly in northern Mali and was stuck upon taking off after overflowing several tons of cocaine. Originally flying in from Latin America, the airplane had been set on fire in an attempt to cover its presence after its accident. This event was a dramatic telling sign of the superposition of drug routes and AQMI’s terrorist activity. Further indications of a junction between the “Colombian Connection” and the “Sahel Connection” emerged in 2010 when reports came of a “drug summit” held in Guinea-Bissau in late October at which AQMI was represented by newly-emerging figure Abdelkrim “the Tuareg” Targui.

Box 1: GSPC/AQMI Major Operations, 2003-2011

2003

22 February-11 April: Thirty-two European tourists (sixteen Germans, ten Austrians, four Swiss, one Dutchman, and a Swede) are taken hostage between the towns of Ouargla, Tamanrasset, and Djanet in Algeria. Seventeen are freed on 19 May and fourteen on 19 August. One dies of exhaustion. Much confusion surrounds the kidnapping and release.

2004

1 May: GSPC militants use Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) to kill two soldiers in the Chrea forest near Algiers.

2 June: The GSPC ambushes a military convoy and kills ten soldiers in Eastern Algeria.

2005

4 June: The GSPC conducts an attack on a Mauritanian base in the area of Lemgheity, killing fifteen soldiers.

7 January: The GSPC kills thirteen soldiers and five civilians in Biskra, Algeria.

18 February: The GSPC kills eighteen soldiers in Batna, Algeria.

2006

10 December: GSPC militants in Algeria bomb a bus carrying workers of the firm Brown & Root, an affiliate of Halliburton.

2007

11 April: Using car bombs, AQMI targets the Prime Minister's office and a police precinct in Algiers. The blasts kill 33 people.

8 September: AQMI conducts attacks in Batna and Dellys ahead of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's visit.

11 December: AQMI attacks several targets in Algiers including the Algerian Constitutional Council and the United Nations office. 63 people are killed.

24 December: A family of four French tourists is gunned down by AQMI in Aleg, Mauritania.

27 December: Three Mauritanian soldiers are killed by AQMI militants at the military base of Al Ghalawiya.

2008

22 February: Austrian tourists Andrea Kloiber and Wolfgang Ebner are kidnapped in Tunisia. They will be released on October 28 in Mali.

14 September: Twelve soldiers are captured and killed near the Tourine army base in northern Mauritania.

14 December: Kidnapping in Niger of two UN diplomats of Canadian nationality, Robert Fowler and Louis Guay. They will be released on April 22.

2009

22 January: Four Western tourists (two Swiss, one German, and one British) are kidnapped at the border between Niger and Mali. The Swiss and German nationals are released on 22 April and 12 July.

31 May: AQMI kills British hostage Edwyn Dwyer, who had been kidnapped on 22 January.

23 June: American aid worker Christopher Leggett is shot dead by AQMI in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

7 July: Killing of 29 Malian soldiers by AQMI militants in northern Mali.

29 July: Killing of fourteen Algerian soldiers by AQMI militants in Damous, Tipaza in northern Algeria.

9 August: Failed suicide attack on the French embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania.

25 November: Kidnapping in Bamako, Mali of French national Pierre Camatte. He will be released on 23 February 2010.

29 November: Kidnapping of three Spanish humanitarian workers in Mauritania, Albert Vilalta, Roque Pascual, and Alicia Gomez. They will be released separately on 10 March and 22 August 2010.

18 December: Kidnapping of two Italian citizens, Sergio Cicala and Philomene Kabore, in Mauritania. They will be released on 10 April 2010.

2010

25 July: AQMI leader Abdelmalek Droukdel announces that his group has executed a French hostage who had been kidnapped on 19 April. The announcement takes place three days after a failed French and Mauritanian military raid on an AQMI camp in northern Mali.

25 August: AQMI attempts a foiled suicide operation against Mauritanian military barracks in Nema.

16 September: In Arlit, Niger, AQMI kidnaps seven workers of the French Industrial conglomerate Areva-Satom, including five Frenchmen. Three of the detainees are released on 25 February 2011.

2011

7 January: AQMI attempts to kidnap two Frenchmen, Antoine de Léocourt and Vincent Delory, from a restaurant in Niamey, Niger. French forces intercept the militants near the Mali border. The two hostages and four of their abductors are killed during the engagement.

2 February: An Italian tourist, Maria Sandra, is taken hostage by AQMI near the city of Djanet in Algeria.

15-17 April: AQMI militants kill twenty soldiers near the Azazga military outpost in Algeria.

28 April: A remote-controlled explosion in a café in Marrakech, Morocco bearing the hallmarks of AQMI kills sixteen people, including eight French nationals.

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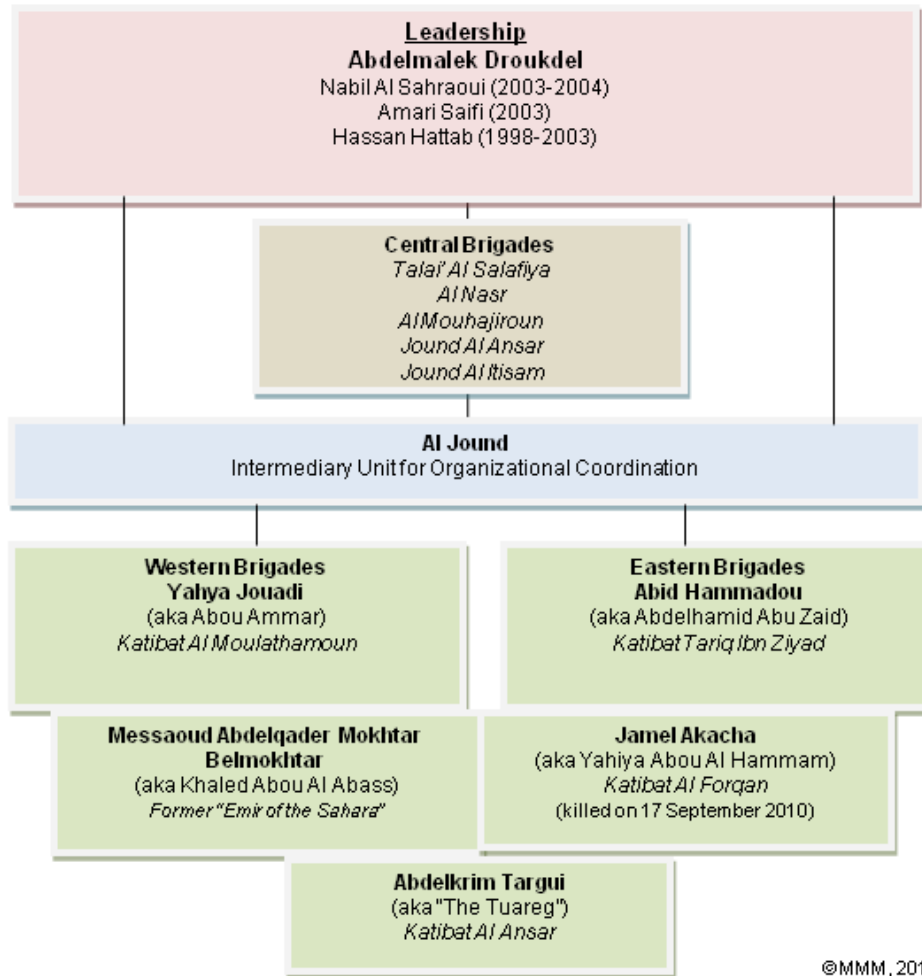
In this worrisome context, AQMI has been pushing its activities further south in Sub-Saharan Africa, increasingly developing links with particularly violent organizations such as the Boko Haram group in Nigeria, whose militants Droukdel offered to train in 2010.

AQMI's sway has however often been a double-edged sword wherein the replenishing of "troops" (and indeed the regular replacement of leaders) betrays an internal organizational instability. Since the ideological message is secondary, then the group's appeal to radicals must be regularly underscored by material considerations ensuring their loyalty.

The Libyan Opportunity

Instability and conflict often breed terrorism. As has happened in Iraq and Afghanistan following the US-led intervention in those two countries in 2001 and 2003, the chaos brewing in Libya in 2011 is likely to benefit terrorist organizations in the Maghreb, first and foremost amongst these AQMI. The group positioned itself rapidly with a 24 February message of support to the rebellion followed by a 19 March statement by Droukdel. On 19 April, AQMI released a statement by one of its representatives, Saleh Abu Mohammed, indicating that it was not pursuing the establishment of an "Islamic Caliphate in Libya".

Box 2: AQMI's Structure



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More consequentially, in late March, reports emerged that, following the uprising in Benghazi, AQMI had been able to enter Libya, acquire heavy weaponry, and transport it back to the Sahel. The weapons, which included SAM-7 anti-aircraft and RPG-7 anti-tank missiles, were obtained either directly through commando-style penetration operations or indirectly through purchases from mercenaries returning from Libya who had been able to access the arms depositories which Libyan leader Kaddafi had ordered open on 26 February. Up until now, and for all its attacks on Algerian, Mauritanian, and Malian army posts, AQMI had not been able to acquire more than explosives and AK-47s. (Historically, Al Qaeda's "Arab Afghans" ancestors fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s had been able to deal lethal blows to the Soviet troops precisely using similar missiles of the Stinger type).

In such a context, *the Libyan vortex can well accelerate the militarization of AQMI*, which was already noticeable with the February 2011 thwarted operation against Mauritania. Between 29 January and 2 February, the Mauritanian army had foiled a large-scale attempt by Al Qaeda when it located and destroyed three vehicles carrying 1.5 ton of explosives coming from Mali and heading for the capital Nouakchott. Hence, earlier talk of an "Afghanization" or "Somalization" of the Sahel, which might have appeared premature as AQMI fundamentally lacks the wider fundamentals of terrorism proliferation (armed violence in the face of an occupying army and an enabling environment

with a population supporting its cause) could approximate that scenario due to the conflict in Libya.

In the final analysis, AQMI has managed to reinvigorate itself through (i) its association with Al Qaeda and (ii) the steady expansion of its domain of attack and threat enabled by (iii) a political economy of terrorism-cum-criminality. The group's ambition to target the wider region has accelerated following the French-Mauritanian July 2010 raid and the February 2011 Libyan revolution. As the region's countries haphazardly pursue an excessively politicized counter-terrorism cooperation program which remains largely a work in progress, and France is increasingly facing problematic military choices in the area, the coming phase will be particularly crucial in addressing insecurity in North Africa and the Sahel. With an AQMI now closing on the Mediterranean and using cell phones, satellite imagery, global positioning navigation systems, night vision equipment, and possibly anti-aircraft missiles, the story of this transnational terrorist group might well reveal itself a self-fulfilling prophecy.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

Endnotes

1 Arguing that members of the GSPC, notably "El Para" and Hattab, may allegedly have had links with intelligence services, several reports have cast doubt on the narrative of the GSPC as an independent radical militant Islamist group, regarding it as a stoked-up regional threat for strategic interests. See International Crisis Group, *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?*, Brussels, March 2005; F. Gèze and S. Mellah, "*Al Qaida au Maghreb ou la Très Étrange Histoire du GSPC Algérien*", *Algeria Watch*, September 2007; and J. Keenan, *The Dark Sahara – America's War on Terror in Africa*, London, Pluto, 2007.

2 A. N. Celso, "Al Qaeda in the Maghreb: The 'Newest' Front in the War on Terror", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 19, 1, 2008, p. 81. Also see R. Nelson and T. Sanderson, *A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011*, Washington, DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2011.

3 S. Mekhennet, M. Moss, E. Sciolino, and M. Williams, "A Threat Renewed: Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Lifeline from Al Qaeda", *The New York Times*, 1 July 2008, p. A1.

4 On the early signs of this duality, see L. Martinez, "*Les Groupes Islamistes entre Guérilla et Négoce – Vers une Consolidation du Régime Algérien?*", *Les Études du CERI*, 3, Paris, August 1995.

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