

## About the Author

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## Key Points

- ◆ **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) poses the greatest immediate threat of transnational terrorism in northwest Africa and is escalating its attacks against regional and Western interests.**
- ◆ **The U.S.-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership has focused on building local and regional capacities to combat AQIM, but these efforts have proved insufficient to prevent further attacks, let alone defeat the group.**
- ◆ **While Algerian counterinsurgency operations in the northeast of that country have degraded the group's capabilities in the Maghreb, AQIM activity in the Sahel—including Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—has increased dramatically since 2007.**
- ◆ **Extremist AQIM leaders threatening attacks in Europe, emerging ties with militants in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, the potential for AQIM to benefit from unrest in North Africa, and AQIM's growing connections to West Africa's drug trade are all factors that may force a more robust U.S. response.**

# The Evolving Threat of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

by Andre Le Sage

The United States faces an important strategic question in northwest Africa: what level of activity by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) would constitute a sufficient threat to U.S. national security interests to warrant a more aggressive political, intelligence, military, and law enforcement response? AQIM already poses the greatest immediate threat of transnational terrorism in the region, and its operational range and sophistication continue to expand.<sup>1</sup> Since 2007, the group has professed its loyalty to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda's senior leadership and claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks in the subregion. These attacks have included the use of suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, kidnapping operations, and assassinations.

AQIM's targets include African civilians, government officials, and security services; United Nations (UN) diplomats and Western embassies; and tourists, aid workers, and private sector contractors. As a result, combating AQIM is the focus of substantial foreign security assistance provided by Western countries, including the United States and France, to their partner nations in the Maghreb and Sahel. In 2005, the United States created the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) to coordinate activities by the Department of State, Department of Defense (DOD), and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to combat terrorism in the region.<sup>2</sup> Now including 10 African countries,<sup>3</sup> TSCTP operates with a combined annual interagency budget of approximately \$120 million.<sup>4</sup>

However, the extent of the threat posed by AQIM and the appropriate U.S. response remain hotly debated in both academic and policy circles. These debates question the seriousness of the threat posed by a relatively small group of hundreds of militants operating in mountainous and arid areas of Africa, their level of ideological commitment versus their criminal and financial motivations, and even the potential complicity of regional security services in supporting AQIM.<sup>5</sup>

The United States needs to understand the nature of the threat that AQIM poses today as well as current trends highlighting the future capabilities and intentions of the group. Only with these assessments in place can U.S. policymakers make appropriate decisions on questions about counterterrorism in northwest Africa that are hotly but inconclusively debated.

## Overview of AQIM

Emanating from Algeria's decade-long conflict with Islamists in the 1990s, AQIM is the only significant militia force remaining from that struggle. Led by Abdulmalik Drukdal, it was created when the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) pledged allegiance to al Qaeda's senior leadership in January 2007.<sup>6</sup> While the GSPC was seen as a national insurgency on the verge of collapse because of continued Algerian security operations, AQIM quickly proved that it was not a spent force. In December 2007, the group conducted simultaneous bombings in Algiers of the UN office complex and the Constitutional Court—a symbol of AQIM's new dual agenda of attacking both Algerian national and global jihadi targets.

AQIM aspires to become a transnational movement across the Maghreb and Sahel areas, encompassing the militants and communities that were loyal to earlier generations of Islamist militant groups in the region, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, Tunisian Islamic Front (TIF), Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Jihad (GMPJ), and others. These groups were effectively suppressed by North African governments, but the drivers of extremism in the region, including poverty, political marginalization, and social alienation, have never been fully addressed.<sup>7</sup>

Based in the mountains of Boumerdes in Algeria's Tizi Ouzou region,<sup>8</sup> AQIM is a highly structured organization. Despite significant Algerian military pressure, the group coordinates its activities through a centralized shura council, including emirs responsible for matters related to military affairs, religious propagation, finance, and communications/

propaganda. In addition to its overall emir, Abdulmalik Drukdal, the United States has identified Ahmed Deghdegh (Abu Abdallah) and Salah Abu Muhammad (Salah Gasmi) as AQIM's finance and communications leaders, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

The size of the group remains limited. While estimates vary, the overall number of AQIM militants is near 1,000.<sup>10</sup> Military commanders are organized into battalions responsible for four distinct zones of operation. Three of these zones spread across northern Algeria, and a fourth zone covers the Algerian Saharan and Sahel areas. The zones are then subdivided into *katibas* or battalions assigned to a particular commander.<sup>11</sup> In the southern zone or Sahel, roughly 300 militants are split between AQIM's two main Sahelian battalions, the Tarik Ibn Ziad Brigade led by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid and the Al Mulhatamin Brigade led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Another leading militant is Yahya Abu Hammam, who is reported to be second-in-command to Abu Zeid.<sup>12</sup> Under their leadership, the Sahel has been transformed from a rear base to an active operational area.

Despite suspicions several years ago that AQIM was making inroads with Sahelian tribal communities, particularly the Tuareg or Berabiche, contacts and sympathies between them remain limited. Rather than mobilizing mass public support from the local population, AQIM has cultivated relationships with key individuals through marriage and business. Other criminal elements have been

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employed by AQIM as contractors to conduct kidnap operations and deliver their hostages back to AQIM leaders for a fee. Of course, some exceptions exist and a small number of Tuareg or other Sahelian tribal militants have

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joined the ranks of AQIM. According to *Jane's*, “One Malian who seems to be growing in importance in AQIM is Abu Ab-al-Karim al-Tarqi, an alias that indicates he is a Tuareg.” He is reported to be responsible for killing a French hostage in July 2010 and commands a small group of 50 fighters in the Al Ansar Brigade.<sup>13</sup>

AQIM has increasingly sophisticated propaganda capabilities and maintains a media group known as Al Andalus, which regularly releases statements that cri-

tique northwest Africa’s ruling regimes, detail the group’s ideological demands, or take credit for attacks. However, according to Geoff Porter, “It is challenging to derive from this ideology what the group wants beyond a rough sketch—to rid North Africa of insufficiently Islamic governments and to cleanse North Africa and the Sahara of foreigners, in particular the French and the Americans.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite representing an immediate security threat, the small number of militants that AQIM has been able

to attract from across northwest Africa demonstrates the general lack of appeal of the group's message. Other than Algerians, the largest number of AQIM recruits now comes from Mauritania. The government in Nouakchott has long been wary of political Islamic movements in the country, and groups such as the GMPJ were successfully repressed by national security services. Nonetheless, a small group of militants known as Al Murabitin is reported to have left the country and joined with AQIM (at that time still the GSPC) in 2006.<sup>15</sup> This is likely the basis for the growing number of Mauritanian recruits and Mauritania-focused operations by AQIM.

Securing funds to continue its operations is a major source of concern for AQIM. While conducting individual attacks may cost only tens of thousands of dollars, maintaining the movement is far more costly. Like other terrorist groups, AQIM needs to recruit, train, equip, and sustain its forces, as well as purchase weapons, ammunition, and explosives. To make matters more difficult and expensive, AQIM must accomplish these tasks in the mountains of Algeria and the desert expanses of the Sahel. In the latter location, accessing fuel and water alone is a costly endeavor.

European hostages have been by far the most valuable source of revenue for AQIM. Despite official denials, media reports suggest that multimillion-dollar ransoms as well as the release of incarcerated AQIM militants from regional prisons are regularly offered for the safe release of these hostages.<sup>16</sup> Some analysts estimate that ransoms paid for Western hostages between 2008 and 2010 amounted to \$25 million and that the average payment for a Western hostage is as high as \$6.5 million.<sup>17</sup> If ransoms were paid for the release of three additional hostages in February 2011—one French, one Malagasy, and one Togolese—then the overall sum of ransom paid to AQIM in the past few years may be significantly higher.<sup>18</sup>

## Assessing the AQIM Threat

AQIM does not pose an immediate threat to Algeria's political stability, and aggressive counterinsurgency

operations there have left the group little choice but to conduct low-level hit-and-run and explosives attacks against government forces. Today, the Sahel is where AQIM poses the most immediate threat to African and Western interests. While parts of northern Mali were a longtime GSPC rear base, smuggling zone, and training area, AQIM's new leadership has turned the Sahel into an operational area. Belmokhtar and Abu Zaid, AQIM's southern zone commanders, have ordered numerous kidnapping operations against Western tourists, diplomats, and aid workers.<sup>19</sup> Victims have included nationals of France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as several African countries.

While most hostages have been released for ransom—a critical means of raising revenue for AQIM's sustainability—a growing number risk execution. A British hostage, Edwin Dyer, was the first to be killed in 2009, after the

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British government failed to respond to AQIM demands for the release of convicted terrorists from British jails.<sup>20</sup> In July 2010, Michel Germaneau, a 78-year-old French engineer kidnapped by AQIM in Niger, was executed. Following his death, French President Nicholas Sarkozy declared war on AQIM and provided military support to a Mauritanian security operation to attack AQIM elements threatening additional attacks in Nouakchott.<sup>21</sup>

The threat of kidnapping has continued to expand. In 2010, the United States warned that AQIM was plotting to kidnap a Western national in northern Burkina Faso, resulting in the evacuation of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers.<sup>22</sup> In January 2011, two French citizens were

killed during a failed rescue operation after an AQIM-sponsored raid of a restaurant in Niamey, the capital city of Niger.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, while hostages are moved to northern Mali after being seized, the actual kidnapping operations have taken place across the border in Niger or Tunisia.<sup>24</sup> This has led some to suspect that AQIM does not want to jeopardize its safe haven in the Sahel or incur the wrath of the Bamako government by conducting attacks on Malian soil.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, Mauritania has become the site of a growing number of AQIM attacks. This includes several confrontations with local security forces, the murder of a family of French tourists in December 2007, a failed assault on the Israeli embassy in February 2008, the murder of a U.S. aid worker in the capital city in June 2009, and a failed suicide bombing of the French embassy in August 2009. Most recently, in February 2011, Mauritanian soldiers intercepted an AQIM convoy only 8 miles outside of the capital as it tried to enter the city to launch car bomb attacks.<sup>26</sup> AQIM responded to the botched attack by threatening to kill President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz for his collaboration with France in the war on terrorism.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the significantly increased operational tempo of AQIM in the Sahel since its formation from the GSPC, the group faces a large number of constraints, and even its increased operational activities in the Sahel may be of limited interest to al Qaeda globally. In particular, AQIM has failed to emerge as a trans-Sahara umbrella organization. Its operations inside Algeria have been constrained by persistent counterinsurgency pressures from local security forces, and AQIM has conducted few major attacks in Algeria since 2008.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, AQIM has not been able to extend operations into key countries in the Maghreb, including Morocco, Tunisia, or Libya.<sup>29</sup> In fact, leaders of the LIFG actually rejected a possible merger with al Qaeda in a June 2009 statement.<sup>30</sup>

Most kidnapping activities of AQIM are intended to secure ransom payments so the terrorist group can continue financing its operations and have resulted in only limited casualties. Aside from Mauritania, the

group has conducted few attacks in other Sahelian countries. And, as detailed below, while AQIM is known to have relations with drug trafficking syndicates operating in the Sahel, the link is not direct. Rather, AQIM levies a tax on all types of smuggling operations in the region for financial gain.

By these metrics, there would appear to be little strategic pressure to step up efforts to defeat AQIM. In fact, it could be argued that additional counterterrorism

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activities, especially those led from outside the African continent, would be counterproductive. They might enable AQIM to portray its operations as defensive efforts to combat U.S. aggression and create a motivation for foreign fighters to flow toward northwest Africa to support their AQIM brethren.

### **Future Scenarios**

African and international government strategies should be careful not to exacerbate the existing AQIM problem, but they should not be premised on the current threat picture alone. They must also take into account the potential short- and medium-term evolution of the AQIM threat and prepare appropriate responses. With the next several years in mind, there are already several indicators that AQIM is a growing, not a stable or receding, threat to U.S., European, and African security interests.

AQIM continues to threaten attacks on Western countries, with France and Spain regularly identified as targets.<sup>31</sup> Both al Qaeda's senior leadership and AQIM have declared their intention of "restoring *al-Andalus*," the section of the



Iberian Peninsula that was once ruled by Muslims.<sup>32</sup> In April 2010, an AQIM posting on a jihadi Web site threatened to attack the U.S.-England soccer match at the FIFA World Cup in South Africa.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the group's predecessor organization, the GSPC, was known to maintain significant networks across Europe, although these were used primarily for financing and foreign fighter facilitation purposes. With AQIM's capabilities in the Maghreb and Sahel at a plateau, al Qaeda's senior leadership may seek for AQIM to reactivate these networks or build new ones to make its threats against Europe a reality.

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An additional risk is that AQIM will lash out in response to increased unilateral security pressure by key countries in the region that do believe the group to be an immediate threat. Even if the United States does not presently rank AQIM as an imminent strategic threat, countries such as France, Algeria, and Mauritania certainly do. The potential for their security forces to confront AQIM outside their borders, with or without the consent of a country such as Mali, was demonstrated in two separate incidents in 2010. As noted above, France supported a brief Mauritanian military incursion into northern Mali in July after AQIM killed a French hostage. This was followed in September by a sustained Mauritanian operation into Mali to push AQIM elements away from its border.<sup>34</sup> If these operations succeed in pressuring AQIM, the group may respond by conducting new attacks in Bamako, Dakar, or elsewhere.

AQIM's relationship with drug trafficking through West Africa is an additional concern.<sup>35</sup> In 2007, an estimated 40 tons of cocaine valued at \$1.8

billion transited West Africa, comprising some 27 percent of Europe's annual supply.<sup>36</sup> Facilitation of the drug trade and other smuggling activities through the Sahara has bolstered the capabilities of ethnic militias drawn from the Tuareg and Berbiche tribes and, more recently, AQIM. Members of these groups all run protection rackets against traffickers and receive financial payoffs in exchange for either escorting contraband shipments or simply leaving the traffickers unmolested. Until recently, most drugs were smuggled from coastal West Africa to Europe via commercial air or sea routes. However, overland trade across the Sahel may be on the rise. In 2009, a Boeing 727 aircraft was burned on a desert airstrip in northern Mali after as much as 10 tons of cocaine had been offloaded.<sup>37</sup> As this illicit trade continues to expand, there is potential for a significant growth in AQIM's revenue streams and operational capabilities.

The possibility also exists for AQIM to develop cooperative relations with other al Qaeda-affiliated movements in other parts of Africa. The most worrisome potential relationship would be with the East Africa al Qaeda cell and the Somali al Shabaab movement, which are known to provide safe haven and training to a wide range of foreign fighters.<sup>38</sup> If such ties developed, the resulting threat would be substantial. The groups could pool resources (including fighters and funds) and support each other with recruitment, indoctrination, training, and facilitation of movement. Of more concern, however, are the very complex threat vectors that would emerge from pooled target sets and personnel: a terrorist operative from one country could get recruited in a second country, receive training elsewhere, and ultimately be deployed for an attack far from home. The resulting challenge of "connecting the dots" to disrupt such plots would become enormously complex.

### **AQIM and Nigeria**

Over the short term, there is potential for AQIM to penetrate and begin operations farther south into

West Africa. Even if the group does not have any substantial public support there, AQIM may attract small numbers of disaffected Muslims in the subregion to expand their network or conduct limited terrorist operations. In fact, some assessments note that AQIM already has personnel or facilitators or at least smuggling contacts as far west as Senegal, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau.<sup>39</sup> That said, the greatest concern now should be ties developing between AQIM and the militant Boko Haram movement in Africa's most populous country, Nigeria.

In a recent communiqué to Nigeria's Muslim community, AQIM emir Drukdal stated, "We are ready to train your children to use weapons and will supply them with all we can, including support and men, weapons, ammunitions and equipment, in order to defend our people in Nigeria and respond against the aggression of the Christian minority."<sup>40</sup> This follows a series of deadly clashes in early 2010 between Nigerian Muslims and Christians in the city of Jos, which has heightened inter-religious tensions. It also follows Nigerian security force confrontations with the militant Islamist movement Boko Haram, whose name is commonly translated to mean "Western education is a sin," in July 2009.<sup>41</sup>

Boko Haram came to prominence in the rural northeastern states of Nigeria in 2003. It was initially led by a charismatic preacher named Mohamed Yusuf, who attracted thousands of followers to his mosque in Maiduguri. His acolytes included a cadre of educated and middle-class former students from regional universities, as well as recruits from Islamist schools and the wider public interested in Yusuf's critique of Western civilization as the driving force behind what he perceived to be Nigeria's political corruption and lack of social mores. While known today as Boko Haram, the group has also been known as Jama'at Hijra wal Takfir. More colloquially, it had been labeled the "Nigerian Taliban" following statements praising the government and ideology of the Afghan Taliban and its leader Mohamed Omar. It is estimated to number

several hundred militants and a broader following in the low thousands.

Boko Haram's evolution as a political and military challenge in northern Nigeria has been slow and uneven. The group first made headlines between December 2003 and late 2004 when its supporters attacked police stations and government offices in Yobe State near Nigeria's border with Niger.<sup>42</sup> The attacks and the subsequent police crackdown led to dozens of deaths and displaced thousands of Nigerians from

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affected towns. From 2005 until 2008, the group was dispersed and relatively inactive. However, Mohamed Yusuf publicly reemerged in northern Nigeria that year. In 2009, he and his followers barricaded themselves in the group's Maiduguri compound after Nigerian security services discovered caches of weapons and explosives in their possession. After a military assault on the compound, Mohamed Yusuf was killed (possibly while in custody<sup>43</sup>) along with some 100 followers.<sup>44</sup>

Following Yusuf's death, there was another lull in Boko Haram's activity, leading some analysts to hope that the group had been successfully disrupted and dispersed. Such optimism was crushed in 2010 when Boko Haram reappeared in northeast Nigeria. The group conducted a prison raid in Bauchi that freed hundreds of inmates, including a substantial number of the group's followers. Boko Haram also walked away from the prison with a new cache of weapons and ammunition.<sup>45</sup> Following the prison raid, Boko Haram activity continued to increase. Operations have included the targeted killings of dozens of Nigerian police and government officials since mid-2010, often conducted

by young men shooting from the back of moving motorcycles.<sup>46</sup> This ongoing, low-level violence was punctuated by the even more serious threat of targeted bombings. On Christmas Eve of 2010, Boko Haram expanded its area of operations to Nigeria's restive Middle Belt where Christian and Muslim communities from different tribal backgrounds contest control of local land and government offices. Boko Haram launched coordinated bomb attacks against Christian churches in the town of Jos, killing over 80 people.<sup>47</sup> Another bombing followed. It killed dozens at New Year's Eve celebrations at a Nigerian army barracks in the capital city of Abuja.<sup>48</sup>

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These incidents represent a more dangerous trajectory of militancy by Boko Haram since the death of Mohamed Yusuf. His reported successor, Abubakar Shekau (Abu Muhammad), appears to be focused on short-term violence by clandestine Boko Haram cells rather than cultivating a mass public following.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, Nigerian security services have been at pains to locate Boko Haram militants who are able to find safe haven in Nigeria's remote northern border areas or operate cross-border into Niger and Cameroon near the Lake Chad basin. If AQIM follows up its public statements of support for Boko Haram with actual operational cooperation, the threat will expand further. AQIM could provide sophisticated operational training to Boko Haram leaders and foot soldiers. More worrying still, AQIM may influence Boko Haram's

target selection by pushing or even funding the Nigerian group to attack Western interests.<sup>50</sup>

## AQIM and the "Arab Spring"

Recent uprisings in North Africa—ranging from the ousting of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt to the ongoing crisis in Libya—raise additional concerns about AQIM's future evolution. Certainly, these events caught AQIM by surprise just as they did the rest of the world.<sup>51</sup> However, AQIM is attempting to take advantage of the situation. While there were no indicators of prior connections to antiregime organizers in these countries, AQIM has released several media statements supporting demonstrators and rebel forces and calling for similar pressure to be brought against the regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria.<sup>52</sup> These are obvious attempts to overlay AQIM's agenda and vision onto those of antiregime proponents, and they have not been met with interest even by political Islamic forces in the new governments or political parties in Tunisia or Egypt, or the rebels in eastern Libya.

Nonetheless, there are several reasons why the unrest in North Africa will provide new opportunities for AQIM to strengthen its role in the Maghreb, as well as avenues for AQIM to bolster its capabilities in the Sahel. First, AQIM will be tempted to send militant cells to Libya to participate in ongoing antiregime efforts or to launch their own attacks. Their efforts could gain further notoriety and possibly credibility for AQIM with opposition elements that may eventually take the reins of national or regional power. Even a limited operational foray into Libya could be an investment in alliance building. Alternatively, AQIM could simply take advantage of the fact that security services in Tunisia and Libya have their hands full and cannot prevent AQIM from placing operatives as sleeper cells to conduct future attacks against Western interests.

Second, even once the unrest in North Africa ends, the new governments are unlikely to focus significant energy on domestic and regional counterterrorism concerns.



New governments in the region led by civil society leaders are unlikely to have close and trusted relations with their own internal security and intelligence services. Moreover, these governments may not have the same control over their territory and borders that their more autocratic predecessors did. AQIM will likely find greater freedom of movement in the subregion and possibly the opportunity to establish new safe havens for their Maghreb operations in peripheral areas of Tunisia or Libya.

Third, AQIM may also hope to find new militant Islamist partners in North Africa. During the 1980s and 1990s, the LIFG, Tunisian Combat Group, and TIF were effectively suppressed by the Qaddafi and Ben Ali regimes.<sup>53</sup> However, there is a chance that these groups may reemerge over the coming years, possibly fed by foreign fighter returns from other jihadi theaters such as Afghanistan, by Islamist militants released from North African prisons during the unrest, or by a new generation of militants who are angered by insufficient outcomes of their revolutions. AQIM would certainly prefer to harness such individuals and nascent movements to become part and parcel of its own group as an umbrella movement for militant action in the region. Yet even if these groups developed their own leadership structure and national cadres, AQIM would be strengthened by coordinating operations with them.

Finally, AQIM is likely to exploit the unrest in Libya by gaining access to additional weapons, ammunition, and explosives from stockpiles that are no longer controlled by the government. With millions of dollars of ransom money at its disposal, particular concern is focused on AQIM's ability to acquire man-portable air defense systems, which could be used to target military and civilian aviation.<sup>54</sup>

## Strategy Considerations

These indicators demonstrate the potential for a growing and serious AQIM threat to both African and Western national security interests. Their realization would likely drive increased U.S. security involvement

in the Sahel. A relatively small number of opportunistic kidnapping-for-ransom operations and involvement in smuggling activity may be viewed as manageable problems. Yet with more extremist leadership of AQIM's Sahelian battalions, more funding for AQIM operations from hostage ransoms and drug smuggling, the emergence of affiliated militant movements in Nigeria, and the potential to leverage ongoing unrest in North Africa, there is a possibility that AQIM could escalate its operational tempo, expand its area of operations, and further enmesh AQIM in global jihadi operations that are autonomous from its traditional guerrilla activities in Algeria.

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Since 2005, the United States has responded to the threat posed by AQIM by establishing the TSCTP to coordinate efforts by the U.S. Department of State, DOD, and USAID to combat terrorism in north-west Africa. U.S. military efforts under the TSCTP umbrella fall under Operation *Enduring Freedom—Trans-Sahara* and are managed by U.S. Africa Command and its Special Operations Command—Africa component through a Joint Special Operations Task Force—Trans-Sahara.

According to Ambassador Daniel Benjamin, the State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism:

*The program supports partner efforts to: build long-term capacity to defeat terrorist organizations and facilitation networks; disrupt efforts to recruit, train, and provision terrorists and extremists;*

*counter efforts to establish safe havens for terrorist organizations; disrupt foreign fighter networks that may attempt to operate outside the region; address underlying causes of radicalization; and increase the capacity of moderate leaders to positively influence vulnerable populations. It also supports efforts to increase regional and sub-regional cooperation and interoperability, in such areas as communication and intelligence sharing.*<sup>55</sup>

TSCTP partner countries now include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. It has been a successful interagency effort weaving together disparate programs focused on diplomacy to build regional political will to combat terrorism, and the program has increased regional security cooperation, support for good governance, community outreach, poverty reduction, and

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humanitarian assistance with military-led training efforts to build African command-and-control, special forces, general infantry, intelligence, communications, and logistics capabilities.<sup>56</sup> One of the major objectives of this effort has been convincing countries, including Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Algeria, to increase their cooperation against AQIM. The formation of a joint military base and intelligence fusion cell by these countries in the southern Algerian town of Tamanrasset is a possible indicator of progress in building a harmonized regional approach.<sup>57</sup>

While this represents a measure of success for the United States, a study by the U.S. Government

Accountability Office in July 2008 found several areas that need to be addressed for TSCTP to be implemented more effectively.<sup>58</sup> These include the lack of a “comprehensive, integrated strategy,” including prioritization of operational activities against milestones of progress, questions of authority over DOD personnel temporarily assigned to work in Africa, challenges of adequately resourcing State Department and USAID efforts, and the lack of metrics to gauge TSCTP’s success over time.

Despite international efforts to build military capacity, promote regional intelligence sharing, and develop political will in the region, there has been little coordinated action by Sahelian countries against AQIM. For instance, U.S. Special Operations forces have been heavily engaged through Joint Combined Exchange and Training (JCET) activities to build the counterterrorism capabilities of elite African military units across the Sahel, with a focus on Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. However, Mali—where AQIM’s Sahel battalions are based—has never fully “graduated” its forces from this training cycle or put their new skills and equipment to use in confronting AQIM, resulting in a stable safe haven for the movement.

A primary criticism of U.S. interagency efforts has been lack of clarity on the final objectives of TSCTP activities. On the one hand, if the objective is actually to defeat AQIM, the United States would be required to become more directly engaged in on-the-ground security efforts to confront AQIM. However, there is concern that increased U.S. involvement in the region would not be welcomed by countries such as Algeria and Mali<sup>59</sup> and that such involvement would legitimize and build support for AQIM in the eyes of Islamic militants in Africa and around the globe. On the other hand, if the objective is to support regional security capabilities and promote development over the long term, there is a serious danger that the level of investment is too little and too slow to contain AQIM. In brief, the United States is at risk of allowing a small, geographically isolated and exposed threat to metastasize across

other parts of the continent while waiting for African partners to take action.

## Conclusion

At present, the threat posed by AQIM may appear manageable, particularly to policymakers concerned that additional U.S. involvement in the region may exacerbate Islamist militancy and increase regional tensions. However, as described above, events on the ground in north-west Africa indicate a serious potential that the threat posed by AQIM will continue to grow. In this context, the United States needs to be prepared to take more aggressive actions to disrupt, degrade, and ultimately defeat AQIM and should clearly determine in advance what level of increased AQIM activity would represent a direct threat to U.S. national security interests.

There are a number of specific scenarios that would likely force the United States, working in conjunction with its African and European partners, to act. These include: increased AQIM operational presence and attacks on capital cities, including Bamako, Niamey, Dakar, and Abuja, or other urban centers in Nigeria; hostage crises involving credible AQIM threats to harm U.S. citizens if political demands are not met; use of AQIM's safe haven in the Sahel by other al Qaeda-associated movements or AQIM support for new generations of militants in the Maghreb; planning by AQIM to conduct attacks against U.S. or European diplomatic, military, or private interests in Africa; and any AQIM effort—whether successful or unsuccessful—to launch or support al Qaeda-linked attacks outside the African continent.

In the latter case particularly, there would likely be an immediate increase in direct U.S. counterterrorism pressure, as happened with regard to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen after the failed December 2009 airline bombing plot. However, even lower levels of threat activity would require the United States to take more aggressive political, intelligence, military, and law enforcement actions against AQIM. While challenges exist to implementation—including rancorous regional relationships, the need for a combined mul-

tilateral campaign, and the expansive geographical area in which AQIM operates—the outlines of such a strategy are clear.

First, the Department of State, acting through U.S. Embassies in the region, needs to place far more pressure on the governments of Mali, Algeria, Mauritania, and Niger to take coordinated action against AQIM. The message needs to be clearly delivered that the establishment of military coordination and intelligence-sharing mechanisms is an insufficient response if no actual security pressure is brought to bear against AQIM in places such as northern Mali. Given France's declaration of war on AQIM, it is quite certain that that country would support U.S. diplomatic efforts, and other European Union partners are likely to follow suit.

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**the United States needs to be prepared to take more aggressive actions to disrupt, degrade, and ultimately defeat AQIM and should determine what level of AQIM activity would represent a direct threat to national security interests**

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Second, the U.S. Intelligence Community needs to work with European and African counterparts to build a better understanding of AQIM's vulnerabilities and how they can be leveraged. Tensions are often reported among the group's Sahelian battalion leaders, as well as between them and the national emir in Algeria.<sup>60</sup> Opportunities may exist to exploit these divisions, possibly through tribal contacts and negotiations to bring less ardent jihadists out of the desert. Alternatively, in its arid safe haven, AQIM remains highly dependent on the financing it receives from ransoms and the logistical support it receives from criminal and smuggling networks. Domestic security agencies in the Sahel could, for instance, track down, arrest, and

prosecute the town-based facilitators of AQIM who provide weapons, funds, and other supplies to AQIM units operating in deserted areas of the Sahel. Since many of these actors are also involved in other regional smuggling and criminal activities, joint counterterrorism and law enforcement efforts would be most useful. Additional intelligence, law enforcement, and counterterrorism assets should also be dedicated to track and help Nigerian security services dismantle Boko Haram and to support new regimes in North Africa to prevent the revival of militant movements there.

Third, if coordinated and resourced properly, simultaneous and internationally supported military action should be considered. If supported by Mali, Mauritania,

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**if supported by Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Algeria, a slow and deliberate movement of forces into northern Mali could effectively box in and destroy AQIM's Sahelian battalions**

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Niger, and Algeria, a slow and deliberate movement of forces into northern Mali could effectively box in and destroy AQIM's Sahelian battalions. In this regard, DOD could provide additional support to select African partners to actively degrade, if not defeat, AQIM. In some cases, particularly in the Maghreb, TSCTP partners do not currently require or simply would not authorize the deployment of U.S. or other foreign forces on their soil to directly support security actions against AQIM. Elsewhere, however, particularly in the Sahel, African actions are limited by continued problems of capacity or confidence that could be addressed by embedding Western military and intelligence advisors and mentors within local counterterrorism units.

On the one hand, given their limited actions in northern Mali in 2010, the French military may be willing to take a strong lead in supporting sustained

offensive operations in the Sahel. On the other hand, there are potential means for additional U.S. engagement. One available option to increase assistance in the Sahel is shifting U.S. special operations activities from training and equipping local militaries through JCET programs to more aggressive Joint Planning and Advisory Teams. Under this construct, U.S. forces would not engage directly in combat but would provide support to local security initiatives to field patrols in AQIM-dominated territory. In addition, the presence of U.S. forces near the front lines with AQIM would ease constraints on the sharing of sensitive intelligence, which would certainly be useful for African efforts to combat AQIM.

Fourth, military actions against AQIM are unlikely to succeed on their own. They need to be balanced with and premised upon a range of diplomatic and peacebuilding activities in northwest Africa to achieve several objectives. Countries in the Sahel, particularly Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, need to embolden ongoing efforts to reach out to disenfranchised and antagonized communities to ensure their acquiescence to, if not support for, these security actions. In Mali, this requires accelerated implementation of the Algiers Accords with the Tuareg-based Alliance for Democratic Change (ADC), including further economic development efforts and the integration of ADC forces into mixed paramilitary units designed to promote security in the country's northern regions. In Niger, newly elected civilian leaders must similarly reach out to Tuareg communities to ensure that the insurgent Movement of Nigeriens for Justice is not revived. Without such confidence-building measures, pressing militarily into disputed territories on the continent—which U.S. policymakers often refer to as “ungoverned areas”—is a recipe for exacerbating existing tensions and possibly pushing local actors into the arms of criminal or terrorist groups.

Together, these four elements of a more aggressive U.S. involvement in the campaign against AQIM are the basis for a clearer strategy to protect U.S. national security inter-

ests if the AQIM threat continues to grow. At the same time, it represents a middle ground between direct U.S. military action that could exacerbate the AQIM threat and the current approach of supporting African security capabilities in the hope they will eventually be deployed to improve regional security. Essentially, the United States would take a lead in forging regional agreement to confront AQIM on the ground. However, U.S. forces would focus on assisting African security forces at the operational level without compromising African governments' sovereign control of their forces. Thus, their role remains within the framework of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership to support African countries' own efforts to combat terrorism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Other active terrorist threats in the subregion include a range of low-level, often unnamed, extremist cells operating in Morocco, and Hizballah operatives focused primarily on fundraising in West Africa.

<sup>2</sup> For details on U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the region, see Daniel Benjamin, "Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities, Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region," testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, November 17, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) partner countries now include Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. Burkina Faso joined TSCTP in 2009, and Libya has been discussed as a possible future partner.

<sup>4</sup> TSCTP was created following the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), which ran from 2002–2004 and focused on military training and equipment provision for only Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.

<sup>5</sup> See David Gutelius, "Islam in Northern Mali and the War on Terror," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 25, no. 1 (January 2007), 59–76; and Jeremy Keenan, "Waging War on Terror: The Implications of America's 'New Imperialism' for Saharan Peoples," *Journal of North African Studies* 10, nos. 3, 4 (September 2005), 619–647.

<sup>6</sup> For background on the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), see *Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?* Africa Report No. 92, International Crisis Group, March 31, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> For additional details, see Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, Monograph Series Number 144, Institute for Security Studies, June 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Geoff Porter, "AQIM's Objectives in North Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 2 (February 2011).

<sup>9</sup> "AQIM's African Recruitment," in *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, March 4, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> See *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," Group Profile, March 8, 2011; and the National Counterterrorism Center, "Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," Group Profile, available at <www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqim.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Use of the term *brigade* or *battalion* in the al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) context does not imply any particular force structure or size similar to Western military convention. In fact, one brigade or battalion may actually be a subunit of another brigade or battalion in AQIM parlance.

<sup>12</sup> Leela Jacinto, "Key Figures in al-Qaeda's North African Branch," *France* 24, September 24, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> "AQIM's African Recruitment."

<sup>14</sup> Porter, 5.

<sup>15</sup> "AQIM's African Recruitment." Also see "Political Transition in Mauritania: Results and Prospects," Middle East/North Africa Report No. 53, International Crisis Group, April 2006.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, see "Al-Qaeda Group Hints at Ransom Payment for Freed Spanish Hostages," *The Guardian*, August 24, 2010, which reports a payment of nearly 4 million euros for the release of two Spanish aid workers. Other sources place the ransom closer to 10 million euros.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Charles Brisard, "AQIM Kidnap-for-ransom Practice: A Worrisome Challenge to the War against Terrorism Financing," *The Terror Finance Blog*, September 27, 2010, citing Algerian government sources. Also see Duncan Gardham, "Al-Qaeda a 'Money Making Machine,'" *The Telegraph*, March 15, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> "France Says Three Hostages Released in Niger," Xinhua, February 26, 2011. Two additional French hostages, employees of the Areva and Satom corporations supporting uranium mining operations in Niger, remain held by AQIM.

<sup>19</sup> Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "AQIM Funds Terrorist Operations with Thriving Sahel-Based Kidnapping Industry," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 8, no. 4, January 28, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> "Al-Qaeda 'Kills British Hostage,'" BBC News, June 3, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> "France Says Joins Mauritanian Strike on al-Qaeda," Reuters, July 23, 2010; and "France 'Declares War on al-Qaeda,'" Al Jazeera, July 28, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> "Americans Evacuated from North Burkina Faso after Terror Warning," *New York Post*, July 7, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> "Two French Hostages in Niger Killed in Rescue Attempt," BBC News, January 8, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> For a map showing locations where AQIM hostages have been abducted, see *Jane's Terrorism and Security Center*, "Desert Storm Brewing," November 2, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> "AQIM Risks Mali Refuge," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, August 27, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> "Mauritania: 'Al-Qaeda Men Die' as Troops Fire on Car," BBC News, February 2, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> "AQIM Threats to Kill Mauritanian President for His Ties with France," *Ennabar Online*, February 7, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> In August 2008, AQIM successfully conducted a suicide attack on Algerian police and military buildings near Tizi Ouzu, killing some two dozen people.

<sup>29</sup> While several al-Qaeda-inspired attacks have taken place in Morocco and Tunisia in the past decade, these were conducted by local groups not affiliated with AQIM. For further details on the terrorist threats in those countries, see Andre Le Sage, "Terrorism Threats and Vulnerabilities in Africa," in *African Counterterrorism Cooperation*, ed. Andre Le Sage (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press and Potomac Books, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Camille Tawil, "Libyan Islamists Back Away from al-Qaeda Merger in Reconciliation with Qaddafi Regime," Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 17, June 18, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Luc Marret, "Homeward Bound: AQIM Fails to Strike Western Europe," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 11, 2010.



<sup>32</sup>J. Peter Pham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: An Evolving Challenge in the War on Terror," Strategic Interests, *World Defense Review*, May 8, 2008, available at <<http://worlddefensereview.com/pham050808.shtml>>.

<sup>33</sup>Richard Edwards, "Terrorism Threat to England Opening Match against USA at Football World Cup," *The Telegraph*, April 10, 2010.

<sup>34</sup>"Mauritania Strikes at Militants on Mali Border," BBC News, September 18, 2010.

<sup>35</sup>Johnnie Carson, "Confronting Drug-trafficking in West Africa," testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, Washington, DC, June 23, 2009.

<sup>36</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Cocaine Trafficking in West Africa: The Threat to Stability and Development* (Vienna: UNODC, December 2007), 3.

<sup>37</sup>Serge Daniel, "Burnout Boeing, A Clue in African Drugs Trade," Agence France Presse, December 11, 2009.

<sup>38</sup>For instance, Nigeria recently extradited to the United States a man trained by al Shabaab in Somalia. Mr. Mohamed Ibrahim Ahmed was captured in Nigeria with a large sum of money and instructions for manufacturing bombs. See "Nigeria: Man Arrested in Country Charged in U.S. with Assisting Terror Group," *The Daily Trust*, March 9, 2010.

<sup>39</sup>"AQIM's African Recruitment."

<sup>40</sup>NEFA Foundation, "AQIM: 'The Annihilation of the Muslims in Nigeria,'" February 1, 2010, available at <[www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/NEFA%20AQIM%200210.pdf](http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/NEFA%20AQIM%200210.pdf)>.

<sup>41</sup>More recently, the group's propaganda statements have used the name Jama'atu Ahlu Sunna Lidda'awati wal Jihad or "The Group of the People of Sunnah, Call and Jihad."

<sup>42</sup>Some date the formation of Boko Haram to as early as 1995 when a cleric named Abubakah Lawan led a movement named Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a Hijra. See Freedom C. Onuoha, "The Islamist Challenge: Nigeria's Boko Haram Crisis Explained," *African Security Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2010), 55.

<sup>43</sup>"Nigerian Sect Head Dies in Custody," BBC News, July 31, 2009.

<sup>44</sup>"Nigerian Troops Shell Islamists," BBC News, July 28, 2009.

<sup>45</sup>Adam Nossiter, "Prison Raid in Nigeria Releases Hundreds," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2010.

<sup>46</sup>Adam Nossiter, "Killings in Nigeria Are Linked to Islamic Sect," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2010.

<sup>47</sup>"Islamic Sect Claims Nigeria Attacks, Toll at 86," Reuters, December 28, 2010.

<sup>48</sup>"Nigerian Capital Abuja Hit by Barracks Bomb," BBC News, January 1, 2011.

<sup>49</sup>The potential for Islamist extremism in Nigeria to directly impact U.S. security interests was demonstrated by the failed attack

in December 2009 on Northwest Flight 253 by a Nigerian national, Umar Farouk Abdul Mutallab. However, while that plot transited Nigeria, no connection has been made to Boko Haram.

<sup>50</sup>It is important to note that at this time, Boko Haram's attacks have neither impacted nor threatened the productivity of Nigeria's hydrocarbon sector. Oil production in the Niger Delta is the target of distinct groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta. See Michael Watts, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate? Conflict & Violence in the Niger Delta," *Review of African Political Economy* 34, no. 114 (December 2007), 637-660.

<sup>51</sup>Nelly Lahoud, "Revolution in Tunisia and Egypt: A Blow to the Jihadist Narrative?" *CTC Sentinel* 4, no. 2 (February 2011), 4.

<sup>52</sup>For instance, see "Al-Qaeda Supports the Events in Tunisia and Algeria," *Ennabar Online*, January 14, 2011.

<sup>53</sup>See Andre Le Sage, "Terrorism Threats and Vulnerabilities in Africa."

<sup>54</sup>Scott Stewart, "Will Libya again Become the Arsenal of Terrorism?" Stratfor Global Intelligence, March 10, 2011. Also see "Libyan Anti-aircraft Missiles in the Hands of Droukhal," *Ennabar Online*, March 26, 2011, citing a statement by Chadian President Idris Deby that AQIM already acquired surface-to-air missiles.

<sup>55</sup>Ambassador Daniel Benjamin, "Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities, Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region," testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on African Affairs, November 17, 2009.

<sup>56</sup>In addition to bilateral engagement, the United States has worked to develop regional counterterrorism strategies and capabilities through engagement with the African Union's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism and regional groupings such as the Economic Community of West African States. These organizations, however, do not play an operational role in combating terrorism. For further details, see Jason Ipe, James Cockayne, and Alistair Millar, "Implementing the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in West Africa," Center on Global Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, September 2010.

<sup>57</sup>See Walid Ramzi, "New Sahel-Saharan Joint Military Command Opens in Algeria," *Magharebia*, April 22, 2010.

<sup>58</sup>U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), "Combating Terrorism: Actions Needed to Enhance Implementation of Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership," report to Ranking Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, GAO-08-860, July 2008.

<sup>59</sup>See "Mali Says West Should Limit Fight Against AQIM," Associated Press, October 13, 2010.

<sup>60</sup>For instance, see Nazim Fethi, "Droukdel Possibly Out as Leader of AQIM," *Magharebia*, March 15, 2010. Also see *Jane's*, "Desert Storm Brewing."

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