

AQIM's Offensive Reveals Shift from Insurgency to Terrorist Tactics in Algeria

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August was one of Algeria's bloodiest months in recent history. In total, 12 attacks carried out across the country by jihadi terrorists – including three suicide bombings – killed 80 and injured over 140. This murderous wave of violence confirmed a major shift by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in terms of strategy, tactics, and media efforts. AQIM's offensive brought the Algerian insurgency back to the international agenda and forced the Algerian regime to take back the initiative, both on the battlefield and in the media arena.

It took AQIM only four days to demonstrate the absurdity of the daily announcements of al-Qaeda's end by Algerian officials. On August 17, a score of armed men ambushed a patrolling convoy in Skikda, in northeast Algeria, after detonating two roadside bombs, killing 12 and injuring 13. On August 19, a suicide bomber detonated a car laden with explosives outside a gendarmerie (paramilitary police) school in Issers, Kabylia, where young applicants were waiting in line to register for the entry exam. The attack killed 43 and wounded 45, including passerby civilians. One day later, on August 20, two explosives-packed cars parked on the streets of Bouira, Kabylia, were detonated, killing 12 and injuring 31. The first car targeted a local military office, while the second car targeted a bus transporting employees of a Canadian company (Magharebia, August 19; AFP, August 24).

The local and international press was quick to mistakenly depict the "recrudescence" of violence, which would imply that

it followed a lull in terrorist activities. In fact, violence never stopped in Algeria. According to data gathered through newspaper databases and local press archives, there was a steady level of terrorist activities since the beginning of 2008 (an average of four attacks per month), with a first peak in February (eight attacks, although most of small scale). [1] Therefore, August was no "recrudescence", but a carefully prepared terror offensive, constituting a peak in violence.

It is obvious that AQIM is still alive, and its ability to carry out operations remains unaffected, despite continuous internal feuds and alleged difficulties in recruiting new members (see Terrorism Focus, August 5). However, one should be cautious before asserting that the Algerian insurgency is growing in size. Indeed, despite last month's tragedy, violence has not resumed to its early 1990s level when the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) was controlling entire regions and decimating resisting villages.

The history of the Algerian insurgency is one of decline in terms of insurgent numbers, as it started with thousands of combatants – as many as 27,000 in 1993, according to General Mohamed Touati – before it dramatically decreased to approximately 4,000 fighters among the ranks of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) in 2002 (see Terrorism Focus, November 14, 2005). [2] Today, the number of AQIM jihadi fighters is estimated somewhere between 300 (a figure often repeated by Algerian authorities) and over 1,000. [3]

AQIM's Transformation

Recent developments, including the latest bombings, are a reminder of the changing nature of the Algerian insurgency. When the GSPC started its merging process with al-Qaeda – through a communiqué of support to Osama Ben Laden on

September 11, 2003 – it was more than a mere media coup. It was the beginning of a long transformation process, which would involve a strategic, tactical and propaganda shift.

Strategically, the Algerian insurgency evolved from a local struggle to part of a global conflict – which means that AQIM has global objectives but acts locally. The GIA and the GSPC were typical national insurgencies, with a local agenda. The first article of the 1998 GSPC Charter claims that the objective of the group is to “fight the Algerian regime.” [4] Although the GIA had an important network in Europe and even carried out terrorist operations in France, these attacks did not target France because it was a Western or an apostate country, but because the support of Paris was essential to the Algerian regime. Although the internationalization of the Algerian insurgency was arguably initiated in 2003, the strategic shift – from local to global – really started under the leadership of Abdelmalek Droukdel, who was appointed leader of the GSPC in 2004 and became leader of the newly created AQIM in January 2007.

The strategic shift is most apparent through attacks against foreign targets in Algeria, such as the infamous bombing of the United Nations office in Algiers on December 11, 2007. The “international” strategy was illustrated again last month when AQIM targeted a bus used by employees of the Canadian company SNC-Lavalin, although all the victims were Algerian workers (CanWest, August 22). AQIM’s international focus translates into a greater ratio of attacks against foreign targets and a growing emphasis on international issues – including threats against Western countries – in AQIM statements. [5]

Tactically, the insurgency evolved from guerrilla-oriented operations such as armed assaults to terror-oriented operations such as bombings. In a recent study, based on her own data collection, Anneli Botha shows that the GSPC traditionally resorted to a balanced use of explosives and firearms. However, in 2007, the use of firearms by AQIM

plummeted while the use of explosives more than doubled. [6] This year, according to the data of this author, bombings outnumbered basic assaults by four to one.

On April 11, 2007, Algerian insurgents resorted to suicide bombings for the first time since the beginning of the insurgency – except for one incident in January 1995. This year, AQIM has already carried out seven suicide operations, the one on August 19 being the deadliest.

This tactical shift – from guerrilla operations to terrorism – is essentially inspired by al-Qaeda's modus operandi elsewhere, mainly in Iraq. It can be explained by a copycat effect, as well as by the return of several Iraqi veterans who can teach their know-how. However, it can also be a consequence of a decreasing amount of fighters, as terror tactics require fewer combatants than guerrilla operations.

If the use of explosives, especially suicide bombings, has proven effective in conducting the "propaganda of the deed," the increasing use of indiscriminate violence can potentially further alienate the population and reinforce AQIM's isolation. Conscious of this, AQIM's leadership has felt compelled to publish several communiqués after their attacks in order to outline their intentions and defuse criticisms, including those from their own ranks (Liberté, September 4; El Watan, August 23). After the bombing of the Canadian bus, for instance, a communiqué stated: "we are choosing our targets carefully and we are always careful with your blood. We do not target the innocent [Muslims]" (CanWest, August 22).

The last major shift made by AQIM is on the propaganda front. Inspired by al-Qaeda's model, AQIM is putting much effort into its propaganda. On the battlefield, recent spectacular actions demonstrate AQIM's attempt to look more appealing to young sympathizers – locally and globally – through the "propaganda

of the deed." AQIM also evolved toward a centralization of propaganda production, based on the model of al-Qaeda's al-Sahab Media Center, in order to improve the reputation of the group among international jihadi supporters and to offer a more unified image of the group. A few months ago, Droukdel reached a whole new propaganda level when he was interviewed by the New York Times. In a master media coup, he was instantly granted international credibility and publicity, while simultaneously emphasizing AQIM's new international agenda (New York Times, July 1).

Taking Back the Initiative

In the last few months, insurgents and counterinsurgents have been engaged in a tit for tat campaign. However, AQIM's August offensive, and the international attention it received, broke the routine and left Algerian authorities with no choice but to react. The latest attacks seem to have triggered the "awakening" of the government, as the daily *Liberté* titled its editorial (*Liberté*, August 26).

The discourse of the government towards AQIM has radically changed. First, after almost two years, officials have finally recognized that AQIM is more than a national insurgency, but a transnational threat affiliated to al-Qaeda. After the bombings of Issers and Bouira, Minister of the Interior Mohamed Zerhouni recognized that the insurgency "serves foreign interests" (*Liberté*, August 26; *La Tribune*, September 3). Official condemnations of terrorism have also become firmer and more credible. Local media underscored that recent declarations of Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia to "fight terrorists to the last one" recall his harsh policy against GIA in the 1990s (*El Watan*, September 3).

Unofficially, the government is also starting to recognize that AQIM might count more than 300 fighters. Indeed, official

sources told L'Expression that there are about 400 fighters solely in the Batna-Jijel-Skikda triangle in northeast Algeria (L'Expression, September 9).

Beyond the rhetoric, Algeria launched a massive military operation across the country and heightened security in strategic points. The army announced that it has deployed 15,000 soldiers in the regions of Batna, Jijel and Skikda (L'Expression, September 9). Other operations are also ongoing in the so-called "triangle of death" in the provinces of Bouira, Boumerdes and Tizi Ouzou (Liberté, September 2). In its operations, the army is increasingly using air power, and more specifically its helicopters, which have been recently outfitted with infrared equipment, indispensable for carrying out night operations. Helicopters have been used both for reconnaissance and to attack insurgent positions (L'Expression, September 7). Their use is expected to increase in the immense and lawless Sahel region (Magharebia, August 27).

According to the military, the current operation is a "combing operation," not a military raid. The difference between the two, according to an Algerian military source, is that "a military raid is limited in time and space. On the contrary, a combing operation, composed itself of several military raids, can last for months" (L'Expression, September 9).

In Algiers, the number of police personnel is increasing as 14 new police were opened last month. Hundreds of such offices are planned to be built soon across the country. According to Ali Tounsi, director of the Sûreté Nationale (domestic intelligence), this expansion of the police "will continue until we reach a ratio between security forces and population that allow us to control the situation and every form of criminality" (El Watan, August 31). As security tightens, opportunities for terrorists diminish. In early September, security forces thwarted a terrorist plot allegedly planning several suicide bombings in El Oued, east of Algiers (L'Expression, September

10).

Conclusion

August will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the bloodiest months in Algeria's recent history. The modus operandi of the attacks and the selection of targets confirmed AQIM's transformation from a local to a global insurgency, with connections to al-Qaeda. Although the offensive demonstrated AQIM's continuous capacity to hit hard, it also triggered a massive reaction from the government. In the short term, the military counteroffensive seems to bear some successes as the month of Ramadan goes by without any significant attack. In the long term, however, Algeria will need to take some serious measures locally, but also regionally – in collaboration with its European and Maghreb neighbors – if it is determined to undermine AQIM's strength.

Notes:

1. This author used a restrictive definition of terrorist attack, excluding robberies and kidnappings.
2. Luis Martinez, "La sécurité en Algérie et en Libye après le 11 septembre," EuroMeSCo (Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) Papers, No. 22 (2003).
3. See for instance Olivier Guitta, "Algeria fooling itself over al-Qaida," Middle East Times, September 1; and the interview of Mathieu Guidère in "Mathieu Guidère: L'Algérie doit craindre le

pire pour le Ramadan," Paris Match, August 19.

4. Mathieu Guidère, *Al-Qaïda à la conquête du Maghreb: le terrorisme aux portes de l'Europe*, Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 2007.

5. See Andrew Black, "AQIM's expanding internationalist agenda," *CTC Sentinel* 1(5), April, 2008.

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