

Organization Attributes Sheet: Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); aka the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)

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A. When the organization was formed + brief history

- Formerly known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) originated as a splinter faction of the Islamic insurgency in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s.¹ By the end of the war, AQIM's national focus on fighting the secular Algerian government had broadened to include regional and international terrorist activities. AQIM declared its allegiance to al-Qa'ida in 2003. The group adopted its current name and was officially sanctioned by Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2006.²
- The mid-2000s witnessed a marked increase in attacks against Western nationals in the African Sahel and elsewhere. AQIM regularly targets tourist locations, Western embassies, and foreign energy companies in addition to regional African state security forces.³
- Algerian counterterrorism operations have been successful in disrupting AQIM activities and are largely credited with reducing the group's numbers from a height of 30,000 as the GSPC to less than 1,000 to 4,000 today.
- Despite these advances, 2009 witnessed an upsurge in North African terrorist activity, possibly sparked by the return of battle-hardened militants from the war in Iraq.⁴ In addition to its Algerian bases, AQIM now operates throughout the Sahel region, taking advantage of the remote, difficult to police terrain.
- This expansion has occurred in parallel with the growing transshipment of Latin American cocaine through West Africa, an increasing amount of which is trafficked northward along overland routes through the center of AQIM areas of operation. AQIM is increasingly involved, both directly and indirectly, in the highly lucrative transport of cocaine across the Saharan Desert toward Europe.
- AQIM terrorist cells have been discovered in France and Italy and are known to exist elsewhere throughout Europe as well.⁵ EU officials consider the group to be among the most significant terrorist threats presently facing the continent.⁶
- The current revolutionary unrest across North Africa and the Middle East will likely provide new opportunities for the expansion of AQIM and similar groups, but reports differ on AQIM's exact role in the uprisings.⁷ While acknowledging elevated risks, in the view of European authorities AQIM has not yet significantly benefited from the regional turmoil and has thus far proven "incapable of influencing events in any significant fashion."⁸
- The Algerian government is concerned about the possibility of Libyan arms being smuggled into Algeria by AQIM operatives.⁹ Some sources do indicate a recent increase in Sahel/Sahara trafficking.¹⁰ Tunisian security forces have reported the infiltration of several dozen AQIM operatives into their territory.¹¹
- Beyond these initial reports, however, it is too early to assess the degree to which AQIM will be capable of exploiting the ongoing unrest. Future developments will merit close attention.
- In the wake of the recent killing of Usama bin Laden, AQIM's top leadership has threatened retaliatory attacks against United States citizens in West Africa, prompting U.S. embassies to issue travel warnings.¹² Thus far, however, no new attacks have materialized.

B. Types of illegal activities engaged in,

a. In general

- Terrorism, drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, extortion, document forgery, money counterfeiting

Information derived from several sources and searchable databases.

All research conducted according to the project manual.

b. Specific detail: types of illicit trafficking activities engaged in

- Drug trafficking: AQIM generates a significant share of its revenue through the smuggling of illicit drugs. While the group has long been involved in the drug trade, analysts note a significant increase in AQIM's narcotic trafficking since 2008.¹³ Cigarettes (the most commonly smuggled item in the region) and Moroccan-produced marijuana and hashish are regularly trafficked south, west, and east along traditional smuggling routes. Latin American cocaine and other narcotics are increasingly transported north across the Saharan Desert toward European markets. At the North African coast, AQIM delivers the drugs to criminal organizations specializing in illicit sea transportation across the Mediterranean to Southern European coasts.¹⁴
- Weapons trafficking: AQIM is a significant source of illegal arms transport and sales throughout the Sahel.¹⁵ It is believed that the southern AQIM faction smuggles arms and other materiel to the North Algerian grouping within the larger flow of illicit traffic.¹⁶
- Protection for trafficking organizations: in addition to its own direct involvement, AQIM is tied to the broader smuggling of drugs, weapons, persons, and cigarettes in the Sahel. EU authorities report "low level, individual and tribal contacts" between specific AQIM cells and West African drug trafficking organizations.¹⁷ AQIM maintains agreements under which criminal groups pay in exchange for safe passage and other assistance.¹⁸ The terrorist organization provides physical protection, geographical guidance, and transport to criminal groups.¹⁹ In one incident, the Mauritanian military intercepted a drug trafficking convoy accompanied by armed AQIM escorts.²⁰
- The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that 50-60 tons of Latin American cocaine are now being transported through the Sahel each year.²¹ As greater quantities of illicit drugs are transshipped through West Africa, land routes across North Africa to the Mediterranean and Europe will continue to gain in importance. AQIM is currently positioned to benefit considerably from these developments.²²
- However, the entry of new criminal organizations into the lucrative regional drug trade also carries greater risks of conflict among competing groups, and violent incidents between AQIM and other drug traffickers have been documented.²³
- Nonetheless, at least for the immediate future, it is highly probable that the growing organized criminal penetration of West Africa, particularly by traffickers of Latin American cocaine, will generate an expansion of the current cooperation between AQIM and other criminal groups seeking to transport the increasing volumes of illicit drugs.²⁴

C. Scope and Size

a. Estimated size of network and membership

- At its height, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the organizational predecessor to AQIM, constituted the largest and most active terrorist organization in Algeria with some 30,000 members.
- Estimates of AQIM's current membership range from less than 1,000 to as many as 4,000.²⁵ This decline in strength is largely attributed to the counterterrorism efforts of the Algerian government.

b. Countries / regions group is known to have operated in. (i.e. the group's operating area)

- Africa: Algeria,²⁶ Morocco,²⁷ Mali,²⁸ Mauritania,²⁹ Niger,³⁰ Ghana,³¹ Chad,³² Nigeria,³³ Senegal,³⁴ Tunisia,³⁵ Libya,³⁶ Sudan³⁷
- Middle East: Syria,³⁸ Iraq,³⁹ Afghanistan⁴⁰
- Europe: France,⁴¹ Italy,⁴² Spain,⁴³ Germany,⁴⁴ Portugal,⁴⁵ the United Kingdom,⁴⁶

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- Belgium,⁴⁷ Switzerland,⁴⁸ the Netherlands,⁴⁹ Norway,⁵⁰ Bosnia⁵¹
- North America: the United States⁵² Canada⁵³

D. Leader Characteristics

a. Who is/are the leader(s)

- Abdelmalek Droukdal: aka Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud, top leader of the AQIM North Algerian faction, a university-educated scientist known for his bomb-making abilities.⁵⁴
- Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Mali-based head of the AQIM Sahel faction, said to be a “counterbalance to Droukdal’s leadership” and a critical link to al-Qa’ida.⁵⁵
- Mebarek Yazid: aka Abou Obeida Youcef, senior AQIM figure, viewed as a possible successor to Droukdal.⁵⁶
- Abdelhamid Abu Zeid: senior cell leader in Mali.⁵⁷
- Amari Saifi: aka Abderrazak el-Para, influential AQIM figure, currently jailed and sentenced to death in Algeria.⁵⁸

b. Leadership timeline

- The GSPC was founded in 1998 by Hassan Hattab and other disaffected GIA members. Hattab led the group until 2001 when he resigned or was deposed by Nabil Sahraoui who subsequently declared the organization’s allegiance to al-Qa’ida.⁵⁹ With Hattab’s replacement, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a senior commander and one of the group’s founding members, grew increasingly distant from the mainstream GSPC leadership. Belmokhtar was further alienated by the 2004 selection of the relatively inexperienced Abdelmalek Droukdal for the top leadership position following the death of Sahraoui in a gunfight with Algerian security forces.⁶⁰ In response, Belmokhtar began the consolidation and expansion of his organization in the Sahel region, creating AQIM’s southern faction and positioning himself as a counterbalance to Droukdal. Droukdal maintains control of AQIM’s northern grouping and is considered the overall organizational head. Despite tensions among the leadership, cooperation between the two sections remains significant.⁶¹

c. Leadership style (autocratic, diffuse, etc.)

- Autocratic: individual cell leaders or sub-commanders possess considerable operational autonomy within the overall AQIM structure but exert control over their subordinates.

E. Organizational Structure

a. Topology (cellular, hierarchical, etc.)

- Cellular: the group operates through a network of autonomous or semi-autonomous terrorist and criminal cells.⁶² Some analysts believe AQIM maintains sleeper cells throughout West Africa.⁶³
- The group’s structure has at times led to infighting between cell leaders or sub-commanders.⁶⁴
- Two distinct AQIM factions can be identified: one based in Northern Algeria headed by Droukdal and one located in Southern Algeria and the Sahel under Belmokhtar.⁶⁵
- Some reports suggest the two AQIM factions are splintering further.⁶⁶

b. Membership – is there formal or informal membership in the organization or network? What role do informal or nonmembers play in trafficking and other criminal activities?

- AQIM utilizes both formal membership and informal association. The group maintains cooperative relationships with numerous other terrorist and criminal organizations.
- European-based North African non-members sympathetic to AQIM’s aims constitute a regular source of funding for the group.⁶⁷

c. Command and Control (decentralized or centralized)

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- Decentralized: at the organizational level, despite some amount of cooperation between the two groups, AQIM operates autonomously from al-Qa'ida.
- Within the networked AQIM structure, the two parallel factions also function with significant independence of one another.
- At the cellular level, cell leaders or sub-commanders themselves possess considerable operational autonomy.⁶⁸

F. Resources

a. Financial

- The Algerian government estimates AQIM's financial resources to be in excess of \$130 million.⁶⁹ The true number might vary significantly, but the group's financial resources are likely substantial.
- AQIM is funded through a variety of means including: smuggling in drugs, weapons, people, and illicit goods; taxing criminal organizations involved in smuggling; kidnapping for ransom; and various petty criminal activities such as drug dealing and counterfeiting money.⁷⁰
- In addition to these direct activities, agreements between AQIM and other trafficking organizations allow smugglers safe passage through AQIM areas of operation in exchange for payments.⁷¹
- AQIM also benefits from financial contributions by European-based North African expatriates.⁷²
- Some analysts emphasize the degree to which AQIM increasingly resembles a for-profit criminal organization.⁷³ While the group's criminal involvement is undoubtedly growing, ideological and terrorist activities remain a core element of the organization's identity and purpose.⁷⁴

b. Human

- Many AQIM members possess military training and combat experience as a result of state military service or participation in the wars in Algeria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.⁷⁵
- The organization also possesses considerable bomb-making capabilities.⁷⁶

c. Logistical

i. Forgery, safe-houses, etc.

- AQIM is involved in counterfeit money production. Italian authorities recently broke up one such enterprise operated by AQIM-linked North Africans within their territory.⁷⁷
- AQIM is also known to have manufactured forged identity and travel documents for use by AQIM operatives traveling to Europe and sale to illegal immigrants.⁷⁸
- AQIM maintains encampments in remote, largely ungoverned regions of the Sahel Band of the Saharan Desert.⁷⁹
- The group is also reported to operate "mobile training camps" throughout the region.⁸⁰

ii. Key routes

- A long established marijuana and hashish trafficking route begins in Morocco moving across Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad to locations in the Sudan and Egypt, running directly through the core of AQIM areas of operation.⁸¹
- This same route is increasingly used by ex-cannabis traffickers and AQIM members for the transportation of growing quantities of Latin American cocaine from West African states (including Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Ghana, Cape Verde, Mauritania, and Mali) northward to the Mediterranean and Europe.⁸²

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- Morocco has emerged as a key North African point of departure for AQIM and associated traffickers moving drugs to Europe. Algeria and Libya constitute important secondary locations.⁸³ Spain functions as the primary point of entry on the European side of the Mediterranean.⁸⁴
- Italy's geographic proximity to North Africa makes it another likely point of entry for AQIM members attempting to infiltrate the European Union, and Italian authorities have arrested AQIM-affiliated Algerians operating inside the country.⁸⁵

d. Transportation

i. Land

- AQIM possesses a strong working knowledge of Sahelian/Saharan geography and trafficking routes.
- The group travels by vehicle convoy, reportedly Land Rover and Toyota SUVs, capable of traversing the area's difficult terrain while using satellite phones and GPS for communication and navigation.⁸⁶

ii. Sea

- AQIM maintains strong connections to criminal organizations specializing in the sea transport of illicit drugs from Morocco to Spain.⁸⁷ According to AQIM suspects in U.S. custody, one of these Moroccan-based smuggling groups consists of Brazilian nationals.⁸⁸ It is likely that AQIM and its associates utilize similar groups stationed along alternative routes from elsewhere in North Africa to Southern Europe.

iii. Air

- Information not found.

iv. Intermodal container

- Information not found.

G. Trafficking Methods and Modalities

a. Corruption

- To the extent they are present, local governmental authorities in and around AQIM's presence in the Sahel are regularly complicit in smuggling.⁸⁹

b. Concealment

- Information not found.

c. Deception

- Information not found.

d. Circumvention (avoiding border entry points)

- AQIM operates in remote and largely ungoverned regions of the Sahel/Sahara, circumventing scarce border controls.

H. Prior / Existing Relationships

a. Other criminal organizations (cooperative and conflictual)

- Al-Qa'ida
- Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI)
- Armed Islamic Group (GIA)
- Nigerian Taliban
- Polisario Front of the Western Sahara
- Islamic Combatant Group (Morocco)⁹⁰
- Islamic Fighting Group (Libya)⁹¹
- Tunisian Combatant Group⁹²
- Unnamed European-based terrorist cells

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- Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
- Unnamed Brazilian-based smuggling organization⁹³
- Arms trafficking organizations⁹⁴
- Human trafficking organizations⁹⁵
- Drug trafficking organizations: although the exact groups are often unknown, AQIM maintains cooperative relationships with numerous African and Latin American drug trafficking organizations operating throughout the Sahel/Sahara region.⁹⁶ While AQIM is involved both directly and indirectly in the trafficking of Latin American cocaine from West Africa, uncertainties remain about the degree of direct contact and the extent of the presence of intermediary criminal groups between AQIM and the Latin American organizations. Significant cooperation between AQIM and Latin American groups has been reported by security officials.⁹⁷ However, other relationships are more speculative. In at least one instance, a plane smuggling FARC-produced cocaine from Venezuela to West Africa where the drugs were transported on-land through AQIM-controlled areas, stopped over in Cancun, Mexico on its return flight. Although the relationship between AQIM and the plane's operators remains unclear, U.S. Department of Homeland Security officials expressed concern about the possibility of AQIM militants utilizing one of the growing number of illicit Latin American-West Africa roundtrip flights for the transport of operatives to Mexico and on to the United States.⁹⁸

b. Corrupt politicians, law enforcement , political parties and other state entities, etc.

- Corrupt law enforcement and border officials are understood to play a role in facilitating illicit traffic through notoriously porous and difficult to police regional borders of West and North Africa.⁹⁹

c. *Specific detail: Any alliances / past dealings with terrorist groups.*

- Al-Qa'ida (AQ): AQIM's affiliation with al-Qa'ida dates back to the Algerian civil war. In the early 1990s, Usama bin Laden provided funding to Algerian Islamist militants and encouraged the creation of AQIM's antecedent organization, the GSPC. Many of AQIM's founding members underwent training in al-Qa'ida's Afghanistan camps.¹⁰⁰ However, some observers believe the current relationship between the two groups to be overstated and mainly symbolic.¹⁰¹ Others describe both terrorist organizations as part of a loosely integrated international "network of networks."¹⁰² In either case, some important substantive collaboration has been documented. During the Iraq war, AQIM funneled significant numbers of North African fighters to AQ-affiliate al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In 2002, high level Yemeni al-Qa'ida operative Imad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan was killed by Algerian security forces while en route to a meeting with the then-GSPC leadership.¹⁰³ (Neither al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP] nor its predecessor al-Qa'ida in Yemen [AQY] had yet been established.¹⁰⁴) Senior al-Qa'ida military commander Abu Layth al-Libi, another key link to AQIM, was killed in Pakistan in 2008.¹⁰⁵ Mokhtar Belmokhtar, head of AQIM's northern faction is believed to be the most critical link between AQIM, the broader North African militant Islamist movement, and al-Qa'ida today.¹⁰⁶ Whatever the precise nature of the relationship, however, AQIM continues to operate independently of al-Qa'ida.
- Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI): AQIM funneled significant numbers of North African fighters to Iraq where many undertook suicide bombing missions. The scale of North African participation points to a recruitment effort that was "highly coordinated on an international level."¹⁰⁷ Until his arrest by Syrian authorities, Adil Sakir al-Mukni functioned as a key link between AQIM and al-Qa'ida in Iraq.¹⁰⁸

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- Armed Islamic Group (GIA): the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) broke from the GIA over the latter group's brutal and widespread killing of civilians. Once the largest Islamic terrorist organization in the region, the end of the Algerian civil war, a loss of popular support, and Algerian counterterrorism efforts massively reduced GIA strength and capabilities. The group's last major terrorist attack is dated to 2001, and although it cannot be proven with complete certainty the GIA is generally supposed to have ceased functioning.¹⁰⁹ A significant part of AQIM's current European-based network, however, is believed to consist of reactivated ex-GIA operatives.¹¹⁰
- Nigerian Taliban: also known as Boko Haram, the Sunni fundamentalist terrorist organization located in Northern Nigeria seeks to ban Western education and impose a stricter version of sharia law. The Nigerian militants model themselves on the Afghan Taliban although no substantive connections between the two groups are known to exist. Boko Haram is responsible for numerous attacks on Nigerian Shiite civilians and government officials.¹¹¹ One of the group's leaders, identified only as Musa, recently declared an ideological affinity with the global militant jihadist movement, expressing a desire to attack U.S. targets and interests. At present, however, the Nigerian Taliban's capabilities appear limited in the aftermath of a government crackdown that killed numerous members including the organization's previous leader. Importantly, Boko Haram has no known relationship with Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian "underwear bomber" who attempted to blow up a U.S. Northwest Airlines flight on Christmas Day 2009.¹¹² AQIM maintains an active presence in Northern Nigeria and is known to have recruited and trained Nigerian Taliban members in its Sahel camps. Most of these are believed to have returned to Nigeria after completing training.¹¹³
- Polisario Front of the Western Sahara: a nationalist political-military organization founded in 1973 to oppose Spanish and then Moroccan control of the Western Sahara, the Polisario movement has evolved into a network of militants based out of Sahrawi refugee camps of Western Algeria. Many Polisario fighters now support a militant Islamist ideology and are sympathetic to AQIM's goals. AQIM maintains high-level contacts with the Polisario leadership and is believed to have assisted the group with materiel procurement.¹¹⁴
- Unnamed European-based terrorist cells: several European-based cells composed of naturalized North Africans or Europeans of North African heritage have contacted AQIM and travelled to the group's camps to receive training. Proximity and lower levels of regional conflict mean that, for Europeans, training at AQIM's northwest African bases implies significantly less risk than alternative locations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, or Yemen. The trainees provide AQIM with additional European-based assets for future operations.¹¹⁵
- Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC): AQIM is widely accepted to have connections with Latin American drug trafficking organizations operating in West Africa, although uncertainty exists concerning the exact nature of those linkages.¹¹⁶ Many observers believe that AQIM and the FARC have established a direct agreement on cooperation in the overland transport of cocaine through Northwest Africa.¹¹⁷ While no definitive proof of such a direct agreement has of yet been uncovered, United States and West African security officials have acknowledged that FARC-produced cocaine is being trafficked across Northwest Africa either directly by AQIM or by criminal groups facilitated by AQIM.¹¹⁸ The uncertainties about the nature of the

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relationship between the two organizations center on the degree of contact and the presence of intermediary criminal groups between AQIM and the FARC. Although conclusive proof of a direct AQIM-FARC agreement has not been found, the December 2009 arrest of three AQIM-affiliated militants in a joint Ghanaian-U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) operation provides some interesting new evidence in favor of a relationship between the two organizations.¹¹⁹ According to the DEA, the three militants, all of whom were experienced drug traffickers, were apprehended during negotiations with undercover counterterrorism operatives posing as representatives of the FARC. The AQIM-affiliated individuals were charged over the proposed “transport [of] cocaine through West and North Africa with the intent to support three terrorist organizations – Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM), and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC).” The DEA’s Acting Administrator called the case “further proof of the direct link between dangerous terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda, and international drug trafficking that fuels their violent activities.”¹²⁰ It must be noted, however, that the negotiations involved DEA operatives posing as representatives of the FARC. No real contact between FARC members and AQIM was conclusively documented.¹²¹ The incident nonetheless lends some additional credence to the widely suspected relationship between the two terrorist and drug trafficking organizations.

- Unnamed Brazilian-based smuggling organization: one AQIM drug trafficker, believing he was negotiating a cocaine shipment with representatives of the FARC, now in U.S. custody as the result of the DEA operation described above, reported a “longstanding working relationship with a Brazil-based criminal organization... that has assisted him with obtaining visas for travel to Brazil and parts of Europe.” According to the AQIM trafficker, the Brazilian group could be used for transporting the cocaine by boat “from the coast of Morocco to Spain.”¹²²
- More broadly according to one analyst, “European intelligence officials note that, more than any other regional grouping, organized crime is a gateway to participation in terrorist networks for North Africans.”¹²³

I. Ideological / Ethnic / Familial Orientation (if any)

- Salafi Islamic radicalism-fundamentalism
- AQIM membership is overwhelmingly North African, primarily Algerian with lesser numbers of Moroccans, Libyans, Tunisians, Malians, Nigeriens, and Mauritians and others from the region.¹²⁴

J. Technical Sophistication

- Moderate: AQIM possesses improvised and conventional bomb-making capacities. The group is also involved in money counterfeiting and document forgery.¹²⁵

K. Penchant for Innovation

- Given AQIM’s history of evolution and adaptation, its largely autonomous cellular structure, and the range of its criminal and terrorist activities, the organization’s potential for innovation is high.

L. Activities in United States

a. Includes both criminal and non-criminal activities

- Attempted terrorism

b. *Specific detail: trafficking activities ; logistical activities*

- Attempted terrorism: there are indications that the Algerian-born attempted-terrorists Ahmed Ressam and Mokhtar Haouari, convicted for the December 1999

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millennium plot to detonate a bomb inside the Los Angeles International Airport, had loose connections to AQIM which at the time was still known as the GSPC.¹²⁶

- c. Linkages with US groups
 - i. Market/transaction links
 - Information not found.
 - ii. Stable supplier
 - Information not found.
 - iii. Franchise arrangement
 - Information not found.
 - iv. HQ and Branch office
 - Information not found.

M. Evaluations

- a. Strengths
 - The strengths of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb are similar to those of the broader transnational militant Islamist movement. The group's networked cellular structure has proven fluid, adaptive, and difficult to dismantle, and the organization has amply demonstrated its ability to harass state security forces and successfully attack soft Western targets throughout Northwest Africa.
 - AQIM has capitalized on the safety provided by the Sahelian/Saharan region's weak governance and difficult to police geography while exploiting the potentially immense revenue offered by the growing volume of illicit narcotics traffic. The pragmatism illustrated by AQIM's approach to other criminal and terrorist organizations has proven important to the group's recovery from earlier losses to Algerian counterterrorism operations while securing a long-term source of funding for future activities.
 - AQIM has also employed a uniquely effective public relations strategy. The greatest significance of the group's alliance with al-Qa'ida may be in its symbolic and propaganda value. The change of name and highly publicized association has undoubtedly raised the organization's international profile. While the costs of this decision in the form of greater state counterterrorism attention are considerable, the higher profile and the al-Qa'ida label also confer important advantages in an increasingly decentralized, loosely networked global extremist movement: specifically, it functions as a powerful form of recruitment. A significant number of disaffected individuals from countries throughout Northwest Africa and, perhaps more importantly, Europe are known to have initiated contact with AQIM on their own accord. Al-Qa'ida benefitted from a similar phenomenon in the years after the 9/11 attacks.
 - For radicalized Europeans seeking terrorist training, instruction, and assistance, however, AQIM's North African camps are more accessible and entail less risk than distant locations in the Middle East and Central Asia.¹²⁷ Given AQIM's international ambitions, these contacts may prove to be critical assets in the conduct of future operations in European or even U.S. territory.
 - Furthermore, in light of AQIM's cooperative working relationships with a diverse range of criminal organizations, the possibility that one of these criminal groups might provide reciprocal assistance for the conduct of AQIM's terrorist activities cannot be dismissed.¹²⁸
- b. Weaknesses and vulnerabilities
 - AQIM has suffered significant losses as a result of Algerian counterterrorism efforts. It

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is probable that AQIM's Sahel presence, which benefits from the absence of governance in the area, would be similarly vulnerable to scaled-up regional counterterrorism operations, and some initial steps have been taken in this direction.

- Although adaptive and critical to the group's survival thus far, AQIM's cellular structure also entails significant organizational weaknesses. Divisions within the top leadership and conflict between the two main factions and individual cells offer potential pressure points that can be exploited to disrupt AQIM's organizational function and coherence.
- As recently demonstrated by the joint Ghanaian-U.S. DEA operation, the growing presence of new criminal groups associated with the regional drug trade and AQIM's willingness to work with such groups provides a point of entry for counterterrorism agents seeking to penetrate AQIM.
- Finally, without minimizing the ongoing risk posed by AQIM or the significance of its successful North African attacks, it must be noted that despite its stated intentions and repeated attempts, AQIM has thus far been unable to carry out a single successful terrorist attack on European or American soil.¹²⁹

c. Additional insights

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Other Notes

- In October 2009, French authorities arrested a physicist and longtime analyst at the CERN nuclear research center's Large Hadron Collider in Geneva, Switzerland on suspicion of links to AQIM. The suspect, a naturalized French citizen of Algerian origins, reportedly admitted to an online correspondence with AQIM members that included vague plans for future terrorist attacks. CERN officials say the suspect did not have access to any materials with potential military or terrorist applications.¹³⁰

¹ Andrew Hanson and Lauren Vriens, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 21, 2009. <http://www.cfr.org/north-africa/al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim/p12717>.

² Aron Lund, "Merger with Al Qaeda deepens threat from Algerian radicals," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 3, 2006. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/1003/p05s01-woaf.html>.

³ Scott Stewart and Fred Burton, "Algeria: Taking the Pulse of AQIM," *Stratfor*, June 24, 2009. http://www2.stratfor.com/index.php?q=weekly/20090624_algeria_taking_pulse_aqim.

⁴ Eric Schmitt and Souad Mekhennet, "Qaeda Branch Steps Up Raids in North Africa," *New York Times*, July 9, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/10/world/africa/10terror.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=al%20qaeda%20north%20africa&st=cse.

⁵ Lund, "Merger with Al Qaeda deepens threat from Algerian radicals."

⁶ Europol, *TE-SAT 2008: EU Terrorism and Situation Trend Report* (The Hague: Europol, 2008), 17.

http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2008.pdf;

and Europol, *TE-SAT 2011: EU Terrorism and Situation Trend Report* (The Hague: Europol, 2011), 18.

http://www.europol.europa.eu/publications/EU_Terrorism_Situation_and_Trend_Report_TE-SAT/TE-SAT2011.pdf.

⁷ "Arab uprising disturbing flow of anti-terror intel," Associated Press, May 19, 2011.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hd9RKWcJ6C7mRbX7OKmA8YytGOIQ?docId=a782be1e09cd4a7290309d1d463d1e83>; and Neil MacFarquhar, "The Vacuum After Qaddafi," *New York Times*, February 27, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/27/world/africa/27qaddafi.html>.

⁸ Europol, *TE-SAT 2011*, 19.

⁹ "Algeria boosts Libya border security in 'unprecedented' operation - Al-Jazeera," *Doha Al-Jazirah Satellite Channel Television* in Arabic, April 20, 2011, OSC: GMP20110421950039.

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- ¹⁰ “State PAO: Algiers Media Digest 31 May 11,” Algiers *US Embassy Public Affairs Office* in English, May 31, 2011, OSC: GMP20110531835004.
- ¹¹ “Selection List: Paris Jeune Afrique 22-28 May 11,” Paris *Jeune Afrique* in French, May 22, 2011, OSC: AFP20110524644001.
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