

Restructuring al-Qaeda's Algerian Insurgency

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Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the North African branch of al-Qaeda, has been driven to the wall. Despite a new suicide attack that injured 25 on Sunday morning in Tizi Ouzou, Kabylie, the Algerian-based group is facing difficulties that could endanger its very existence (AFP, August 3; for Tizi Ouzou, see Terrorism Focus, April 22). The number of militants is shrinking due to continuous military operations and difficulties in recruiting new volunteers. International anti-terrorism cooperation is also drying up sources of financing.

Since the beginning of 2008, Algerian authorities, with the help of neighboring countries, have arrested or killed more than 200 AQIM members, according to security sources. The great majority of these individuals were affiliated to support networks, while about thirty were active terrorists (Liberté, July 28; L'Expression [Algiers], July 30).

The strategy of the People's National Army (Armée Nationale Populaire - ANP) to focus mainly on key figures of AQIM has proven largely successful. In February, Halouane Amrane (a.k.a. Handhala) was killed during a military raid in Si Mustapha, Kabylie (Le Jour d'Algérie, February 18). Amrane was AQIM's main expert in explosives and one of the few instructors in the manufacturing of bombs. Amrane was also responsible for assembling the bombs used in the December 2007 suicide attacks in Algiers. In March, Abou Oussama, an Afghan veteran considered the leader of AQIM's faction in southern Algeria, was arrested in Mali (L'Expression, March 5). In all, about ten amirs (commanders) have been eliminated since the beginning of the year (Liberté, July 28).

Persistent internal fights for power between competing factions partly explain AQIM's current crisis, although internal fights are as old as the organization. Nevertheless, feuds sometimes lead to denunciations with grave consequences, such as in the case of Amrane who was allegedly given up to authorities by Abdelmoumène Rachid (a.k.a. Hodheïfa al-Assimi), an AQIM amir from another faction (Liberté, July 28).

Militants have been arrested, killed or have surrendered to authorities in growing numbers, and AQIM is said to be encountering difficulties in filling the vacuum. According to Algerian Interior Minister Nouredine Yazid Zerhouni, AQIM is "not able to recruit anymore" (L'Expression, July 17). The difficulties in recruiting volunteers for the jihad in Algeria, compared to other fronts such as Iraq or Afghanistan, seem to be confirmed in part by the fact that volunteers from neighboring Morocco are more willing to join the battle in Iraq than join the Algerian insurgents (see Terrorism Focus, July 23). There are also indications AQIM has used the Iraqi conflict to attract new recruits who later deserted once they realized that they would fight in Algeria and not in Iraq [1].

It is impossible to estimate the number of Algerian jihadis returning from Iraq at this time. In an interview with the New York Times, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud), declared "there is a limited and very small number of the mujahedeen brothers who fought in Iraq that came back and joined us" (New York Times, July 1). At this point, it has become clear that the number of foreign jihadi fighters entering Iraq is in decline. However, it is still unknown whether North African fighters still present in Iraq will decide to stay, go back to their country and join AQIM, or eventually leave for another jihadi battlefield such as Afghanistan or Somalia.

Today, the number of fighters among the ranks of AQIM is

estimated to be between 300 and 400, according to recent declarations of the Algerian Interior Minister (L'Expression, July 30). Although some prudence is always necessary with official statistics, these numbers seem to confirm the steady decline of the group, whose strength was estimated at 800 fighters in 2005, and over 500 at the end of 2006.

As a result of its weakening, AQIM has been forced to adapt. First, Abdelmalek Droukdel restructured his organization. Instead of eight geographic zones, he divided Algeria into only four zones: one in the East (including Jijel, Skikda, Constantine, Batna, Khenchela and Tébessa); two in the Center (one including Tipasa, Chlef, Aïn Defla, Berrouaghia and Khemis Miliana, the other including Tizi Ouzou, Boumerdès, Bouira, Béjaïa and M'sila); and a fourth in the Saharan south (L'Expression, May 18). This restructuring indicates both AQIM's loss of control in certain areas and Droukdel's search for tighter control of his troops – and more specifically his dissident amirs.

Secondly, Droukdel ordered a redeployment of his fighters. While most activities of the group have traditionally taken place in the Center zones, where the leadership is still thought to hide, Droukdel is attempting to develop a new hub in the East, close to the Tunisian border. According to security sources, AQIM will also redeploy in urban suburbs instead of isolated rural regions (L'Expression, May 18; April 23).

Thirdly, AQIM adapted its tactics to its shrinking capacities and its evolving strategy. With a diminishing number of fighters, AQIM cannot conduct its insurgency in the way Algeria's powerful Groupement Islamique Armé (GIA) did in the 1990s. Therefore, fewer firefights are observed, while the use of explosives is increasing. The use of suicide operations has become frequent since the former Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) merged with al-Qaeda in 2007 – despite the fact that suicide operations were nonexistent in Algeria before that time. Although often very

effective, suicide operations are more a tactic of terror or “propaganda of the deed”, than the work of an insurgent guerrilla group. Moreover, two recent suicide operations, less destructive than planned, demonstrate AQIM’s difficulties in recruiting experienced fighters. On June 4, a teenager suicide bomber blew himself up in the military base of Bordj al-Kiffan, injuring three soldiers, but killing only himself. On July 23, another newly recruited kamikaze drove his motorbike laden with explosives against a military truck, injuring 13, but again killing only himself.

Finally, AQIM seems to be in financial trouble. The U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of four prominent members of AQIM on July 17 after the UN added the men to the list of Bin Laden associates on July 3 (U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, HP-1085, July 17). Spanish police arrested eight Algerian men on June 10 and four others on July 1, all of whom are accused of providing financial and logistical support to AQIM. Nevertheless, AQIM was quick to respond to its cash crisis. It has made a business of kidnappings for ransom, which are multiplying in the region.

Algerian operations and international collaboration have led to a strong decline in AQIM’s budget and fighting strength. However, the group has shown an impressive resilience and capacity to adapt. With Algerian security forces struggling to adapt to AQIM’s new structure and tactics, it appears Algeria is entering a new phase of its 16-year-old Islamist insurgency.

Notes

1. Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series, no.144, June 2008.