

## **The Dangerous “Pragmatism” of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb**

J. PETER PHAM

*Since its “rebranding” from a terrorist group narrowly focused on the violent overthrow of the Algerian government into the regional affiliate of al-Qaeda, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), has seen a significant transformation not just in its geographical space but also in its operational and strategic emphasis. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), as the organization now denominates itself, has proven to be remarkably pragmatic, shifting away from those areas in North Africa where it had come under tremendous pressure from the largely successful counterinsurgency efforts and amnesties of recent to the vast, poorly governed spaces of the Sahel where it has found safe haven. In the process, AQIM has shown itself willing to partner with drug traffickers, smugglers, and other criminal elements as well as dissident factions like the Polisario Front in order to gain the resources required to continue the pursuit of its radical agenda over an increasingly broader geopolitical and social space. The transformed group thus presents a unique challenge not only to states in the region, but also to the wider international community.*

**KEYWORDS** *Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), Islamism, Sabara, Sahel, terrorism*

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## INTRODUCTION

On January 7, 2011, two young French citizens, Antoine de Léocour and Vincent Delory, were abducted from a restaurant in Niamey, Niger, and found dead the following day after a gunfight between the kidnapers and French commandos in Malian territory. France's Prime Minister François Fillon subsequently affirmed that he was "almost certain" that the terrorist group known as "al-Qaeda for Jihad in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM, *Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami*) was responsible,<sup>1</sup> a judgment subsequently confirmed by French Defense Minister Alain Juppé.<sup>2</sup>

While kidnapping for ransom is by no means a new tactic by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its precursor organization, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)—recall the mass abduction of thirty-two German, Austrian, and Dutch tourists by the GSPC in 2003, to say nothing of the fairly routine taking of Algerian civilians—the focus on Western prisoners and extraction of spectacular ransom payments and concessions can certainly be said to represent a qualitative jump that was facilitated by both the "rebranding" of the organization as an affiliate of al-Qaeda in 2006 and the ideological influence which accompanied the makeover.<sup>3</sup> The group certainly received a fillip from the new association: Exploiting al-Qaeda's popularity to recruit new members, it has largely traded in guerrilla tactics for terrorism and criminal activities and moved south—and, subsequently, also east—across borders to escape pressures from security forces.

With the benefit of hindsight, the concluding statement made by the group's national emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, in the interview he gave to the *New York Times* in 2008 seems less braggadocio than the summary of a well-considered plan for strategic consolidation and expansion:

We believe that our greatest achievement is that the jihad is still continuing in the Islamic Maghreb for sixteen years. And today it is developing and climbing. By the generosity of God we were able to transfer our jihad

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<sup>1</sup>"Niger: Fillon 'quasiment sûr' de l'implication d'Aqmi," Agence France-Presse, January 10, 2011, <http://www.leparisien.fr/flash-actualite-politique/niger-fillon-quasiment-sur-de-l-implication-d-aqmi-09-01-2011-1219828.php> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Boureima Hama, "Français tués: 2 combattants d'Aqmi interrogés, toujours des zones d'ombre," Agence France-Presse, January 11, 2011, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iNrfA1zY9yRQ5j\\_wQFw1UFbEr2kQ?docId=CNG.7aad494766741eea325d1f3b8019e8d2.bc1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iNrfA1zY9yRQ5j_wQFw1UFbEr2kQ?docId=CNG.7aad494766741eea325d1f3b8019e8d2.bc1) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>See David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Evolution from Algerian Islamism to Transnational Terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2, no. 4 (December 2008): 91–97; also see Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 213–226.

from the country to regional, and we were able to expand our activity to the Maghreb states and the African coast, and we could participate in the regional awakening jihad. Based on their sacrifices and their blood, our mujahedeen could keep the jihad reason and carry the flag generation after generation, and revive the absent duty in the hearts of the Muslims. Today, we receive a lot of requests from some Muslims who want to do martyrdom operations. In Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia we see Muslim youths who support our matter, they are ready to sacrifice themselves and their money for the sake of supporting Islam. We consider this as one of our greatest achievements. Among our greatest achievements is that we realized unity with our brothers as an important step towards the adult succession. Also, we did not weaken and we remained on the road, we developed our jihad and we revived the jihad matter in the heart of our nation after it was absent for a long time. This is a big change in the region and we thank God that he enabled us to participate in its achievement.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, AQIM’s shift beyond the limits of its Algerian origins is not just a geographical move, but also an operational transformation, with the group acquiring both new tactics and new allies to implement them.<sup>5</sup> In a change that deserves more careful consideration, the group has evolved in a relatively short time from what two veteran American intelligence analysts described dismissively as “one of the weakest of al-Qaeda’s affiliates, only having the capacity for infrequent in North Africa,”<sup>6</sup> to significant enough of a threat that Director of National Intelligence James Clapper included concern that AQIM was “augmenting its operational reach in West Africa” in the annual global assessment he presented to the United States Congress.<sup>7</sup> While the alliance made a certain sense for both sides,<sup>8</sup> the affiliation with al-Qaeda gave the hitherto predominantly Algerian group the prestige of that “brand name” that, within a year of its proclamation, had actually brought to in

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<sup>4</sup>“An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>See J. Peter Pham, “Foreign Influences and Shifting Horizons: The Ongoing Evolution of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Orbis* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 240–254.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, *Assessing the Terror Threat: A Report of the Bipartisan Policy Center’s National Security Preparedness Group*, September 10, 2010, 11–12, <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/sites/default/files/NSPG%20Final%20Threat%20Assessment.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, February 10, 2011, [http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20110210\\_testimony\\_clapper.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/testimonies/20110210_testimony_clapper.pdf) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>See Lianne Kennedy Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa’ida’s Global Jihad*, North Africa Project Paper, Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, April 2007.

“a considerable number of Mauritians, Libyans, Moroccans, Tunisians, Malians, and Nigerians,” as AQIM’s emir readily acknowledged in his *New York Times* interview, as well as terrorist tactics imported from other conflicts.

### AQIM SHIFTS TO THE SAHEL

Perhaps the most interesting—and, potentially, most dangerous—developments in the ongoing evolution of AQIM are taking place with respect to the group’s southern command, what was formerly its Zone 9, covering most of southern Algeria (the *wilayas* of El Oued, Ouargla, Illizi, Tamanghasset, and Adrar). Under the leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a.k.a. Khaled Abou al-Abbas, a.k.a. Laâouar (“one-eyed”), an acquaintance of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi from the year and a half he had spent in Afghanistan in the early 1990s, receiving military training in the Khaldin and Jihadwal camps as well as at al-Qaeda camps in Jalalabad,<sup>9</sup> AQIM has spread its operations across the Sahel into Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and elsewhere.

In many respects, the Sahel, the belt connecting North Africa and West Africa and straddling ancient trade and migration routes, was the ideal next step for AQIM. The region is strategically important for several reasons, including its role as a bridge between the Arab Maghreb and black sub-Saharan Africa as well as its important natural resources, both renewable and nonrenewable. Moreover, the Sahel belt touches several countries—including Algeria, Nigeria, and Sudan—with serious security challenges of their own that could easily spill over their borders. In fact, some scholars have argued that the Sahara and the Sahel form “a single space of movement” that, for purposes of the geography of terrorism, “should be considered as a continuum, something that the territorial approach of states and geopolitics prevents us from understanding.”<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the borders of the region are virtually unguarded, permitting ease of movement as well as access to populations that, if not exactly clamoring for AQIM’s message, are at least somewhat receptive to it due to both their social, economic, and political marginalization and historical memories of *jihad* out of the desert. In fact, it was not long before training camps were operating in Mauritania, for example,<sup>11</sup> and the country saw an attack on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott on February 1, 2008, accompanied by a communiqué calling upon the region’s Muslims to “compel their treacherous

<sup>9</sup>See Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series 144 (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2008), 50.

<sup>10</sup>Olivier Walther and Denis Retaille, “Sahara or Sahel? The Fuzzy Geography of Terrorism in West Africa” (working paper, CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxembourg, November 2010), 11.

<sup>11</sup>Nicholas Schmidle, “The Saharan Conundrum,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 15, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/magazine/15Africa-t.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

governments to break off diplomatic and commercial relations with Israel, and to target the interests of the Jews and the Christians and their nationals in the Islamic Maghreb.”<sup>12</sup> The following year, Mauritania experienced its first suicide bombing, an August 2009 attack in Nouakchott on the street between the French and Libyan embassies that killed the native militant who carried it out and injured three others.<sup>13</sup>

That Belmokhtar has been able to emerge in the pivotal role of presiding over this geopolitical shift in the terrorist groups operations despite his “being at odds with AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel,” including “even going so far as to criticize Droukdel’s leadership of the organization,”<sup>14</sup> is due to the increasingly decentralized nature of the extremist group as a whole as it has sought to adapt itself to the changing conditions in its Algerian base where robust antiterrorism measures and better counterinsurgency efforts have led to large numbers of the militants being killed or captured—including, most recently, during a large offensive in the Kabylie region east of Algiers during December 2010 involving thousands of land and airborne troops and the jamming of three mobile telephone networks<sup>15</sup>—while amnesty programs have whittled away even more of the group’s strength.<sup>16</sup> More recently, Belmokhtar is thought to be in direct command of one of the two main units (*katibats*)<sup>17</sup> operational in AQIM’s southern flank.

The links that Belmokhtar has forged with local communities in the harsh desert environment, including the fabled nomadic “blue men” of the Tuareg, a nomadic people native to the region whose members have had a contentious history with the national governments, including full-fledge insurgencies as recently as 2007–2009,<sup>18</sup> have been the key to his success.

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<sup>12</sup>Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Statement on the Attack on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, February 2, 2008, translated by the NEFA Foundation, <http://www1.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefaaqim0208-2.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>Daniel Magnowski, “France Condemns Mauritania Suicide Attack,” Reuters, August 9, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5780LZ20090809> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>14</sup>Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 12 (May 8, 2009): 9.

<sup>15</sup>See Isabelle Mandraud, “Algerian Forces Attack Allies of al-Qaida,” *Guardian*, December 28, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/28/offensive-algeria-al-qaida-allies> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>16</sup>See Jean-Luc Marret, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: A ‘Glocal’ Organization,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (June 2008): 541–552.

<sup>17</sup>AQIM is thought to be organized into geographical zones, each of which has one or more operational battalions (*katibats*), which are further subdivided into several companies (*fassilas*). A *fassila* is made up of two “platoons” (*sarayas*), each with twelve to eighteen members, who may be further organized into smaller cells.

<sup>18</sup>See, *inter alia*, Yves Guichaoua, *Circumstantial Alliances and Loose Loyalties in Rebellion Making: The Case of Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger (2007–2009)* (Brighton: MICROCON, 2009).

According to one senior Malian military commander, following his intermediary role in resolving the 2003 kidnapping of the European tourists, Belmokhtar was granted de facto asylum in Mali: “We promised him we would leave him alone under the condition that he did not carry out hostile actions on our soil.”<sup>19</sup> Belmokhtar used the opportunity to get married, taking as his first bride a young Malian woman from an Arab family in Timbuktu. He subsequently also took additional wives from Tuareg and Brabiche Arab tribes.<sup>20</sup> The marital alliances helped gain him entrée into smuggling and other extralegal activities for which the region is infamous. While Belmokhtar clearly profited personally from these criminal enterprises—one regional newspaper described him as “controlling the majority of the traffic in arms, cigarette, drug, and stolen car in southern Algeria and the Sahel” as well as having a hand in human trafficking—he also used the desert routes and smuggling networks to continue funneling arms to AQIM units in northern Algeria.<sup>21</sup>

### A TERRORIST GROUP BRANCHES OUT

Evidence has also emerged of AQIM’s increasing involvement in the burgeoning drug traffic transiting the group’s new operational areas in the Sahel.<sup>22</sup> In October 2010, Moroccan authorities broke up an international drug trafficking ring, with links to South American cartels, that was transporting cocaine and marijuana between Latin America and Europe, via North Africa. The Moroccan Interior Minister claimed that with the arrests there was established what he called “an apparent coordination and confirmed collaboration” between drug traffickers and AQIM, noting that the terrorist group was making money by using its members’ knowledge of desert routes, weapons, and means of transportation to protect the traffickers.<sup>23</sup> Until recently, Morocco’s political stability was credited with effectively curbing

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<sup>19</sup>Colonel El Hadj Gamou, quoted in “Sur les traces des djihadistes du Sahara,” *Le Figaro*, March 19, 2007, [http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/20070319.FIG000000262\\_sur\\_les\\_traces\\_des\\_djihadistes\\_du\\_sahara.html](http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/20070319.FIG000000262_sur_les_traces_des_djihadistes_du_sahara.html) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>20</sup>See Sambou Diarra, “Mokhtar Ben Mokhtar: Profession, preneur d’otages,” *L’Aube* (Bamako), April 9, 2009, <http://www.afribone.com/spip.php?article18583> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>21</sup>See J. Peter Pham, “Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: The Ongoing Evolution of Jihadist Terrorism in North Africa,” *World Defense Review* (May 14, 2009), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham051409.shtml> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>22</sup>See Christophe Champin, *Afrique noire, poudre blanche. L’Afrique sous la coupe des cartels de la drogue* (Brussels: André Versaille Éditeur, 2010), 136–140.

<sup>23</sup>Taieb Cherqaoui, quoted in Anne Look, “Morocco says Dismantled International Drug Trafficking Ring Linked to Terrorists,” *Voice of America*, October 18, 2010, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/north/Morocco-says-Dismantled-International-Drug-Trafficking-Ring-Linked-to-Terrorists-105188824.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

AQIM’s ability to operate within the kingdom, but the drug activity “revealed the extremist organization’s growing network.”<sup>24</sup>

The potential for the region being the setting for an explosive mix of Islamist terrorism, secular grievances, and criminality was underscored barely a month after the Moroccan drug busts when, in December 2010, authorities in Mali arrested six major drug traffickers whom they linked with a criminal gang that had aligned itself with AQIM and whose leader had been detained just earlier in the week next door in Mauritania. The Malians identified the six as “coming from the ranks of the Polisario Front,” the Algerian-sponsored group that has unsuccessfully sought for nearly four decades to wrest control of the Western Sahara from Morocco,<sup>25</sup> and were “one of the three major networks of traffickers who pass through the Sahara and sell the drugs to Europe.”<sup>26</sup>

While the question of whether or not AQIM itself has taken on a direct role in illicit trafficking is still subject to often fierce debate, a substantial body of evidence seems to indicate that it has worked with traffickers of cocaine and other contraband, offering them protection. And certainly AQIM is well positioned to benefit financially from the lucrative illicit trade networks that cross the Sahara. With the group’s members are familiar with the areas in which they operate, it is able to offer protection to the traffickers and tax the trade, especially in the absence of effective countervailing governmental structures. In any event, most analysts are willing to at least acknowledge that AQIM nowadays “is funded at least in part through the paid protection of trafficking routes.”<sup>27</sup>

The safe haven Mokhtar Belmokhtar and others staked out for it in the Sahel has enabled AQIM to establish “mobile training camps, in particular those in northern Mali [which] provided training to nationals as far south as Nigeria, nationals from neighboring countries, other countries in West Africa, as well as individuals recruited in Europe.” As a result, “GSPC/AQIM migrated from a domestic to a transnational terror group.”<sup>28</sup> Overall, the style of Belmokhtar in particular has been characterized by remarkable

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<sup>24</sup>Aida Alami, “Morocco Battles Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *GlobalPost*, November 2, 2010, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/morocco/101101/morocco-battles-al-qaeda-the-islamic-maghreb> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>25</sup>See J. Peter Pham, “Not Another Failed State: Towards a Realistic Solution of the Western Sahara,” *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1–24.

<sup>26</sup>“Six ‘Major’ Drug Traffickers Arrested in Mali,” AFP, December 9, 2010, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hkrHwHj7tdxQRWZLLbi0R5gWs2NA?docId=CNG.62a22137f469f072689fa6696afc6142.c31> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>27</sup>Britt Sloan and James Cockayne, *Terrorism, Crime, and Conflict: Exploiting the Differences Among Transnational Threats?* Policy Brief, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, Brussels, February 2011, 2.

<sup>28</sup>Anneli Botha, “Islamist Terrorist Threat in the Maghreb: Recent Developments in Algeria,” *Circunstancia* 7, no. 18 (January 2009), [http://www.ortegaygasset.edu/contenidos.asp?id\\_d=802](http://www.ortegaygasset.edu/contenidos.asp?id_d=802) (accessed February 15, 2011).

pragmatism. His apparently all-but-independent branch of AQIM is increasingly willing to make common cause with criminal elements in the interest of both augmenting its tactical and operational capabilities and extending its strategic reach. In the case of the three Spanish aid workers from the Catalan nongovernmental organization Barcelona Acció who were abducted in November 2009 when their convoy, which was carrying humanitarian relief materiel, was ambushed by armed men in northwestern Mauritania, approximately 170 kilometers from the capital of Nouakchott, while AQIM claimed responsibility for the attack, an investigation by Mauritanian security services led them to one Omar Sid'Ahmed Ould Hamma, a.k.a. Omar le Sahraoui ("Omar the Sahrawi"), who was arrested in Mali in February 2010 and extradited to stand trial in Mauritania. Subsequently nearly two dozen accomplices were rounded up by Mauritanian officials.

What is interesting, as the Spanish daily *ABC* has reported, is that Omar le Sahraoui was never a member of AQIM. Rather he is, as the newspaper's headline noted, a mercenary working for the regional al-Qaeda franchise. In fact, Omar le Sahraoui, as his *nom de guerre* suggests, "was part of the hierarchy of the Polisario Front." A source quoted by the Spanish newspaper described him as "a man of the desert" who "placed his expert knowledge of the territory gained over the decades at the service of terrorists and traffickers of drugs and other contraband."<sup>29</sup> At his subsequent trial, it was further revealed that he had been paid by Belmokhtar to organize and carry out the attack. According to European analysts, those rounded up with Omar le Sahraoui represented a veritable cross-section of Saharan and Sahelian rogue outfits, including at least three other Polisario veterans, Mohamed Salem Mohamed Ali Ould Rguibi, Mohamed Salem Hamoud, and Nafii Ould Mohamed M'Barek.<sup>30</sup> In July 2010, after an exhaustive trial, Omar le Sahraoui was convicted by a Mauritanian court for his role in organizing the abduction of the three Spaniards and sentenced to twelve years of hard labor. (The Mauritanian authorities' handling of the case did not go unnoticed: the U.S. Director of National Intelligence singled out their "aggressive campaign against AQIM"<sup>31</sup> for praise, while others drew contrast between it and the efforts of some of the country's neighbors.<sup>32</sup>)

Regrettably, less than a fortnight after the terrorist mercenary's conviction was confirmed on appeal by the Mauritanian judiciary in early August

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<sup>29</sup>See Luís de Vega, "Mercenario de Al Qaida," *ABC*, April 12, 2010, [http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-12-04-2010/abc/Nacional/mercenario-de-al-qaida\\_14043335259.html](http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-12-04-2010/abc/Nacional/mercenario-de-al-qaida_14043335259.html) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>30</sup>See Claude Moniquet (ed.), *Le Front Polisario et le développement du terrorisme au Sabel* (Brussels: European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, 2010), 17–19.

<sup>31</sup>Clapper, Statement for the Record, op. cit.

<sup>32</sup>See, *inter alia*, Kadiata Touré, "Stratégies de politiques et coopération entre les pays du Sahel pour renforcer et combattre le terrorisme en Mauritanie," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 13 (2010): 127–132.



2010, he was a free man, his release being among the concessions that AQIM exacted in exchange for the two Spanish men they still held (the third hostage, a woman, was released in March).<sup>33</sup> Although Prime Minister José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero will neither confirm nor deny it, Spain’s Socialist government apparently also forked over a significant ransom to the terrorists, estimated between five and ten million euros.<sup>34</sup> If true, this would make the kidnapping of the three Spaniards the most profitable operation of its kind that AQIM has ever orchestrated, possibly topping even the \$8 million it reportedly collected in early 2009 in exchange for freeing Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay and several German and Swiss civilians. Worse, it seems that AQIM does not waste any time in putting any new resources it acquires to work, as evidenced by the ratchet upward of activity since the latest ransom was collected, including the September 16, 2010 raid on Airlit in northern Niger and the kidnapping of seven expatriates, among whom were five French citizens connected with the French nuclear group AREVA. According to Algerian intelligence sources, the raid was led by an Algerian extremist, Abid Hammadou, a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, head of the same AQIM cell that had abducted another French citizen, Michel Germaneau, the year before. Nigerian sources add that the raiders were assisted by guides speaking Tamashek, the language of the Tuareg.<sup>35</sup> (In yet another indication of the flexibility of AQIM, elements of one of the Arab militias formed to oppose the most recent Tuareg rebellions, the *Mouvement des Jeunesses Arabes Nigériennes*, have also been implicated in the terrorist group’s hostage taking according to a well-informed researcher.<sup>36</sup>)

Abou Zeid, who leads AQIM’s other main far southern *katibat*, is a native of Ourgla in southern Algeria. An early *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front) militant, he joined the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA, Armed Islamic Group) with his brother Bachir, who was killed in a fight with the military in the mid-1990s. Abou Zeid has been accused of involvement in the abduction of dozens of Western hostages and was said to have ordered or carried out the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyers in 2009 after London refused his demand for ransom and also the release of jailed militant Abu Qutada al-Filistini. He placed his “Tarek Ibn Ziad” unit

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<sup>33</sup>See “‘Omar le Sahraoui’, monnaie d’échange des ex-otages espagnols,” Radio France Internationale, August 24, 2010, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20100824-omar-le-sahraoui-monnaie-echange-ex-otages-espagnols> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>34</sup>See Albert Vilalta and Roque Pascual, “Liberados los dos cooperantes catalanes secuestrados en Mauritania desde noviembre,” *El Mundo*, August 23, 2010, <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2010/08/22/barcelona/1282490182.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>35</sup>See J. Peter Pham, “When Crime Does Pay: The Threat of an Emboldened al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *World Defense Review* (September 23, 2010), <http://worlddefensereview.com/pham092310.shtml> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>36</sup>See Frédéric Deycard, “Les rébellions touarègues du Niger: Combattants, mobilisations et culture politique” (doctoral dissertation, Université de Bordeaux, 2011), 357.

(so named in honor of the eighth-century Muslim conqueror of Visigothic Spain) under the command of Belmokhtar when the later was head of Zone 9 in 1998,<sup>37</sup> although some analysts have recently seen him as assuming greater prominence not only in the terrorist network,<sup>38</sup> but beyond.<sup>39</sup>

The September 2010 abduction of the hostages seized from Niger actually raises a number of questions. First, from their delayed reaction to the raid, it is not altogether clear to what extent that the central leadership of AQIM had a hand in or even foreknowledge of the operation, despite the appointment by the group's council of Yahia Djouadi, a.k.a. Yahia Abu Amar, as the nominal head of its southern zone.<sup>40</sup> Second, there was the broadcast by al-Jazeera of a videotape message from AQIM's emir, Droukdel, with the claim that Osama bin Laden alone could negotiate the release of the prisoners<sup>41</sup>—which, if proven true, would represent a far closer link between the al-Qaeda and its North African franchise than previously thought.

In any event, AQIM's southern commanders have thus shown themselves to be rather pragmatic in using the resources that come their way to “professionalize” operations, that is, employing mercenaries like Omar le Sahraoui and others willing to work for hire for the terrorist organization irrespective of their ideological commitments. The six killed in the failed French raid to free Germaneau in July 2010, for example, included three Tuareg, an Algerian, a Mauritanian, and a Moroccan. Tuareg guides were said to have assisted in the abduction of the AREVA personnel. Polisario Front-connected individuals have been used in various operations, both those which might be characterized as classic terrorist acts and those involving AQIM's interests in moving contraband across the region. By using personnel who are either trained or who have superior knowledge of the geographic or social space in which operations are to take place, AQIM's activities not only stand a greater chance of success, but in case of failure and capture, authorities do not gain much by way of entry into or leverage with the terrorist group itself.

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<sup>37</sup>See Mohamed Sifaoui, *Al-Qaïda Maghreb Islamique. Le groupe terroriste qui menace la France* (Paris: Éditions Encre d'Orient, 2010), 143–144.

<sup>38</sup>Adlène Meddi and Mélanie Matarese, “Sahel: Abou Zeid, l'irrésistible ascension,” *El Watan*, October 1, 2010, [http://www.elwatan.com/weekend/contrechamps/sahel-abou-zeid-l-irresistible-ascension-01-10-2010-92611\\_184.php](http://www.elwatan.com/weekend/contrechamps/sahel-abou-zeid-l-irresistible-ascension-01-10-2010-92611_184.php) (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>39</sup>See Alfred de Montesquiou, “Abou Zeid veut être le Ben Laden di Sahara,” *Paris Match*, September 30, 2010, <http://www.parismatch.com/Actu-Match/Monde/Actu/Abou-Zeid-veut-etre-le-Ben-Laden-du-Sahara-215426/> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>40</sup>Interview with senior intelligence official, November 16, 2010.

<sup>41</sup>“France Told to Deal with bin Laden over Hostages, AFP, November 18, 2010, [http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g95mrzGMy\\_DF435jBpgtWcNNnSMG?docId=CNG.b87c37c112754e2733d81dcdd9dafdd.ce1](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g95mrzGMy_DF435jBpgtWcNNnSMG?docId=CNG.b87c37c112754e2733d81dcdd9dafdd.ce1) (accessed February 15, 2011).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Much has been made of the alleged differences within the leadership of AQIM’s most dynamic branch, the southernmost *katibats* led by Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. The former is said to be “focused less on jihad than on raising cash by protecting cigarette and cocaine smuggling that has traditionally flourished in the area,” while the latter is described as more “hard line.”<sup>42</sup> However, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive as the wealth gained from the criminal activity can be used to fuel what had been a somewhat weakened, but nevertheless still active, *jihad*. Some analysts question the extent to which the organization’s capacity for violence has been diminished, pointing out that as more North African fighters return home from Iraq—presumably with improved combat and bomb-making skills—the intensity of the conflict might actually increase in the near term. Certainly the vaunted contrast between Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid is belied by the fact that it was to the former, not the latter, that a French judicial investigation has assigned responsibility for having commissioned the recent kidnapping of the two young Frenchmen from Niamey.<sup>43</sup>

In fact, the hybrid structure that AQIM has adopted by combining the old (e.g., the grievances against incumbent Maghrebi regimes, the support networks among the North African diaspora in Europe) with the new (e.g., ideological structures, strategic planning), the local (e.g., the remoteness of the Sahara, the informal political economies of the Sahel), and the global (e.g., vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), al-Qaeda “branding”) may well prove to be the model for similar regional groups—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and *Jemaah Islamiyah* in Southeast Asia come to mind—around the globe and an even greater security challenge. One intelligence analyst with extensive Africa experience has sketched out a frightening scenario:

Rebel, warlord, terrorist, and criminal organizations are complex and highly fungible structures that tend to have multiple identities. Moreover, it is often difficult to determine whether a political agenda (for rebels and terrorists) or an economic agenda (for warlords and criminals) is the driving force, because groups tend to disguise and cloud their true motivations . . . The AQIM of the future may come to consist of only a few hundred hardcore terrorists waging international jihad against the West and its allies, while being supported by an affiliated criminal organization of several hundred . . .

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<sup>42</sup>Edward Cody, “‘Emir of the South’ Abu Zeid Poised to Take over al-Qaeda N.W. Africa,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102005252.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>43</sup>See Yves Bordenave and Nathalie Guibert, “Otages du Niger: la version de la justice ne répond pas à toutes les questions,” *Le Monde*, January 25, 2011: 6.

A smaller, more close-knit AQIM terrorist network will prove increasingly difficult to penetrate and collect intelligence against. A leaner organization may also mean fewer terrorist incidents, but those that do occur will likely be more high profile and extremely violent to achieve maximum impact. Counterterrorism strategies aimed at winning hearts and minds almost certainly will prove ineffective against these hard core terrorists; a strategy of containment may be the most realistic option.<sup>44</sup>

Another veteran observer has focused on the fact that AQIM, freshly endowed with new resources, has largely remedied the GSPC's mistake of relegating communications to a secondary role in its overall strategy:

Paradoxically, this new focus means that AQIM may gradually become a more serious threat even though its structure and operational capabilities are being continually eroded. Propaganda is the key which will allow the Maghrebi branch to gain more with less. Although its capacity to carry out acts of terrorism in the future may be seriously curtailed, the perception of insecurity on the part of the population (a perception which is, by definition, subjective) can be multiplied through intelligent use of communications. For example, the emphasis in recent years on kidnappings of Westerners and the media exploitation of these kidnappings is a good indicator of the new operational paradigm: actions requiring little in terms of human and material resources but which focus world attention on the group and its actions.

A greater and more effective AQIM media presence adds to the group's attractiveness and enhances its recruitment capacity in the Maghreb and beyond. Through the "media jihad," the Maghrebi branch of al-Qaeda can continue to cultivate a new image of strength, sophistication, and religious piety, which will allow it to increase its ability to attract the radical Muslim population keen to join the ranks of the Jihad against "crusaders and apostates."<sup>45</sup>

Of course, the notoriously porous borders of the Maghrebi and Sahelian countries require that any effective effort to counter AQIM must first be regional. And while tremendous progress has been achieved in recent years thanks in part to external efforts to encourage coordination like the U.S.-sponsored Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), which brings together Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia,<sup>46</sup> rivalries between states in the region have proven an obstinate obstacle to greater integration. This year, a senior U.S. counterterrorism official

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<sup>44</sup>Stephen A. Emerson, *The Metamorphosis of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb*, Occasional Paper 03/2010 (Pretoria: International Institute of Islamic Studies, 2010), 2.

<sup>45</sup>Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, 1 (January 2011): 85.

<sup>46</sup>See J. Peter Pham, "U.S. Interests in Promoting Security across the Sahara," *American Foreign Policy Interests* 32, no. 4 (July–August 2010): 242–252.

observed that “while the Maghreb governments have had some success in combating AQIM and terrorism, there remains much to be done.” “Unfortunately,” he noted, focusing on the perennial conflict between the two most powerful states, Morocco and Algeria, over the latter’s support of the Polisario Front, “the lack of resolution of the Western Sahara question block[s] the cooperation and integration the region needs. For the region to achieve real success, the key differences must be resolved or at least bridged.”<sup>47</sup> Failure to overcome these divisions allows for episodes like the Polisario-connected drug trafficking gang led by Sultan Ould Bady, recently dismantled by Malian authorities,<sup>48</sup> as well as the plot, disrupted by Moroccan authorities in January 2011, by an AQIM cell to set up a “rear base” in the part of the country’s Saharan provinces beyond the security barrier it has erected.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, successfully overcoming the threat of AQIM will also require an international effort. AQIM “has never hidden its ambition to bring in the Islamists of Nigeria in particular, at this, at the very moment when sectarian strife and conflict between Muslims and Christians is on the rise”<sup>50</sup> in the West African nation. Nor is it without its reach into the large Maghrebi and Sahelian diaspora communities across the Mediterranean, potential constituencies AQIM has consistently attempted to cultivate,<sup>51</sup> to the extent that European analysts are now affirming that “AQIM constitutes a direct threat to European citizens and interests,”<sup>52</sup> with one prominent French security expert even going so far as to posit the existence of a veritable fifth column in Western Europe: “AQIM is rightly regarded as a major threat in Europe. Numerous sleeper networks have been established in French, Dutch, English, and Spanish suburbs, under the guise of various different associations, ready to perpetrate attacks.”<sup>53</sup> Despite this threat, there has yet to be substantial progress on a joint European—much less a common

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<sup>47</sup>Robert Godec, “Opportunities and Challenges for U.S.-Maghreb Cooperation” (keynote address, Conference on “The Dynamics of North African Terror,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, February 16, 2010), <http://csis.org/event/conference-dynamics-north-african-terror> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>48</sup>See Samuel Benshimon, “Narcotraffic-AQMI: le ‘chaînon manquant’ serait le front Polisario,” *Sahel Intelligence*, December 10, 2010, <http://sahel-intelligence.com/narcotraffic/148-narcotraffic-f-polisario> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>49</sup>“Morocco Arrests Five Soldiers over Militant Arms,” *Al Arabiya*, January 12, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/12/133257.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>50</sup>Mohammed Mokaddem, *Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique: Contrebande au nom de l’Islam* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010), 120.

<sup>51</sup>See Nidra Poller, “A French *Intifada*,” *Middle East Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 25–36.

<sup>52</sup>Thomas Renard, *Terrorism and Other Transnational Threats in the Sahel: What Role for the EU?* Policy Brief, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, Brussels, September 2010, 2.

<sup>53</sup>Christophe Naudin, “Union pour la Méditerranée contre al-Qaïda,” *Outre-Terre: Revue Française de Géopolitique* 13 (2009): 321.

U.S.-European—policy on the Sahel despite the specific issue of “proof that the same routes are used for illegal trafficking of people as those used for criminal ends in drug trafficking and terrorism”<sup>54</sup> being raised by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) during last year’s informal meeting in Toledo of the EU ministers of justice and home affairs with their American counterparts.

While facilitating greater cooperation between the states in North and West Africa themselves and with their international partners is a highly desirable objective, both in themselves as political goals and for the sake of more effective operations against AQIM, to really eradicate the challenge that the group presents, one must eventually confront “the current condition of political stasis, economic stagnation, social atrophy, and cultural discontinuity”<sup>55</sup> that has fanned the flames of radical political Islamism in the region—as witnessed by Droukdel’s attempt to exploit the “Jasmine Revolution” in Tunisia and the unrest in Algeria at the beginning of 2011,<sup>56</sup> to say nothing of the opportunities offered by the subsequent violent upheaval in Libya.<sup>57</sup> That would require a longer-term commitment both to opening up the political systems of the region and creating economic opportunities for its growing youth population. Conversely, the extremists are “vulnerable to their socio-political milieu and, should the state achieve its own domestication and legitimacy within the eyes of its population, their political relevance will

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<sup>54</sup>Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, “The EU and the U.S.A. Are Seeking Greater Coordination in the Fight against Terrorism,” January 21, 2010, <http://www.eu2010.es/export/sites/presidencia/en/documentosynoticias/noticias/toledorubalcaba.html> (accessed February 15, 2011).

<sup>55</sup>John P. Entelis, “The Democratic Imperative vs. the Authoritarian Impulse: The Maghrib State Between Transition and Terrorism,” *Middle East Journal*, 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 555.

<sup>56</sup>See Adem Amine and Jamel Arfaoui, “Le leader d’AQMI exploite les agitations en Tunisie et en Algérie,” *Magharebia*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/fr/features/awi/features/2011/01/13/feature-01> (accessed February 15, 2011). For a background on the pre-upheaval trends toward political Islamism and radicalization in the Maghreb other than Algeria, see Alison Pargeter, “Localism and Radicalization in North Africa: Local Factors and the Development of Political Islam in Morocco, Tunisia and Libya,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 5 (September 2009): 1031–1044.

<sup>57</sup>Whatever else might be said about the regime of Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi, it adopted relatively early a hard stance against militant Islamism, indeed, against any form of political Islamism, virtually eliminating the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group that had been formed by Libyans returning from the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan and subsequently promoting aggressively programs to “de-radicalize” the remnant. See, *inter alia*, Alison Pargeter, “Libya: From Rogue-State to Partner,” *Journal of Middle Eastern Geopolitics* 1, no. 2 (2005): 5–9; also see Rohan Gunaratna, Ami Angell, and Jolene Jerard, *Combating Terrorism in Libya through Dialogue and Reintegration* (report, International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technical University, Singapore, March 2010).

eventually disappear, as will their support base”<sup>58</sup>—although it has been cautioned that AQIM’s “growing appeal among North Africans in the neighboring countries and in Western Europe might give its internationalization its own impetus”<sup>59</sup> and, consequently, “a weakened al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is not necessarily less of a threat to North African and European security.”<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

AQIM has proven itself to be rather resilient, transforming itself to adapt to changing conditions in the Maghreb. The active units of the group that survived the counterinsurgency campaign unleashed against them in recent years seemed to have understood that the decentralization of their organization—to say nothing of the centrifugal forces affecting al-Qaeda in general—created a new dynamic whereby regional groups assume responsibility for their own recruitment, operations, and sustainment. AQIM’s learning this lesson was significantly facilitated—indeed, perhaps dramatically accelerated—by the group’s shift in operational focus to the Sahel. Installed there in a new configuration, AQIM, unlike its GSPC predecessor that was closer to a guerrilla army, cannot be effectively combated by military means alone, even with the benefit of the counterinsurgency knowledge recaptured in recent years; an even broader approach will be required, one that does justice to the growing nexus among extremism, terrorism, and organized criminal activity. Thus, the danger inherent in the pragmatism that AQIM has lately evinced—its perhaps unexpected flexibility with respect to the operators it employs, the partnerships it forms, and the tactics it uses both to garner resources and to carry out its unchanged radical agenda—is that it will result in al-Qaeda’s African franchise becoming an ever greater threat to both the states and peoples North and West Africa and those well beyond. Hence there is a need to move from better awareness of the peril to greater cooperation between not only the nations of the Maghreb and the Sahel but also the United States and European countries as well as, since all have strategic interests not only in countering AQIM but in promoting the security and development of this geopolitically important region.

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<sup>58</sup>George Joffé, “Informal Networks in North Africa,” in *Terrorism, Security, and the Power of Informal Networks*, ed. David Martin Jones, Ann Lane, and Paul Schulte (Cheltenham, Gloucester/Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2010), 93.

<sup>59</sup>Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, “Between the ‘Near’ and ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” *Mediterranean Politics* 12, no. 3 (2007): 412.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 413.

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