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Al-Qaida in the Maghreb

Just a New Name or Indeed a New Threat?

Guido Steinberg / Isabelle Werenfels

The strongest armed faction in Algeria has changed its name to “al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb”, thus announcing a move towards internationalisation. It is not clear whether the group, in its weakened state, has simply adopted a new handle for recruitment purposes or whether it aims to step up its activities outside Algeria. The second alternative seems likely as the group is attempting to extend its operational area to the neighbouring states and to extend its recruiting activities in Morocco and Tunisia. Regardless of the actual magnitude of the terrorist threat, these efforts are likely to trigger a sequence of negative consequences, in that increased activities by the group will prompt the Maghreb states to increase their repressive measures and intensify their military cooperation with the USA. Both these responses have been shown to encourage armed groups in the past. Thus Europe would be wise to insist on the observance of human rights and due legal procedures despite the necessity of cooperation in security matters.

In mid-February 2007, an organisation called “al-Qaida in the Maghreb” claimed responsibility for an attack in which simultaneous detonations of at least six car bombs claimed several lives in two towns east of Algiers. At the end of January 2007, the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, GSPC) had announced the change of its name to “al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb” (Qaida al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami). This announcement represented the interim climax of an attempted rapprochement—on the rhetorical level if nowhere else—between the GSPC and the transnational terrorists of al-Qaida.

Al-Qaida had already acknowledged the alliance in September 2006. In a video message on the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, the organisation’s number two, Aiman al-Zawahiri, had stated that the GSPC and al-Qaida would be joining forces against the Americans and the French.

Since 2005, there have been repeated indications that the GSPC is extending its operating radius to the states bordering on Algeria. Most recently, shootouts between Tunisian security forces and armed Islamists south of the capital of Tunisia claimed at least twelve lives in December 2006 and January 2007. According to sparse official

reports from Tunisia, the militants involved in these clashes were Islamists from Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania with ties to the GSPC, who are believed to have infiltrated Tunisia from the Algerian border.

Only a few years ago, the GSPC explicitly confined its activities to Algeria, where it aimed to topple the government and set up an Islamic state. The group was founded in 1998 as a spin-off from the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA). The bloody massacres of civilians by the GIA had previously made headlines and caused public support for the group to dwindle. As a result, smaller groups split off from the GIA, and the largest of these, the GSPC, succeeded in regaining the support of parts of the population by largely confining its attacks to security forces and state institutions.

However, this group too was on the defensive by 2003. The Algerian security forces were generally successful in confining the operations of the GSPC to a mountainous region in the east and south-east of Algeria and also, with very few exceptions, in preventing larger-scale terrorist attacks. Responding to this situation, the GSPC began to move into the south of the country—where it was responsible for abducting 32 European tourists, among them 16 Germans, in spring of 2003—and to begin operations outside Algeria's borders in Mali, Chad, and Mauritania. At the same time, however, the GSPC was being increasingly weakened by internal policy and power struggles, and it began to seem as though the armed struggle in Algeria would shortly be over.

In this situation, the GSPC attempted to form ties with transnational organisations like al-Qaida and al-Qaida in Iraq. As early as October 2003, its then leader, Nabil Sahraoui (d. 2004) announced that the GSPC had subordinated itself to the al-Qaida organisation of Usama Bin Laden and to the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and would support their fight against the USA. In June 2004, he confirmed the new international thrust of the GSPC by

declaring war on all Western foreigners in Algeria. Sahraoui's successor, Abu Musab Abdalwudud, continued his predecessor's policies. In December 2006, the group performed its first attack in several years on a foreign target, claiming one life when a bus carrying employees of a joint venture between the American oil services company Halliburton and the Algerian oil corporation Sonatrach was attacked near Algiers—on one of Algeria's most securely guarded roads.

Empty words or a real threat?

The magnitude of the threat posed by "al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb" remains unclear. On the one hand, there are many indications that the group has stepped up its international activities. On the other hand, the Arab media report that the existence of the GSPC is threatened because the name change has rekindled old policy disagreements.

Over the last two years, there have been indications in the Sahel, North Africa, and Iraq that the GSPC is turning its attention to international activities. Even if these indications usually come from official sources in the region and must be treated with caution because the North African governments have a vested interest in instrumentalising the terrorist threat for their own political ends, the increasing frequency of the reports suggests a definite trend.

- ▶ The GSPC has stepped up its activities in the Sahara and the Sahel since 2003. In the past, it was difficult to distinguish between criminal and terrorist activities of the GSPC commanders in southern Algeria. In 2003, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who is a fugitive today, was not so much the head of an Islamist terrorist group as a local weapons smuggler. The abductors of the European tourists, too, had financial rather than political objectives. In the summer of 2005, however, Mokhtar's group is said to have attacked a Mauritanian army base near the Mali border, killing over a dozen soldiers.

- ▶ There have been increasingly frequent reports since 2005 from Morocco and Tunisia, countries bordering on Algeria in North Africa, about volunteers undergoing training in GSPC camps. Over the last two years, armed insurgents from Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya have repeatedly been arrested in Algeria. At least some of these fighters, however, return to their home countries to bolster the local terrorist infrastructure there. Thus the internationalisation of the GSPC to date has largely been a process of “pan-Maghrebitisation”.
- ▶ According to American, Iraqi, and North African security officials, the number of North Africans going to fight in Iraq has been increasing rapidly since 2005. Until then, the foreign contingents were dominated by Saudi Arabians and Syrians. In contrast, American figures suggest that of the total number of foreign fighters in Iraq today (between 800 and 2000 men), about 20% are Algerians. Additionally, there are reports of Moroccan, Libyan, and Tunisian fighters. These fighters do not currently pose a problem for the North African states. They do, however, indicate that international targets are very attractive to Jihadists in the Maghreb. In the long term, there is a danger that the fighters in Iraq—in analogy to the fighters returning from Afghanistan in the early 1990s—may return to their home countries and reinforce certain groups there once the situation in Iraq has stabilised.

These Iraq veterans also represent a threat to Europe. It can be expected that North African fighters will not return to their home countries, where security forces take extremely brutal action against (militant) Islamists. They are more likely to go to some other region with a large North African population—in other words, to Western Europe. And indeed the media is already reporting that North African fighters are starting to migrate towards Western Europe. The GSPC has maintained logistics networks in France, Spain, the

Benelux countries, and Germany in the past and could thus organise attacks in Europe as part of the internationalisation of its strategy. In particular, Spain and France, which have been the targets of terrorist attacks by Algerians and Moroccans in the past, are likely to remain in the sights of the Jihadists, especially as these two countries are the direct European neighbours of North Africa, which are perceived as superior in power and with which the unpopular North African governments cooperate closely.

Algerian media reports tend to contradict the hypothesis that North Africa and Europe are in increasing danger. These reports indicate that the GSPC is deeply divided and that its leader, Abu Musab Abdalwudud, is facing growing isolation as a result of the name change. Thus the name change may cause the GSPC to implode, and Algerian officials maintain that the group is “facing imminent, complete dissolution”. However, such claims must be taken with caution, as Algerian officials were predicting the imminent demise of the GSPC as early as 2002.

Additionally, it should not be forgotten that terrorist groups have been known to overcome a phase of weakness by adopting an international perspective—the founding of al-Qaida, for instance, was preceded by the internationalisation of its strategy. After an uprising by Islamist groups in Egypt failed in the mid-1990s, Egyptian and Saudi Arabian militant groups decided to fight not only against their own governments, but also against their governments’ American allies. The September 11 attacks in the USA were one consequence of this decision. Although these analogies must be treated with due caution, they do serve to highlight possible dangers for North Africa and Europe which could arise from the formation of “al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb”.

New recruiting potentials

For the al-Qaida leaders, isolated in Pakistan and capable only of limited action, the (rhetorical) joining of the GSPC has the advantage of helping to create the impression that al-Qaida is a genuinely global force. For the GSPC, it opens up the possibility of accessing the international financing and recruiting networks of al-Qaida. Thus the alliance could have more than just a public relations impact for the GSPC and al-Qaida in the Maghreb and could help to step up recruiting.

The attraction of Jihadism for young North Africans can be superficially explained in terms of the same factors which promote militant Islamism throughout the Muslim world. They include feelings of hatred—which are themselves rooted in a massive sense of humiliation—for the “crusaders and Zionists” occupying Palestine and Iraq. Additionally, there is great anger about the fact that the USA and Europe, despite frequent assertions to the contrary, still support authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. This resentment is one of the factors behind the admiration for, and the motivation to join, Bin Laden’s battle against the West.

North African Jihadism is also fuelled by a combination of the following factors, which may vary between different countries: Decades of political repression of the (Islamist) opposition by the ruling regimes and a monopoly on religious interpretation by clerics appointed by the state; Islamist indoctrination and agitation by battle-tested veterans returning from Afghanistan; and a lack of perspectives for young people coupled with social injustice—both of which are rooted largely in the failure of the post-colonial elites and their development projects.

Attraction and recruiting in Algeria

Unlike in the other Maghreb states, it is possible to identify an explicit trigger for the armed struggle in Algeria. The suspending of the parliamentary elections by

the army command in 1992 and the brutal suppression of the Islamist election winner, Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) forced thousands of Islamists to go underground. Their embracing of international terrorism is primarily an outgrowth of the subsequent civil war, during the course of which it became increasingly clear that they would be unable to topple the Algerian regime.

There is no agreement on the extent to which this disillusionment may have decreased the GSPC’s recruitment potential. While the Algerian government declared in 2002 that the terrorists were as good as defeated, claiming that there were only a few hundred remaining fighters in the underground, these assertions are contradicted by the fact that, since that time, Algerian newspapers have carried almost daily reports of the arrest or killing of one or more terrorists, while at the same time there is an increase, not a decrease, in the figures for GSPC membership published by official sources. In 2006, the membership of GSPC was estimated at 800. These confusing figures become even more impenetrable if one includes an estimated 300 combatants who are said to have laid down their arms in return for an extensive amnesty, which was offered in 2006 as part of the presidential initiative for reconciliation (*Charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale*).

Paradoxically, there are several indications that this offer of amnesty may have helped the GSPC’s internationalisation efforts by thinning the ranks of the combatants somewhat and thus increasing the urgency of recruitment. Considering that the GSPC’s struggle within Algeria has become a hopeless cause, internationalisation is now an option for increasing recruitment potential both within Algeria and beyond its borders. Algerians willing to fight thus gain the added perspective of contributing to the international Jihad, which is seen as having better chances of success and which attracts far more (media) attention than was ever accorded to terrorism within Algeria itself.

Attraction and recruiting in the neighbouring states

In contrast to Algeria, there are no groups in *Tunisia* which can look back on years of experience in armed combat; however, the bloody clashes between security forces and armed Islamists in early 2007 show that a potential for militancy exists in this country as well. The attack on Djerba in 2002 was an early indicator of this potential. Additionally, Tunisians allegedly recruited by the GSPC have been arrested in Algeria on several occasions since 2005. It is not clear whether they were recruited to fight in Iraq, in Algeria, or against the Tunisian regime.

One important factor contributing to the radicalisation of one part—albeit a small one—of the Islamist spectrum in Tunisia is the fact that all Islamist protagonists have been subject to severe repression and complete exclusion from the political process for over fifteen years. There is currently no Islamist party or civic organisation which could operate legally to direct the radicalisation of Islamist protagonists into political channels and thus exercise some control over it. The radicalisation of young people in particular is fostered largely by the tensions resulting from efforts over many years by the government—which, like that of Turkey, discriminates against women wearing headscarves—to modernise society against the backdrop of the religiosity of some sectors of the population which are increasingly reverting to traditionalism.

In *Libya*, too, Islamists are given no opportunities for political activity. Here the factors which have encouraged support for armed groups include the following: The merciless suppression of unarmed Islamists (as well as every other form of political opposition) for well over two decades; policies that financially disadvantage the east of the country (especially Libya's second-largest city, Benghazi); and the religious interpretations of the Libyan revolutionary leader Gaddafi, which are deemed heretical by Islamists.

The physical elimination of armed

protagonists in the 1990s prompted activists of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) to cooperate more closely with international networks outside Libya. Thus all the al-Qaida field commanders in Afghanistan whose names are currently known are Libyans. According to Libyan officials, one of the reasons for the introduction of the visa requirement for Algerians and Moroccans in February of 2007 was concern about the increased level of cooperation between Jihadists in the region.

In *Morocco*, barely a month went by in 2006 without security forces raiding a cell of allegedly violent Islamists. In some instances, the persons arrested included members of the security forces themselves. Moroccan officials additionally discovered links to the GSPC in several cases.

Socio-economic marginalisation is one of the factors whose power to drive young Moroccans into the arms of militant groups should not be underestimated. Morocco has the widest discrepancy between rich and poor of any country in the region. The majority of the masterminds and perpetrators of the Casablanca attacks in 2003 came from one of the city's slum-like suburbs. In other major Moroccan cities too, as well as in the Spanish exclave of Ceuta (which is located in Morocco) severely neglected areas are developing into dangerous hot-spots of militant ideas. In all these cases, too, radical preachers not subject to control by the Moroccan government dominate the mosques in the poor areas. Many of these preachers were trained in Saudi Arabia. The conspicuously large numbers of Moroccans joining international terrorist networks are also an indirect consequence of the lack of opportunities for young people on the domestic job market.

Consequences for the fight against terrorism

Since the late 1980s, the Maghreb governments have been using the threat of an Islamist takeover as their main pretext for

justifying repression, human rights violations, and limits on political participation. In the process, the ruling regimes exhibit a tendency to equate Islamists with terrorists. In the usage of Tunisian officials, for example, the two terms are used as almost exact synonyms, while in Algeria, the government and the military made strenuous attempts in the past to suggest that there were links between al-Qaida and the GSPC—even when such links were highly uncertain—in order to lend added international legitimacy to its own, frequently brutal, battle against terrorism and solicit weapons deliveries from the West.

If Tunisia today refuses to tolerate social or political activity by Islamists, if Algeria still maintains a state of emergency which limits such freedoms as the right to demonstrate, and if about 1000 Islamists are in jail in Morocco after extremely dubious legal proceedings, each of these countries justifies its actions with the same aim: that of curbing Islamist terrorism and preserving national stability.

These arguments, however, are problematic. For example, it is a good question whether limiting freedom of opinion and suppressing the unarmed Islamist opposition in the name of fighting terrorism will benefit Tunisia's national stability in the long run or add extra fuel to the fires of radicalism.

Should the internationalisation of the GSPC result in terrorist attacks in Algeria's neighbouring states, which seems likely, the vicious circle of repression and violence will gain momentum. If this is the case, the human rights situation in the entire region can be expected to deteriorate while further curbs are placed on political freedom and the rule of law remains a Utopian dream.

In all these issues, the role of the international fight against terrorism, and that of Western countries, is a problematic one. For example, there is the problem of extraditing militants from countries like Great Britain and the USA to countries like Libya, where the human rights situation and

prison conditions are extremely questionable.

There is also the problem of the growing American military presence in the Sahel—at the southern border of the Maghreb countries—and the growing intensity of American cooperation with the Algerian army in the fight against terrorism. While this cooperation could prove successful in purely military terms, in that the weakening of the GSPC is partly a consequence of American technological and logistical support for Algeria's security forces since September 11, 2001, the cooperation nonetheless discredits both the USA and Algeria's government in the eyes of the Algerian population: The credibility of the local rulers suffers because they allow American soldiers to operate on Algerian soil, and the USA becomes the target of resentment because, despite its rhetoric of democratisation, it continues to cooperate closely with an authoritarian regime.

While the existence of internationally active terrorists in the Sahel was still uncertain a few years ago, it has been proved beyond doubt today—not least because of the internationalisation of the GSPC. The new question that must now be asked is to what extent the international counter-terrorism activities in the Sahel countries have strengthened, if not created, the monster they claimed to attack.

Positive side-effects?

Paradoxically, the internationalisation of the GSPC and of North African Islamist terrorism in general could prove to have positive consequences for domestic processes in at least some Maghreb countries. For example, past experience has repeatedly shown that terrorist attacks on civilian victims have contributed to a division of the Islamist spectrum into a small minority of Islamists who favour violence on the one hand and an overwhelming majority of Islamists who oppose violence on the other. The former group can today be found

almost nowhere except in the vicinity of transnational networks like the GSPC.

In *Morocco*, the attacks in Casablanca in 2003, which were carried out by Moroccans with ties to international networks, resulted in an even higher degree of pragmatism in the already moderate Islamist party in parliament, the Party of Justice and Development (Parti de la justice et du développement, PJD). After the attacks, the PJD approved a far-reaching anti-terrorism act and a law on civil status that is progressive by Moroccan standards. Before the attacks, the party had been opposed to both these laws. As a consequence of the attacks and subsequent demands for a ban on Islamist parties, the PJD found itself obliged to exhibit a greater willingness to compromise than ever before and to demonstrate complete loyalty to the royal family. This tendency may increase still more if further attacks are carried out, for example on tourist attractions in Morocco. In the past years, several such attacks have been prevented by Moroccan security forces working together with Western services.

In *Algeria*, incidents such as massacres of civilians in the second half of the 1990s induced the FIS party leaders and its armed wing to renounce violence and negotiate a cease-fire with the army. When the former second-in-command of the FIS, Ali Belhadj, implicitly approved the murder in 2005 of two Algerian diplomats in Iraq by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the result was that he lost support even in his own camp. As in Morocco, the legal Islamist parties in Algeria have no choice but to agree to compromise in order to demonstrate their loyalty to the state and their rejection of violence.

The same division of the Islamist spectrum can be observed in *Tunisia*, even though Islamists are unable to act legally there. During the confrontation between armed Islamists and security forces in early 2007, the leader of the banned Nahda Party, Rachid Ghannouchi, vehemently reiterated his condemnation of violence and his support for cooperation between all political

forces for the purpose of solving the country's social and political problems. Although he did not omit to mention that Tunisia's repressive government was provoking violent resistance in the long term, he did not justify such violence.

In *Libya*, the Muslim Brotherhood has disassociated itself from armed groups like the LIFG and is attempting to come to an arrangement with the ruling regime—presumably in the hope of escaping violent persecution. However, newspaper reports indicate that even imprisoned members of the LIFG in Libya have been negotiating with Libyan officials for the past two years with a view to ending the violence. A division within the group seems to be emerging here: While one wing of the LIFG denies these reports, another makes an effort to disassociate itself from al-Qaida.

No North African Islamist with a serious political agenda on the national level wants to be associated with international terrorist networks. Should Islamist terrorism begin to spread, therefore, moderate Islamists are likely to join forces with secular groups. One of the consequences of the civil war in Algeria was the formation of a governing coalition of nationalists and moderate Islamists, and this coalition is still in existence.

Another indirect result of the increased collaboration between North African terrorists was an improvement in the cooperation between Maghreb states for security purposes. The effects of this, however, have not been exclusively positive. While it is encouraging to see Moroccans and Algerians sitting down at the same table to exchange security information despite being on opposite sides in the West Sahara conflict, their doing so can have awkward consequences for the rule of law.

Conclusion

Even if the present-day strength of the GSPC remains unclear, North African terrorists undoubtedly represent a growing threat not only to their home countries, but to

Europe as well. When a terrorist organisation is weakened, this does not usually mean that it is no longer capable of perpetrating terrorist attacks, as can be shown by al-Qaida's activities since September 11, 2001.

One logical consequence would be for the West to step up its cooperation with North African countries for security purposes. However, doing so poses a dilemma for Europe in that the negative effects of counter-terrorism measures by the USA and the North African states are hindering the reforms which Europe would like to see in the region and which represent the only option for eliminating the breeding grounds of Islamist terrorism.

From the perspective of European and German policies, the solution would be to limit security cooperation as much as possible given the extent of the threat. Naturally, there should be an exchange of police and intelligence information that is relevant for Europe's security, as Europe's knowledge of North African networks is far too incomplete. However, gross human rights violations such as the extradition of terrorism suspects to Libya must be avoided.

It is understandable for cooperation in the sensitive field of security to take place primarily on the bilateral level, between individual states, rather than within the context of the multilateral Euro-Mediterranean partnership, which is entirely ineffectual in questions of security. However, the possibilities of sub-regional cooperation should not be underestimated. The existing "Five Plus Five" format would be suitable for such cooperation. In this format, the five Maghreb states of Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia are working with the five EU countries of France, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain to develop joint security measures in areas like civil defence and disaster relief. The peer group pressure arising from such formats can foster the preservation of a certain level of human rights standards in the fight against terrorism—provided that

Europe takes care not to allow this pressure to result in a contest to implement increasingly repressive tactics.

At the same time, the European Commission would be well advised to be far more open in calling for political reforms in these countries than it has been in the past. In the absence of effective structural reforms specific to each country, Jihadism will continue to prosper in the Maghreb in the medium and long term. The action plans drafted for each country in the European Neighbourhood Policy represent an instrument of reform which has been used too hesitantly to date. It would be advisable for these plans to incorporate a direct link between financial incentives and progress on human rights issues.

Additionally, great progress could be made if the European Commission and individual EU member states could convince the Maghreb populations that it is terrorism and not Islamism that is being combated. Here, too, Europe should keep its distance from the governments and develop an independent EU policy which does justice to one of the more positive recent developments in the region, namely the pragmatism of mainstream Islamism.

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