



Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb



Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or AQIM, is an Islamist militant organization which aims to overthrow the Algerian government and institute an Islamic state. To that end, it is currently engaged in an anti-government campaign.

The group originated as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). It has since declared its intention to attack European (including Spanish and French) and American targets. The group has been designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations, Australia, Canada, Russia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Ideology:

Membership is mostly drawn from the Algerian and local Saharan communities (such as the Tuaregs and Berabiche tribal clans of Mali), as well as Moroccans from city suburbs of the North African country. The leadership are mainly Algerians. The group has also been suspected of having links with the Horn of Africa-based militant group Al-Shabaab.

AQIM has focused on kidnapping for ransom as a means of raising funds and is estimated to have raised more than \$50 million in the last decade. In January 2007, the GSPC announced that it would now operate under the name of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Organization:

On 19 January 2009, the UK newspaper *The Sun* reported that there had been an outbreak of bubonic plague at an AQIM training camp in the Tizi Ouzou province in Algeria. According to *The Sun*, at least forty AQIM militias died from the disease. The surviving AQIM members from the training camp reportedly fled to other areas of Algeria hoping to escape infection. The *Washington Times*, in an article based on a senior U.S. intelligence official source, claimed a day later that the incident was not related to bubonic plague, but was an accident involving either a biological or chemical agent.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is one of the region's wealthiest, best-armed militant groups due to the payment of ransom demands by humanitarian organizations and Western governments. It is reported that 90 per cent of AQIM resources come from ransoms paid in return for the release of hostages. Oumar Ould Hamaha said "The source of our financing is the Western countries. They are paying for jihad."

In December 2012, one of AQIM's top commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, split off from AQIM and took his fighters with him, executing the In Amenas hostage crisis in Algeria weeks later, just after France launched Operation Serval in Mali. Belmokhtar later claimed he acted on behalf of Al Qaeda. In December 2015, Belmokhtar's splinter group, Al-Mourabitoun rejoined AQIM, according to audio statements released by both groups.

A top commander of AQIM, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, was reported killed by French and Chadian forces in northern Mali on February 25, 2013. This was confirmed by AQIM in June 2013.

The *FrontPage Magazine* reported that Sub-Saharan Africans are treated with contempt by the predominantly Arab-led AQIM. The AQIM leadership are said to be mainly Algerians, while no Sub-Saharan African is known to possess any leadership position. Robert Fowler, a former Canadian diplomat, who was held hostage by AQIM for 130 days in the Sahara Desert in 2010, wrote that "There was a big gulf in the AQIM between those who were black and those who were not. They preached equality, but did not practice it. Sub-Saharan Africans were clearly second class in the eyes of AQIM." The article went on to say that an AQIM splinter faction, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa separated itself from the group due to the marginalization of its Sub-Saharan African members.

The United States National Counterterrorism Center stated that AQIM had a reputation for holding cultural and racial insensitivities towards Sub-Saharan Africans. The NCTC maintained that some recruits "claimed that AQIM was clearly racist against some black members from West Africa because they were only sent against lower-level targets." The bulletin goes on to say that former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar in August 2009 stated "he wanted to attract black African recruits because they would agree more readily than Arabs to becoming suicide bombers and because poor economic and social conditions made them ripe for recruitment."

By 2016, AQIM had reportedly recruited large numbers of young sub-Saharan Africans, with attacks like the 2016 Grand-Bassam shootings in Ivory Coast being carried out by black AQIM members. AQIM commander Yahya Abou el-Hammam, in an interview with a Mauritanian website, was quoted as saying "Today, the mujahideen have built up brigades and battalions with sons of the region, our black brothers, Peuls, Bambaras and Songhai".

Leadership:

Key leaders and operatives of this group include Yahya Abu el Hammam, who serves as a senior leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), planning operations and kidnapping Westerners in North and West Africa. Wanted by the US Rewards for Justice Program with a \$5 million bounty for his arrest. Hammam has played a key role in perpetuating AQIM's terrorist activities in West Africa and Mali, and participated in several AQIM terrorist attacks in Mauritania. In July 2010,

Hammam was reportedly involved in the killing of a seventy-eight year old French hostage in Niger. In 2006, Hammam was sentenced to death in absentia by Algerian authorities for terrorism-related charges.

Allegations of the former GSPCs links to al-Qaeda predated the September 11 attacks. As followers of a Qutbist strand of Salafist jihadism, the members of the GSPC were thought to share al-Qaeda's general ideological outlook. After the deposition of Hassan Hattab, various leaders of the group pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda.

In November 2007 Nigerian authorities arrested five men for alleged possession of seven sticks of dynamite and other explosives. Nigerian prosecutors alleged that three of the accused had trained for two years with the then Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat in Algeria. In January 2008 the Dakar Rally was cancelled due to threats made by associated terrorist organizations.

In late 2011, the splinter group Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa was founded in order to spread *jihadi* activities further into West Africa. Their military leader is Omar Ould Hamaha, a former AQIM fighter.

According to U.S. Army General Carter Ham, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Somalia-based Al-Shabaab, and the Nigeria-based Boko Haram were as of June 2012 attempting to synchronize and coordinate their activities in terms of sharing funds, training and explosives. Ham added that he believed that the collaboration presented a threat to both U.S. homeland security and the local authorities. However, according to counter-terrorism specialist Rick Nelson with the Washington-based Center for Strategic International Studies, there was little evidence that the three groups were targeting U.S. areas, as each was primarily interested in establishing fundamentalist administrations in their respective regions.

In a 2013 Al Jazeera interview in Timbuktu, AQIM commander Talha claimed that his movement went to Niger, Algeria, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, to organize cells of AQIM. He explained their strategy: "There are many people who have nothing, and you can reach them by the word of God, or by helping them."

Campaign of violence:

2007-09

- 11 April 2007: Two car bombs were detonated by the group. One was close to the Prime Minister's office in Algiers and the blast killed more than 30 people and wounded more than 150.
- February 2008: Two Austrians were captured in Tunisia and taken via Algeria to Mali and freed later that year, the kidnappings were attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
- December 2008: Two Canadian diplomats were taken hostage along with their driver in south-western Niger while on official UN mission to resolve a crisis in northern Niger. The driver was freed in Mali in March 2009. The diplomats were freed in Mali in April 2009. The kidnappings were attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

- 22 January 2009: Four Westerners were kidnapped while visiting the Anderamboukane festival in Niger near the border with Mali. AQIM demanded the British government release Abu Qatada, and on 31 May 2009 a statement was released claiming Edwyn Dyer had been executed, which was confirmed by the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on 3 June 2009. All of the other tourists were eventually released.
- 30 July 2009: At least 11 Algerian soldiers are killed in an ambush while escorting a military convoy outside the coastal town of Damous, near Tipaza.

2010-present

- March 2010: an Italian national, Sergio Cicala, and his wife are held hostage. They were released on April 16, 2010.
- 21 March 2010: Three militants are killed by security forces near El Ma Labiod, 35 kilometres (22 mi) from Tebessa.
- 26 March 2010: Three militants are killed and another captured by security forces in Ait Yahia Moussa, 30 kilometres (19mi) from Tizi Ouzou.
- 14 April 2010: According to Algerian officials, at least ten militants are killed during a counter-terrorist operation in Bordj Bou Arreridj wilaya.
- 16 September 2010: seven employees from Areva and Vinci are kidnapped in Arlit, Niger (five French, one Togolese and one Malagasy). The capture was claimed on 21 September by AQIM in a communiqué published in Al Jazeera. Three of the hostages were released on 24 February 2011. The other four were released on 28 October 2013.
- 25 November 2011: Three Western tourists were abducted in Timbuktu, including Sjaak Rijke from the Netherlands, Johan Gustafsson from Sweden and Stephen Malcolm McGown from South Africa. A fourth tourist, from Germany, was killed when he refused to cooperate with the perpetrators. Rijke was rescued in April 2015.
- 9 December 2011: AQIM published two photos, showing five kidnapped persons of European descent including the three tourists abducted in Timbuktu. French hostage Philippe Verdon was killed in March 2013. His body was found in July 2013. French hostage Serge Lazarevic was released on December 9. 2013.
- 30 September 2013: AQIM claimed responsibility for a suicide car bombing in Timbuktu that killed at least two civilians.
- 20 November 2015: AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun attacked a hotel in Bamako, Mali. They took more than 100 persons hostage, killing 19 before the siege was ended by security forces.
- 8 January 2016: Gunmen kidnapped Swiss nun Beatrice Shockly in Timbuctoo, Mali. AQIM claimed responsibility for the kidnapping a month later, and released a video in January 2017 showing Shockly still alive.

- 15 January 2016: AQIM gunmen attack the *Capuccino* and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, killing at least 28 people, wounding at least 56 and taking a total of 126 hostages. 200 km to the north, Australian couple Ken and Jocelyn Elliott, medical doctors, were kidnapped. Jocelyn was released a few days later, as AQIM claimed credit for the kidnapping.
- 13 March 2016: AQIM attacked the town of Grand-Bassam, in the Ivory Coast, killing at least 16 people, including 2 soldiers, and 4 European tourists. 6 assailants were also killed.

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