

TESTIMONY

Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region

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Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy Across Africa's Sahel Region²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on African Affairs
United States Senate**

November 17, 2009

Chairman and distinguished members: Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations' Subcommittee on African Affairs session on "Examining U.S. Counterterrorism Priorities and Strategy across Africa's Sahel Region." This testimony will focus on the nature of the terrorist threat posed by Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Regional Instability in Context

As this committee is well aware, the Sahel is a sparsely populated area that is extremely difficult to govern. National borders are remote and poorly monitored, and significant distances separate the developed areas in the south from the northern areas where terrorist activity largely takes place, making it difficult for security services to respond rapidly to terrorist activity. The states themselves are weak or poorly institutionalized, and effective governance is hindered by lack of transparency and accountability. Corruption and a lack of professionalization negatively affect the performance of local security services, while ongoing civil conflict with minority ethnic groups creates distrust between the governments and their citizens.

Insecurity in the Sahel is not a new condition, and although recent terrorist incidents have drawn greater attention to the region, terrorism is not the primary problem. Corruption, civil conflict, smuggling of goods and people, drug and weapons trafficking, and terrorism all contribute to insecurity in the region. Although the indigenous practice of Islam in the Sahel is tolerant and syncretic, less tolerant external religious influences are increasingly making inroads in the region as foreign-sponsored religious organizations introduce Salafi, Wahabi, and Tablighi teachings. Given that many people cannot read at all, let alone read the Qur'an in Arabic, Muslims in the Sahel are vulnerable to the influence of extremist clerics, particularly those who have external

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT335/>.

support and are thus able to attract followers through charitable spending and provision of Qur'anic education, Poverty, environmental degradation, poor access to primary education, and a lack of economic, social, and political progress create conditions for radicalization and extremism, and AQIM's calls for Islamic governance and anti-Western violence have found traction with certain audiences in North Africa and the Sahel. That said, the majority of Muslims in the region appear to reject the extremist messages put forth by violent groups such as AQIM, and despite the apparent increase in violence in the region, terrorist groups do not pose a strategic threat to governments in the region. In sum, AQIM has the capacity to threaten U.S. citizens and U.S. interests in the region, however, the group is not in a position to destabilize any of the states in the Sahel, and it lacks the resources and popular support that would be needed to form a broad, Taliban-like insurgency.

AQIM

AQIM emerged in January 2007 when the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GPSC), having declared its allegiance to Usama bin Ladin in September 2006, changed its name to the "Organization of al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb." Prior to the merger, the GPSC was considered a nationalist jihadist organization focused on challenging the Algerian state, although it had longstanding ties to al-Qa'ida and the wider international jihadist movement.³ Since the merger, AQIM has increasingly mirrored al-Qa'ida in its rhetoric and its actions, and this has led to speculation that AQIM might become a much more dangerous group, capable of threatening U.S. interests and conducting attacks in Europe. Although its alliance with al-Qa'ida has given AQIM greater legitimacy among jihadists, provided increased access to media outlets, and possibly introduced the group to new sources of private funding and other resources, the group itself is under enormous stress, and its ability to operate in Algeria appears increasingly constrained. This has forced AQIM to shift its focus toward the Sahel, particularly Mauritania, in search of new recruits and easier targets. The expansion of operations in the Sahel should not be taken as an indication of greater strength, however; the group may have become more violent, but it is not necessarily more dangerous, as the following discussion will show.

The Effects of the al-Qa'ida Affiliation

AQIM's overarching goal – the overthrow of the Algerian state – has not changed since the merger with al-Qa'ida, despite an increase in rhetorical attacks on the West and the governments

³ Interview with Emir Abu Ibrahim Mustafa, Media Committee of the Salafi Group for Call and Combat, December 18, 2003; Muhammad Muqaddam, "Nabil Sahraoui Confirms Relationship with Al-Qa'ida and Stresses Continuation of Struggle Against Algerian Authorities," *al-Hayah*, January 9, 2004.

of neighboring countries.⁴ AQIM has sought to legitimize its violence by associating itself with al-Qa'ida's vision of global jihad, and its recruitment has increasingly drawn on themes linked to al-Qa'ida, particularly the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵ AQIM has attempted to radicalize potential recruits in neighboring countries by pointing out events that appear to have negative consequences for Muslims or by inserting itself into local affairs.⁶ For example, AQIM commented on apparent police brutality in Morocco in June 2008 and later warned Mauritians about the futility of participating in national elections in May 2009.⁷ Although AQIM appears to have succeeded in recruiting some fighters from the Sahel countries, its overall success in attracting new recruits appears marginal, as the group has shown few signs of increased strength or capability as a result of its various radicalization efforts. Furthermore, AQIM does not appear to have received a large influx of "foreign fighters" from Iraq, which is one of the few variables that could have significantly increased the group's capacity for violence.

AQIM's headquarters remains in northeast Algeria, but AQIM maintains several operational units (called *katibah* – plural *kata'ib* - in Arabic) in the Sahel.⁸ These units are nominally under the command of AQIM's national leadership, led by Emir Abdelmalek Droukdal (aka Abu Mus'ab Abd-al-Wadud), but some units in the Sahel control independent resources and are self-sustaining.⁹ AQIM appears to get most of its funds from its own criminal activities, including kidnapping and smuggling in Algeria and the Sahel, and from petty crime in Europe.¹⁰

The vast majority of AQIM's attacks are in the form of ambushes, roadblocks, kidnapping, extortion, and bombings. AQIM has occasionally attacked Algeria's energy sector, targeting natural gas pipelines with explosive devices or attacking foreign personnel involved with gas

⁴ Abu Obeida Yusuf al-'Annabi, "Congratulations to the People of Tawhid in the Occasion of Eid," Al-Fajr Media, October 6, 2008, and Abu Musab 'Abd al-Wadud, "A Message to Our Ummah in the Islamic Maghreb," Al-Fajr Media, September 21, 2008.

⁵ "The War of Bombs and Mines," video released November 3, 2008. Summary available from SITE Intelligence Group, November 4, 2008; Information Committee of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Press or Nonsense?! In Response to Some of the Lies Published in the Algerian Press," *al-Fajr Media Center*, December 25, 2008; Abu Mus'ab 'Abd al-Wadud, "A Message to the Algerian Muslim People," January, 2006.

⁶ Abu Musab 'Abd al-Wadud, "A Message to Our Ummah in the Islamic Maghreb," *al-Fajr Media Center*, September 21, 2008; Abu Musab Abd-al-Wadud, "Gaza: Between the Hammer of Jews and Crusaders and the Anvil of Apostates," *al-Fajr Media Center*, January 15, 2009.

⁷ 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shanqiti, "My People, Follow Me, for I Will Lead You to the Path of Right," May 30, 2009; Abu Musab 'Abd al-Wadud, "Statement in Relation to Moroccan Sister and Baby Who Were Beaten Near the Prison," June 4, 2008.

⁸ AQIM is organized into four operational zones: Center, East, West, and South (alternately Sahara), each with its own military commander. The Southern zone contains the *kata'ib* that operate in the Sahel.

⁹ Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, who was also active in the Sahara under the GPSC, has longstanding ties to Touareg and Berabiche tribes in Mali and Mauritania. It is bel Mokhtar who is believed to run AQIM's Saharan training camps.

¹⁰ "The Sinews of the 'Holy War': Racketeering, Holdups, and Kidnappings," *Le Monde*, December 11, 2008; "Bejaia Court: The Terrorists' Treasurer Given Life Sentence," *Liberte*, May 2, 2007; "Sahara Zone Kidnappings," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, March 3, 2009; International Crisis Group, "Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page," ICG Middle East Report No. 29, July 30, 2004.

production. Following its merger with al-Qa'ida, AQIM incorporated increasingly sophisticated IED technology into its attacks against Algerian security services, and it adopted suicide attacks in 2007.¹¹ Suicide attacks make up a small percentage of AQIM's attacks, however, and the deadliness of these attacks has decreased over time, as has their frequency. The group suffers from internal personal conflicts and has lost many of its experienced fighters to the Algerian government's amnesty programs and aggressive counterterrorist actions, which may have resulted in the loss of experienced trainers, planners, and bomb-makers.¹²

AQIM's New Emphasis on the Sahel

The recent expansion of terrorist activity into Mauritania and Mali is taking place in part because Algerian security services have put AQIM on the defensive, but also because AQIM has been unable to organize operational cells in Morocco, Libya, or Tunisia. In Morocco, there is no logical counterpart with whom AQIM might form an effective relationship. Moroccan security services arrested thousands of suspects after the 2003 suicide attacks in Casablanca, effectively splintering the emerging jihadist movement. Jihadist presence is weak in both Tunisia and Libya, and as a result, AQIM's outreach in North Africa has been limited to attracting a handful of recruits to join its Algerian units.¹³ AQIM has had little choice but to turn its focus to the Sahel.

AQIM, like the GSPC before it, has been able to capitalize on insecurity in the Sahel to maintain safe haven, capitalize on smuggling routes, and draw recruits from criminal groups and disenfranchised populations. AQIM's continued ability to operate outside of Algeria depends on maintaining cooperative relations with the Touareg and Berabiche tribes in the region. Cooperation between these tribes in the Sahel and the Algerian jihadists is based on mutual interest in generating revenue and avoiding interference from state security services. However, AQIM's actions generated a great deal of attention from the international community – particularly following the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyer in May 2009– and this increased tensions between the Algerian terrorists and the Touareg. Most Touareg do not share AQIM's goal of establishing an Islamic state, and even militant Touareg groups are not seeking to overthrow the governments of Mali and Niger. If AQIM's presence becomes too disruptive, the Touareg are probably capable of eliminating AQIM's safe havens in Mali and Niger – either alone or with the help of their governments' security services.

¹¹ Andrew Black, "AQIM's Expanding Internationalist Agenda," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.1 Issue 5, April 2008; Hanna Rogan, "Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1 Issue 12, November 2008.

¹² Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, "JTIC Briefing: Algerian Jihadists Continue Attacks Despite Internal Rifts," September 27, 2007.

¹³ In 2008, al-Qa'ida announced that the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) had merged with al-Qa'ida. LIFG has little (if any) ground presence in Libya, as most of its members were either arrested or fled the country in the late 1990's. As a result, LIFG is unlikely to provide much in the way of support to AQIM.

Despite these tensions, the number of fighters recruited in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania— although not large - is believed to be growing.¹⁴ Some of these fighters are operating in the Sahel, while others have been incorporated into AQIM's Algerian-based units. In 2008, AQIM claimed responsibility for two attacks in Mauritania, including an attack on a military patrol that resulted in the beheading of twelve Mauritanian soldiers near Zouerate and an attack on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott.¹⁵ In 2009, AQIM claimed responsibility for the murder of an American working in Mauritania and for a suicide attack targeting the French embassy in Nouakchott (during which only the bomber was killed).¹⁶ AQIM claimed the suicide attack after a delay of ten days, suggesting that AQIM's central leadership may not have anticipated the attack, and it appears that AQIM's Mauritanian cells remain weak.

Until recently, AQIM appears to have had a tacit non-interference agreement with the Malian government: AQIM refrained from attacking Malian interests and the government ignored its presence.¹⁷ However, AQIM's execution of Edwin Dyer in May 2009 followed by the June assassination of a senior Malian army officer in his home in Timbuktu appear to have tipped the balance.¹⁸ Malian forces engaged AQIM in May and again in July of this year, killing dozens of AQIM fighters while losing at least five of their own.¹⁹ AQIM may be at risk of losing its safe haven in Mali as a result of its strategic miscalculation. In order to permanently deny AQIM sanctuary, however, the Malian government would need the cooperation of the local Touareg population. In the near term, AQIM may be able to ride out the Malian armed forces' campaign by relocating to Mauritania or Niger.

There has been some speculation that AQIM could join forces with other militant Muslims living in sub-Saharan Africa, specifically extremist groups in Northern Nigeria and the Polisario in Western Sahara. Although AQIM may share some ideological common ground with a small number of militant Nigerians, there are cultural, linguistic, and geographic barriers that inhibit cooperation between them. Conservative Islamist elements in Nigeria have been primarily concerned with

¹⁴ Hamid Yas, "Police Investigation Reveals that Mauritians, Nigerians, and Libyans are Members of Al-Qaidah in Algeria," *El-Khabar*, May 22, 2007.

¹⁵ Media Committee of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Statement on New Victories of the Mujahidin in Algeria and Mauritania," Al-Fajr Media, December 29, 2007.

¹⁶ Media Committee of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Claim of Responsibility for Killing the American Infidel: 'Christopher Langis (sic),' in Nouakchott," Al-Fajr Media, June 24, 2009 and "Statement Claiming the Operation on the French Embassy in Nouakchott," Al-Fajr Media, August 18, 2009, respectively.

¹⁷ In a statement released on July 7, 2009, AQIM articulated its understanding of the tacit agreement: "You know very well that we do not have to fight you....We only came your way in the past after you captured our brothers and you committed acts of aggression against us." Media Committee of al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Fajr Media, July 9, 2009.

¹⁸ Jeune Afrique, "Murders in the Sahel," June 9, 2009.

¹⁹ BBC News, "Mali army 'takes al-Qaeda base,'" June 17, 2009, online report, last accessed August 23, 2009 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8104491.stm>.

implementing shari'a law in the northern areas of Nigeria. AQIM has little to offer them, and they are unlikely to see any benefit in aligning with a foreign terrorist group. While a handful of Nigerians may join AQIM's combat units or provide logistical support, it is unlikely that AQIM will recruit large numbers of Nigerian jihadists. As for the Polisario – an armed group seeking an independent state for the Sahrawi people in the Western Sahara - while Salafi and Salafi-jihadist ideologies may be making inroads within the Polisario camps, the Polisario does not share AQIM's goal of establishing an Islamic state, and the Polisario itself has denied any association with al-Qa'ida.²⁰ As such, the likelihood of AQIM absorbing or affiliating with the Polisario is remote, although it is possible that the groups may cooperate on the movement of people or materiel.²¹

The Needs of States in the Region and U.S. Policy Responses

AQIM is likely to seek to expand its activities in the Sahel, including the kidnapping of foreigners, and it may increasingly seek to target Western interests in the region as a means to maintain its *bona fides* within the larger jihadist movement. As such, the group poses an ongoing threat to U.S. citizens and interests in the region. This threat is best countered by a multi-pronged U.S. policy response that includes programs designed to support development, governance, and security.

The causes of insecurity in the Sahel need to be understood and addressed in a regional context. Although each country in the Sahel poses unique opportunities and challenges for engagement, U.S. policy toward the region needs to take an integrated approach that incorporates both the Sahel and the states in North Africa. Although certain kinds of engagements – such as police training and support for greater rule of law – that target particular ministries or departments are best conducted via bi-lateral agreements, many of the problems in the region are transnational in nature, and are best treated as such. It will be of little use to improve education in Mali without a comparable effort in Niger, and little help to improve police capability in Mauritania but not in Mali.

Recent studies indicate that emphasizing police and intelligence capabilities is particularly useful in countering terrorism, and research also suggests that political violence may be reduced through measures that improve the quality of life for people in the affected areas.²² The Sahel

²⁰ Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," ISS Monograph Series, No. 144, June, 2008.

²¹ Abu Mus'ab al-Suri suggests that some cooperation took place between the early Algerian jihad movement – specifically the GIA – and the Polisario, but he later states that the relationship deteriorated over time. See al-Suri, "A Call to Global Islamic Resistance," p. 781.

²² Recent related RAND reports include: "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida," by Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, MG-741-RC, 2008; "Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the

states need support in improving governance, transparency, accountability, political participation, and rule of law. Traditional development assistance should be targeted toward building local capacity to improve health, the environment, sustainable agriculture, and education, with particular emphasis on improving educational access for girls. Security sector training and assistance is needed to professionalize local security services – including the police and judiciary, the gendarmerie, and the military – and to institute legal and judicial frameworks to facilitate criminal prosecution of terrorist suspects. Regional military and security services also need support in developing efficient intelligence structures and appropriate mechanisms for rapid response to terrorist incidents.

The United States has wide array of policy mechanisms to combat terrorism in the Sahel. AQIM (as well as its predecessor organizations, the GPSC and GIA) is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department, and several AQIM members, including Emir Abu Mus'ab 'Abd al-Wadud, are on the Department of Treasury's list of Specially Designated Nationals. Additionally, the FBI's legal attachés support initiatives that promote regional counterterrorism cooperation, and traditional bilateral military relationships facilitate counterterrorism training and operations. One of the main avenues for regional engagement on counterterrorism has been the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). The goal of the TSCTP is to build partner capacity for counterterrorism and facilitate efforts to counter extremist thought. Begun in 2005 as the Pan-Sahel Initiative (PSI), this interagency program has grown to include nine countries - Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Niger, Tunisia, and Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, and Chad.²³

Some critics of the TSCTP have suggested that the program has encouraged African governments to exaggerate the nature of terrorist threats in their territory in order to receive military assistance that might then be used to suppress internal dissent. This may have been the case when the PSI was created in 2005, but given that AQIM has moved aggressively into the Sahel over the last several years, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger have even greater reason to participate. In the early years of the program, there was an essential difference of opinion between the United States and the African governments over the nature of the terrorist threat in Africa. The United States has necessarily been primarily concerned with incidents of *international* terrorism, whereas most African officials are preoccupied with terrorism that poses a threat to *domestic* security. In the last year, AQIM has demonstrated that it, at least, is both a domestic and international threat.

Pieces Together," edited by Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, MG-8949-OSD, 2009; and "More Freedom, Less Terror? Liberalization and Political Violence in the Arab World" by Dalia Dassa Kaye et al., MG-772, 2008.

²³ <http://www.africom.mil/tsctp.asp>, accessed November 8, 2009.

High-profile programs like TSCTP are an effective way to focus human and financial resources on the problem of terrorism in the Sahel, but difficulties in implementation and interagency cooperation appear to hinder the effectiveness of the program. Furthermore, a visible U.S. footprint may not be appropriate in all countries, as particular aspects of the TSCTP are politically sensitive. For example, when the United States assisted the Algerian government in expanding its physical military infrastructure in the south of the country, local press reports immediately suggested that the United States was constructing a secret intelligence base in the desert. Suspicion, misinformation, or confusion about the nature of U.S. counterterrorist programs in the Sahel will undermine our ability to reduce terrorism, extremism, and anti-American sentiment. Many people in the Sahel are already suspicious of U.S. motives for involvement in local security affairs, and on several occasions, AQIM has pointed to TSCTP activities and AFRICOM's presence as evidence of American "occupation" of Muslim lands.²⁴ In planning anti- or counterterrorist policies, the U.S. needs to take into account local sensitivities and ensure that the scope and the reasons for our activities are communicated to both the host government and the local population.

Conclusion

Reducing terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel requires steady, consistent, long-term engagement by the United States in order to address the immediate threat of terrorism and criminality while improving human security in a broader sense. There is no silver bullet for solving the problems in the Sahel, and the region faces complex, interconnected problems that require integrated solutions. Going forward, the United States should continue to focus its efforts on developing partner capacity. Specifically, the U.S. should seek to build counterterrorist, anti-terrorist, and judicial capacity in the affected states and, rather than emphasizing military capabilities, the U.S. should focus on programs that support the professionalization and modernization of police, investigative, and intelligence services. The U.S. should also push for serious, tangible mechanisms for regional cooperation, specifically intelligence sharing, both within the region and with European partners.

AQIM and other terrorist groups will always be able to find recruits among the small pool of fellow extremists who share their distorted vision of jihad, but their ability to draw active or tacit support from populations in the Sahel can be curtailed with a combination of targeted security assistance and development aid. Activities that allow local governments to reduce AQIM's ability to operate while also undermining its appeal to potential recruits stand the best chance of reducing insecurity in the Sahel.

²⁴ Abu Musab Abd-al-Wadud, "A Message to Our Ummah in the Islamic Maghreb," September 21, 2008.