Terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel: Al-Qa'ida's Franchise or Freelance?

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Cover Photo: The aftermath of the December 11, 2007 al-Qaʻida in the Islamic Maghreb attack on UN Headquarters in Algiers, Algeria (UN Photo/Evan Schneider).

About the Author

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Abstract

This Policy Brief *examines the real and imagined influence of al-Qaʿida in North Africa and the Sahel. Despite a perception of the transnationalization of terrorist movements in North Africa under al-Qaʿida's banner, robust evidence of an effective al-Qaʿida's expansion in the Maghreb and the Sahara/Sahel region remains elusive at best. Rather, doubts about al-Qaʿida's actual threat and the efficacy of international response in the context of pervasive state failure in the Sahel raise questions regarding the policy objectives of US-led counter-terrorism in the region.*

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The commonly agreed upon narrative on the impact and leverage of terrorism in North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel has its inherent logics and obvious shortcomings. There is no doubt that North Africa remains a critical area for radical Islam's (Salafi jihadism) expansion, which affects each North African country both idiosyncratically and transnationally. Over the past 20 years, the threat of terrorism has been reinforced by the emergence of organizational and institutional networking of nationally-based, radical Islamist movements with European and Middle East outreach, in particular its most active group in North Africa, Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Yet, close scrutiny of AQIM's foothold in the Sahara and Sahel region fails to convey a sense of urgency and critical threat, let alone of an incipient offensive posture or projection capability emerging from an autonomous operational basis in the Sahel.

AL-QA'IDA'S REGIONAL MOMENTUM

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has emerged from the harsh legacy of Algeria's civil war of the 1990s and government forces' eventual containment of the radical Islamist insurgency. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 demonstrated a shift in North African states' ability to stem the terrorist trend in the region and reverse popular support for radical Islam, as evidenced by Algeria's successful dismantlement and reintegration of the Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). This led, in turn, to remnants of radical Islamist groups seeking greater transnational cooperation in the Maghreb, Europe, and the Sahara-Sahel. Thus, the resurrection of the GSPC in its new al-Qa'ida outfit (AQIM), whether an act of survival instinct (most national Salafist groups in Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia lost their initial power base) or arranged marriage, reportedly propelled terrorism in the Maghreb to a new level of effectiveness and international attention. The 2007 deadly attacks on foreign targets in Algeria demonstrated improved offensive capabilities and communication maturity. In addition, the successful disruption of North African terrorist cells in Europe may have prompted AQIM to step up operations in the Sahel. Despite a marked decrease in high-profile incidents in Algeria, AQIM continued to carry out car and suicide bombings in Algeria, targeting law enforcement personnel, security forces and exceptionally foreign workers (see Tables 1 and 2). In Morocco, authorities routinely claimed to have either foiled terrorist plots, disrupted AQIM cells, or apprehended suspects (with no follow-up on investigation or court trials). As noted by Daniel Benjamin, US State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "AQIM has failed to conduct attacks or operations in Morocco, Tunisia, or Libya."[1]

- Over the past three years (2008–2010), AQIM operations in Mauritania led to the ambush and killing of Mauritanian soldiers and the kidnapping of foreign tourists and aid workers (Italian and Spanish).
- In Mali, low-level AQIM attacks targeted security forces, but they also managed to kidnap a small number (nine) of Western countries' nationals, releasing over half of them (reportedly after ransom was paid). The fate of the remaining hostages was unknown at the time of writing.
- Spanish tourists kidnapped in Mauritania were also released, reportedly after payment of ransom by the Spanish government.
- In Niger, a British tourist — who was abducted along with three other European tourists (subsequently re-

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1. See US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy across Africa's Sahel Region*, Testimony by Daniel Benjamin, Coordinator for Counterterrrorism, US Department of State, November 17, 2009.

leased) — was executed two years later in Mali, following the British government's refusal to release a prominent Muslim cleric.

- A French aid worker was killed in Mali after a failed rescue raid by French-Mauritanian forces.
- Five French and two African nationals working in a French-operated uranium mine in northern Niger were abducted; three of them were released (one French woman and the two African nationals) without confirmed report of ransom.
- Two French nationals who had been abducted in Niger's capital fell victim to another failed rescue attempt by French forces in Mali.

Table 1: AQIM Incident Counts by Type: Algeria

Year	Armed Attacks	Assaults	Bombings	Suicides
2006	8	1	9	0
2007	16	3	21	(5)*
2008	5	2	17	(8)*
2009	16	3	21	(1)*
2010	5	0	10	(2)*

* Included in bombings record. Source: Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS).

Table 2: AQIM Incident Counts by Type: Mali, Niger, and Mauritania

Year	Armed Attacks	Assaults	Bombings	Kidnappings	Hijackings
2006	1	0	0	0	0
2007	2	0	0	0	0
2008	2	0	0	1	0
2009	7	2	1	5	2
2010	0	0	0	0	3

Source: Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS).

Thus, while AQIM's position in Algeria has significantly weakened in scope and nature (prevalence of low intensity, hit-and-run explosive attacks over armed attacks, with sharply reduced incidence of bombings and suicide attacks), there is no comparison between AQIM's incident record in Algeria and in the Sahara-Sahel (See Table 3). AQIM operations in Algeria still far exceeded the type and number of operations it carried out in the Sahara-Sahel. In this context, the conclusion that AQIM has "launched progressively more sophisticated attacks," multiplied targets, and improved ability to strike could not be fully supported.[2] With Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya out of reach for AQIM until now, dire warning of a regional momentum towards integration and increased capability throughout North Africa, combined with a strategic and operational shift to the Sahara-Sahel, may look premature.

AQIM's threat and capability should also be assessed against the nature and depth of its relations with al-Qa'ida. AQIM has provided fresh recruits to al-Qa'ida operatives in Iraq. Though the numbers may vary according to sources, between 9% and 25% of al-Qa'ida recruits in Iraq may have come from Algeria.[3] More importantly, however, the majority of North African al-Qa'ida foreign fighters in Iraq originated from countries where AQIM has little or virtually no impact, such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya. According to Felter and Fishman, based on 595 records of foreign nationals who entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007, Libya was the second most common country of origin (after Saudi Arabia) with 18.8%, followed by Syria (8.1%), Yemen (8.1%), Algeria (7.2%), and Morocco (6.1%).[4] Thus, on balance, the relationship be-

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2. Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," February 12, 2009, http://intelligence.senate.gov/090212/blair.pdf

3. Andrew Hansen, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 21, 2009.

4. Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records," Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, US Military Academy (December 2007), p. 8.

tween AQIM and al-Qaʻida in Iraq, as far as recruitment is concerned, does not appear robust. The conclusion is consistent with current estimates that al-Qaʻida's influence on and interaction with AQIM remains at best unclear, if not illusory.

Table 3: Terrorist Attacks and AQIM Incident Reports

Year	Terrorist Attacks	AQIM Incident Reports Number of Attacks (Number of Victims)			
	Maghreb/Sahel*	Algeria	Mauritania	Niger	Mali
2006	N/A	20(98)	0	0	9(1)
2007	161	40(785)	2(8)	0	0
2008	152	23(347)	2(17)	1(3)	0
2009	104	38(167)	5(10)	4(22)	3(2)
2010	N/A	15(133)	0	2(14)	1(2)

Algeria, Chad, Libya, Mali. Mauritania, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia. Sources: Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS); Yonah Alexander, "Maghreb & Sahel Terrorism: Addressing the Rising Threat of al-Qaeda and other Terrorists in North & West/Central Africa," International Center for Terrorism Studies and the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, January 2010.

ASSESSING THREAT AND VULNERABILITY

The small number of cases and lack of reliable, on-the-ground information about AQIM operations in the Sahara-Sahel preclude any conclusion on patterns of events or tactical trends, though ransom payments remain the preferred method for settling kidnappings. The type of human targets (European tourists and workers) and favorite area of operations (Niger and Mali), however, offer two important indicators: 1) AQIM's operative range is still linked to its Algerian power base, and 2) its communication strategy objectives seem to override and compensate for the lack of effective means to disrupt and challenge the security and governance of no-man's lands of national authorities in the Sahel.[5] Despite indications of growing regional recruitment within AQIM, the organization failed to offer a convincing case of pan-regional structure, let alone a loose confederation across borders. Rather, its ability to function as a meta-network for logistical and tactical support in Europe and North Africa has added complexity and unpredictability to threat assessments and preventive actions. AQIM's fiery brand of ideology and shady tactics have not elicited the kind of popular support that can sustain a broad-based insurgency or ignite civil conflicts in the region. Though more radical Islamic teachings have penetrated the region and could feed on social and economic desperation, the Sahel's tolerant and syncretic, yet conservative Islam has proved a resilient obstacle to Islamist extremism's attempt to destabilize any one of the region's vulnerable states. Despite critically missing thorough assessment of the situation on the ground, North Africa's home-grown terrorism lacks the strategic depth and operational capacity to mount a credible threat to regional stability or national states.

AQIM still has the capacity to sustain operations, given the Sahel region's mostly weak and failed states. It is also directly benefiting from states' abuse of justifying political inertia and consolidating autocratic power by citing internal terrorist threats. In one of the poorest regions in the world, AQIM's involvement with smuggling, money laundering, the black market, and drug trafficking across the Sahara-Sahel, West Africa, and further afield ensures minimum financial back-up and steady recruitment while expanding its transnational outreach. The Sahel and West Africa region has the highest concentration of failed states in the world, including some of the poorest countries on the planet. Half of Sahel and West African states are experiencing some form of instability; West African and Sahel states represent 13 of the 25 countries with the highest risk of new failure and six of the 17 countries with the largest increase in the risk of instability

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5. Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qaʻida in the Islamic Maghreb," *Carnegie Paper* (November 2009), pp. 9–10.

in 2008–2010, according to one rating.[6] Human development and failed states indices put most Sahel states in the worst performance category, while an even greater number are dependent on multilateral organizations for debt servicing and development aid (See Table 4). The UN Security Council even warned of "growing or emerging threats to security in West Africa, notably terrorist activities in the Sahel band, maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, and illicit drug trafficking which pose a threat to regional stability with possible impact on international security."[7] Thus, security challenges in the Sahel can be traced back to pockets of significant underdevelopment where minimum service delivery, infrastructure, and government control are critically lacking. In Mali and Niger, AQIM has stepped in where state functions no longer meet even the most basic needs of local populations.

Table 4: Sahel States Development Index

CEN-SAD Members	Failed States Index Rank (1-60) (Freedom House)	Peace and Conflict CIDCM (Highest Risk Score) (Univ. of Maryland)	Human Development Index (128-169 Rank) (UNDP)	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) (IMF/World Bank)	Fragile States (World Bank)**
Benin		16	134	X	
Burkina Faso*	35		161	X	
Central African Republic	8	17.6	159	X	X
Chad*	2	16.6	163	X	X
Cote D'Ivoire	12	19.5	149	X	X
Djibouti		28.2	147		
Egypt	49				
Eritrea	30			X	X
Gambia				X	X
Ghana			130	X	
Guinea Bissau	22	20.2	164	X	X
Liberia	33	22.7	162	X	X
Libya*					
Mali*		25.9	160	X	
Morocco					
Niger*	20	33.1	167	X	
Nigeria	14	25.6	142		X
Senegal			144	X	
Sierra Leone	29	23.3	158	X	X
Somalia		16.9		X	X
Sudan*	3		154	X	X
Togo	47		139	X	X
Not included: Mauritania Tunisia	39	21.4	136	X	

Founding members. CEN-SAD: Community of Sahel-Saharan States; CIDCM: Center for International Development and Conflict Management.
*** Source: IDA (2010), IDA Performance Based Allocation System: Review of the Current System and Key Issue for IDA16.*
Note: Blank spaces indicate that the country is not included in an index.

6. Namely: Niger, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire and Benin. See J. Joseph Hewitt, Jonathan Wilkenfeld and Ted Gurr, *Peace and Conflict 2010* (London: Paradigm Publishers, 2010).
7. UN Security Council, Statement of the Presidency, S/PRST/2009/20, July 10, 2009.

The over-stated threat of terrorism in the Maghreb and the Sahara-Sahel, far from feeding exclusively on economic and social grievances or arrested democratization reform process, is as much the creation of states' quest for internal regime stability as the result of their own incapacity to effectively contain jihadism and collectively address the security vacuum in the Sahel heartland (northeastern Mauritania, southwestern Algeria, northern Mali, and Niger).[8] The recent wave of unrest in North Africa, including the fall of the Ben 'Ali regime in Tunisia, has so far failed to showcase the pro-active involvement of AQIM or like-minded groups, regardless of the protests' economic and political motivations. Terrorism has failed to provide a credible alternative to social exclusion or political sclerosis. Yet, the new situation in the Maghreb ushers in a much more fluid context, affording fresh windows of opportunity for AQIM to co-opt popular demands, exploit divisions, and further its agenda. Politically volatile Mauritania, with poorly equipped security forces, is a case in point, as a spike of incidents in 2007–2009 has made the country a target of choice for AQIM.

The Sahara-Sahel is neither a political vacuum nor a *terra nullius*. The region has been the confluence of complex historical and human dynamics: from tribal-based society to colonial domination, as well as multiple geopolitical and religious fractures, the Sahel is rife with underlying tensions that outside interference could trigger. In particular, the measure of power in the Sahel depends on access to and control of informal markets, capital flows, and trade routes, which implies interactions with indigenous and excluded communities. While securing operational and training support bases in the Sahel and immediate surrounding countries (e.g. Libya and Nigeria), AQIM has built local and tactical alliances with Tuareg in Niger and Mali (but not with local Salafi movements or other insurgents) as well as most visibly in Mauritania — where the backcountry is increasingly used as AQIM's rear base in the region — and in the northern Mali's safe haven. Yet, the changing convergence of interests between AQIM and co-opted local groups (with ethnic grievances like the Tuareg or ideological agendas like the Mauritanian Group for the Teaching of Jihad) makes any prospect of AQIM growth uncertain.

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AQIM's potential involvement with the cocaine trade flowing into Western Europe from Latin America via West Africa is another critical factor. If such a trend is confirmed, AQIM's expanding operational capabilities, combined with prolonged unrest and a volatile security situation in the Maghreb, could deepen instability in the whole region. Yet, despite credible reports of exponential growth in cocaine trafficking in West Africa, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported "anecdotal information" about an increase in cocaine trafficking via the Sahara towards Europe and "little evidence of Mali and Niger rebels' involvement in trans-Saharan trafficking."[9] While cocaine routes from Southern Africa and West Africa, as well as heroin streams from East Africa, seem to converge through the Sahel and Algeria, there was no strategic thinking on the Sahel or linkage with terrorism.[10] Likewise, INTERPOL refers to an emerging trend of shipping cocaine via the West African maritime route, by-passing the Sahel (though it mentioned Mali),[11] which is consistent with UNODC mapping of cocaine seizure. In this context, enforcing a no-concessions policy on foreign governments' handling of their kidnapped nationals does not address the root cause of AQIM's strategy in the Sahel and its ability to rely on criminal networks — and in particular drug smuggling operations — to channel funds and purchase weaponry.[12]

8. Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," *ISS Monograph Series*, No. 144 (June, 2008).
9. See US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy across Africa's Sahel Region*, Testimony by David Grutelius, Johns Hopkins University, November 17, 2009.
10. UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Instability. Case Studies of Transnational Threat*, (Vienna: UNODC, 2010), pp. 16–18.
11. INTERPOL, Drugs. Cocaine, http://www.interpol.int/public/Drugs/cocaine/default.asp.
12. See US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy across Africa's Sahel Region*, Testimony by David Grutelius, Johns Hopkins University, November 17, 2009.

Table 5: Membership of Sahel States in Regional Organizations

State	CEN-SAD	AMU	ECOWAS	Arab League	Organization of Islamic Conference	Islamic Development Bank	Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa
Algeria		X		X	X	X	X
Benin	X		X		X	X	
Burkina Faso	X *		X		X	X	
Central African Republic	X				Observer		
Chad	X *				X	X	
Cote D'Ivoire	X		X		X	X	
Djibouti	X			X	X	X	
Egypt	X			X	X	X	X
Eritrea	X						
Gambia	X		X		X	X	
Ghana	X		X				
Guinea Bissau	X		X		X	X	
Liberia	X		X				
Libya	X *	X		X	X	X	X
Mali	X *		X		X	X	
Mauritania		X		X	X	X	X
Morocco	X	X		X	X	X	X
Niger	X *		X		X	X	
Nigeria	X		X		X		
Senegal	X		X		X	X	
Sierra Leone	X		X		X	X	
Somalia	X			X	X	X	
Sudan	X *			X	X	X	X
Togo	X		X		X	X	
Tunisia	X	X		X	X	X	X

Founding members. ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States; AMU: Arab Maghreb Union.
Note: Blank spaces indicate that the country is not a member of an international organization or insitution.

AQIM'S EVOLVING THREAT

In hindsight, the case for al-Qa'ida franchising in the Maghreb and the Sahel region looks weak, but given recent turmoil and regime changes in North Africa, the threat should be re-assessed upwards. Terrorism and weak governance alone cannot explain the regional dynamics which feed into AQIM's foothold in the Sahara-Sahel region. Even a trimmed-down state-building program, focusing on security sector reform, intelligence-sharing, and democratic governance, has reinforced the security apparatus of established authoritarian regimes, and thus incapacitated local appetite and outside pressure for political and economic reforms, while prompting external powers' intervention. In this regard, the US Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), stressing the capacity-building of moderate Islamic states in the Sahel

(Mali, Niger, and Mauritania) to deter and deny AQIM's safe havens, may miss the desired impact and lack strategic breadth. Without a regional integration approach institutionally linking the Maghreb, Sahel, and West Africa (see Table 5), a long-term solution will continue to escape the region. The competitive aspirations of Algeria and, formerly, Libya to intervene in the region — and given the number of overlapping regional organizations without the requisite geographical breadth and security mandate — should be tempered by a multilateral security mechanism for consultation, information-sharing, and operational planning. While a light footprint for international military assistance is helpful, addressing the root causes of instability in the Sahel should include reform of governance failure, which is more criminal in nature than political or ideological in outlook. Fighting criminality and corruption within government and the security apparatus will disrupt AQIM's underground financial and logistical support. As the conflict is about control of criminal activities, a combination of law enforcement operations and military preparedness could undermine the growing nexus between international criminal networks, terrorism, and the state and its security apparatus.[13] In this regard, the misalignment of the US and European counter-responses associated with the AQIM threat in the Sahel is less than perfect: in their fight against terrorism, the US and Europe risk making governance reform secondary to the need to maintain stability by helping rescue fledgling Sahel states. The recent wave of protests and the fall of autocratic regimes in North Africa not only demonstrated the limits of such a paradigm but could also mean less congenial counterterrorism cooperation with the US and European allies. Such a new zone of fragile states in the Maghreb could facilitate the emergence of new jihadist safe havens as well as extremism's opportunistic maneuvers which could further destablilize Sahel states either through a domino effect or prolonged governance failure. Sahel states should be more fearful of themselves than terrorism.

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13. Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Terrorism in the Sahel: Drivers, Actors, Options," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP Comment*, No. 1 (January 2011), p. 4.