



From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel: The Transformation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

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ABSTRACT

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) appeared on the Algerian landscape in 2007 after the merger between Al Qaeda and the GSPC, with the objective of expanding its existing network in North Africa and the Sahel region. Pressure from security forces in Algeria propelled the group to seek refuge in Mali, where the 2012 conflict provided a safe haven for the group. *Opération Serval*, launched by the French military in 2013, dealt a severe setback to AQIM, as many of its fighters were killed and others dispersed to other parts of the region. From that period onwards, there has been a reduction in terror attacks and bombings until recently. Yet, an increase in kidnapping of foreigners for ransom coupled with drug trafficking signalled a transformation in the modus operandi of the group. To understand this trend, the article applies the crime-terror paradigm in order to assess the evolution of AQIM from a terror group with political and religious intentions into a group engaged in criminal activities with economic motivations. The article finds that AQIM is a hybrid entity that displays both terrorist and criminal motivations which are determined by the context within which the group finds itself.

KEYWORDS

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb; AQIM; organised crime; Sahel; terrorism

Introduction

In 1992, Algeria was set to become the first Islamic republic to transit from authoritarianism to democratic pluralism. A military coup abruptly halted the process, thus paving the way for a near decade-long of civil war between the state and militant Islamist groups. In this context, one of the militant groups, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA)—the antecedent to the Salafist Group for Combat and Preaching (GSPC) and later Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—capitalised on the grievance of the population to justify its attacks on the state. Eventually, after losing the support of the people due to its belligerent and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, the GIA splintered and the GSPC was formed. In contrast to the GIA, whose focus was on overthrowing the government and transforming Algeria into an Islamic state, the GSPC sought to extend its reach beyond Algeria. The merger between Al Qaeda and GSPC in 2007 concretized this vision as the group adopted the name Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

In a relatively short period, AQIM started employing Al Qaeda tactics of suicide bombings and targeting foreign institutions, but eventually abandoned this method due

to the decline in support which in turn dealt a massive blow to their recruiting capacity. Furthermore, pressure from security forces in Algeria propelled the group to seek refuge in Mali, where the 2012 conflict provided a safe haven for the group until the French military launched *Opération Serval* in 2013. A great reduction in terror attacks combined with an inverse increase in kidnapping of foreigners for ransom and trafficking of drugs and contraband signals a transformation in the modus operandi of AQIM. In order to ascertain an understanding of the phenomenon of AQIM, the author attempts to answer the question as to whether AQIM is a religious terrorist group that resorts to criminal activities for funding or if it has transformed into an organised crime group focused solely on economic gains and resorts to terror tactics to achieve this goal. To this end, this article is divided into five sections.

Section one introduces the crime-terror continuum as the theoretical framework through which the transformation of AQIM will be examined. The next section studies the origin and organisational structure of the group and the various major attacks it has conducted since its emergence in 2007. Section three examines the group's economic motivation through its various activities, such as kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking, amongst others. In section four, the author attempts to answer the question as to whether AQIM is a terror group involved in criminal activities for economic reasons or a criminal group primarily motivated by financial gain yet focusing on grievance (political or religious) to attract recruits. Section five concludes with a brief examination of the future threat that the group poses.

Theoretical framework: the nexus of crime and terrorism

Traditionally, organised crime and terrorism were perceived as two distinct concepts with regard to their definitions and the motivations of the individuals involved in these entities. For the terrorist, the primary objective is to change the “system” to promote a greater “good” for the community while the organised criminal goal is primarily personal gain and material abundance.¹ In brief, the impetus for the functioning of terrorist groups and organised criminal entities were political or ideological objectives and profit, respectively. However, the demarcation line between terrorism and organised criminal entities slowly blurred in the aftermath of the Cold War. With the onset of globalisation, organised crime groups adopted a more transnational dimension while terrorist groups were evolving. With state sponsorship diminishing, many terrorist organisations had little choice but to resort to criminal activities for financial support, subsequently embracing organised crime tactics such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and kidnapping for ransom inter alia.

The growing instances of criminal entities and terrorists adopting each other's tactics prompted scholars to examine this phenomenon in more detail. The result of these research activities culminated in a proliferation of literature that can be divided into two corresponding categories, namely, the nature and context of the crime-terror continuum.² The concept of the crime-terror continuum has its origins in the 1970s and 1980s when scholars observed the first connection between terrorism and organised crime. In an attempt to describe drug trafficking organisations that perpetrated terrorist acts, then U.S. Ambassador to Colombia coined the term narco-terrorism.³ From this period onwards, the crime-terror nexus would grow in complexity as exemplified in the operations and tactics of the Medellín Cartel, whose members resorted to violence against government and civilians alike in their pursuit of power and profit.⁴

The crime-terror continuum, consisting of terrorist groups on the one end of the spectrum and organised crime entities on the other, can be divided into four phases. The first phase is the alliance phase, where both organised crime and terrorist groups form alliances to promote their respective interests. These alliances can be either tactical, in that it is a one-off deal or a short-term negotiation, or strategic, where it lasts for a longer period depending on the interests of the actors involved.⁵ An example of a tactical alliance is the meeting of FARC members with IRA individuals in 2001 in order to share explosives intelligence.⁶ The relationship that developed between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Albanian mafia during the Kosovo conflict, based on heroin trafficking, typifies a strategic alliance. The proceeds that the Albanian mafia received from its heroin transactions assisted the KLA's political wing in purchasing weapons.⁷

Phase two of the continuum consists of the appropriation stage in which one entity adopts the other one's methods and tactics and vice versa, featuring the employment of operational tactics by both terrorist and organised crime groups. As such, terrorists engage in criminal activities as a means to fund their cause while organised crime entities employ "selected and calibrated violence to destroy competitors or threaten counternarcotic authorities."⁸ In the third phase, both organisations amalgamate to form a functional alliance to pursue their "ideological and economic motivations by perpetrating acts of politically motivated terrorism and engaging in organised criminal activity for profit maximisation."⁹ The final stage occurs when a terrorist group fuses into an organised crime entity through a transformation process. Having explained the nature of the crime-terror continuum, it becomes imperative to provide a brief examination of the context that promotes the emergence of these networks.

Contextualising the crime-terror nexus

Factors that provide impetus for the development and flourishing of the crime-terror relationship include a state of chaos, protracted conflicts, and regions possessing shadow economies.¹⁰ This collaboration is further strengthened when terrorist and organised crime groups are allowed to operate freely in spaces that governments have little or no control over. Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Pakistan, Thailand, Somalia, and northern Mali are a few instances where both criminal and terror entities thrive, since government control over these areas is either fragmented and weak or non-existent.¹¹ In addition to the above-mentioned factors, corruption is another element that contributes towards the sustaining of the nexus. Both terrorist and organised crime groups aim to create a situation in which corruption is so endemic and widespread that the state loses its authority amongst the population. In turn, capitalising on the state's loss of legitimacy among the populace, these groups exploit the situation for their own benefit.¹²

The convergence framework

The convergence theory refers "to the idea that criminal and terrorist organisations could converge into a single entity that initially displays characteristics of both groups simultaneously."¹³ To this end, both groups amalgamate into a hybrid entity, displaying similar motivations and objectives in so far as it becomes impossible to differentiate the one from the other. Both entities assume each other's identity while also changing their

ultimate goals, extending beyond the alliance and appropriation stage. Some terrorist groups, after having converged, are so attracted to the profits accrued from criminal activities to the degree of “using their political rhetoric as a façade solely for perpetrating criminal activities on a wider scale.”¹⁴ When a terrorist group undergoes this change, it is said to have moved beyond the convergence into the transformation phase.

This can be exemplified in the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), which is the epitome of the convergence framework. At its inception, the group was composed of communist militants with the aim of overthrowing the government, but the FARC evolved into one of the most prominent terrorist organisations in Latin America. Turning to drug trafficking to fund their mission, the FARC eventually seized control of the Colombian cocaine market after the Cali and Medellín cartels were dismantled. Aside from its drug operations, the group is also involved in kidnapping for ransom, extortion, and forming alliances with criminal groups outside of Colombia, thus exemplifying the transformation phase.¹⁵

On the crime-terror spectrum, transformation signals an evolution of the aim and motivation of a group resulting in a drastic change in its nature as compared to convergence, which implied the fusion of two entities. For instance, the transformation of a terrorist group into a crime-terror entity will display three main characteristics, namely, “1) a degradation of the leadership cadre committed to the political cause; 2) political transformations that undermine the political *raison d’être* of the group; and 3) searching for opportunities for significant criminal profits.”¹⁶ In other words, the group undergoing a transformation process moves beyond its political motivation to an economic centred one, while masquerading behind a political agenda. In doing so, these groups capitalise on this tactic due to its dual advantages.

Firstly, these groups purposely mislead law enforcement authorities into focusing on the political issues rather than on the criminal activities of the groups. Secondly, as a means to promote its hegemony within the criminal network, the transformed group adopts terror tactics to dissuade any mode of competition from other organised crime entities.¹⁷ Coupled with a focus on political grievances and financial rewards, the group is perceived as an attractive employer for young recruits. AQIM exemplified this when it presented itself as a provider to potential recruits living in extreme poverty in Mali, Niger, and Mauritania.¹⁸

A propos its funding operations, AQIM fits within what Rosenthal defines as terrorism-for-profit’s criminal activities that include “kidnapping, banditry, looting or smuggling—legitimized by an ideological veneer.”¹⁹ As such, AQIM employs an operational ambiguity whereby its smuggling and kidnapping activities overshadow its political or religious pronouncements.²⁰ Another pertinent aspect to the transformation process is the context that enables hybrid groups to maintain their activities. Issues such as corruption, violence, and conflict not only contribute to state failure but also engender an environment referred to by scholars as a “black hole” which fosters the “convergence between transnational organised crime and terrorism ... creating a safe haven for the continued operations of convergent groups.”²¹ Operating in this “black hole,” hybrid groups conduct their activities without fear of reprisal from security or law enforcement authorities.

Based on their study of the emergence of a black hole state in Afghanistan by the Taliban movement, Philips and Kamen highlight three salient features pushing a hybrid organisation into a black hole state.²² Firstly, the group should operate within the geopolitical context of a weak or failing state. Secondly, the organisation should be

constantly involved in both terrorist and criminal activities. Finally, the entity's original founding principle should hold a strategic value to the group. The convergence framework, consisting of both the convergence and transformation, aims to explain the transformation of a terrorist group with political motivations to an organised crime entity focused on criminal activities for the primary purpose of accumulating profits while at the same time capitalising specifically on black hole states.

Espousing the convergence framework, the subsequent paragraphs will determine whether AQIM is a religious terrorist group that resorts to criminal activities purely for funding purposes or whether it has transformed into an organised crime entity focusing solely on economic benefits, resorting to terror acts to achieve this goal.

North Africa: Al Qaeda's playground

Long before its merger with the GSPC, Al Qaeda had a sustainable presence in Africa. Prior to returning to Afghanistan in 1996 after discovering a plot to have him arrested, Osama Bin Laden spent many years in Sudan training future jihadists and planning attacks on U.S. interests. Two years after his departure, on the 8th of August 1998, Al Qaeda carried out its first attack on African soil, targeting the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Both attacks claimed the lives of over 200 people while about 4500 people were injured. These events, even before 9/11, symbolised the serious threat and devastation that Al Qaeda posed to Africa and the rest of the world. Despite its relationship with various jihadi groups in North Africa, it was only in 2002 that Al Qaeda formalised its presence in the Northern region of the continent, exactly seven months after the 9/11 attacks. On the 11th of April 2002, Niza Naouar (an Al Qaeda member of Tunisian origin) detonated a natural gas truck fitted with explosives at the Al Ghriba synagogue on the Tunisian island of Jerba. Al Qaeda's first attack in North Africa killed 21 tourists and injured more than 30 others.²³ It can be argued that the Tunisian attack was the commencement of Al Qaeda's terrorism in North Africa and would find its culmination in the merger between the group and the GSPC.

The pre-birth of AQIM: the GSPC

Former paratrooper Hassan Hattab (also known as Abu Hamza) broke away from the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) to form a new splinter group under the name *Al-Jamaah al-Salafiyyah li-al-Dawah wal Qital* or the GSPC. In terms of its ideology, the newly formed group followed Jihadi-Salafism in the aim of overthrowing the apostate Algerian regime through jihad and installing in its place an Algerian Islamic state ruled by sharia, espousing a similar ideology to the GIA. In fact, the GSPC stated in its first communiqué that it is "a continuation of the Armed Islamic Group, following its ideology, before it deviated and went astray. Thus, [the GSPC] represents the genuine path that jihad has followed since its inception in Algeria."²⁴ The semblance that the GSPC is a mere replica of the GIA could be easily assumed were it not for the tactics espoused by its leader.

From its inception, the GSPC had clarified its twofold aim of a) continuing the war against the government and b) extending the GSPC's operation beyond the Algerian border. As such, the GSPC was contending to undertake jihad on both a local and international level—reminiscent of Al Qaeda's tactic. To further delineate itself from

the GIA, the GSPC emphatically emphasised that the jihad would be undertaken against security forces only and not civilians.²⁵ The GSPC attracted new dissidents from the GIA, the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), and members of other jihadist groups who were not willing to accept the government's truce of laying down their arms. As a result, the GSPC rapidly expanded into one of the most active jihadist groups operating within Algeria and in Northern Africa.

As the first leader of the GSPC, Hassan Hattab's primary role was to rebuild the image of the Salafi-Jihadist movement in Algeria as it had been stained by the previous exploits of the GIA. To this end, Hattab tried to foster ties with other militant movements in Algeria and eventually took control of these groups. He also followed a Salafist ideology focusing attacks on military personnel only, though at times this would include executing civilians who were either informants or spies. Unlike the GIA, the GSPC would refrain from attacking innocent civilians or kidnapping women in order to turn them into sex slaves. Hattab was serious in his vision of reviving the local jihad against the government and set out to persuade those with the same foresight as he to join in with the GSPC. One of those targets was Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former Afghan and GIA veteran, who brought to the GSPC his expertise in smuggling weapons and cigarettes between Algeria and the Sahel. Belmokhtar would later become the leader of the Al Mourabitoun group responsible for attacks in Mali presently, as will be discussed in the next section.

In the international arena, Hattab restored contacts with former GIA sympathisers who had returned to the Salafist movement in Europe and favoured the tactics and vision of the GSPC.²⁶ One of the most notable attacks that occurred during the time of Hattab's leadership was the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in February and March of 2003. By that time, there was growing discontent with the leader of the GSPC as his members perceived him as too moderate and therefore ineffectual in continuing the mission of the GSPC. In September 2003, after a meeting of the GSPC leadership, Hassan Hattab was deposed as leader and replaced by the more radical Nabil Sahrawi (also known as Abu Ibrahim Mustafa). The new leader was resolute in attacking the apostates comprising the Algerian government at home and the U.S. and its allies abroad. Before Sahrawi could actualise his new vision, he was killed by security forces in June 2004. After his death, another former GIA member, Abdelmalek Droukdel (who chose the moniker Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), was chosen as the new emir of the GSPC and carried on with Sahrawi's plan. Within the GSPC, there was a struggle between focusing on the local jihad that consisted of overthrowing the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) government and the global jihad that meant defeating the Far Enemy.²⁷

GSPC under Droukdel: the beginning of an Al Qaeda alliance

The success of president Bouteflika's amnesty program for former jihadist fighters dealt a major blow to the recruiting capacity of the GSPC and further intensified the debate within the GSPC of local versus international jihad. The Iraq War, initiated by the U.S. and allies in 2003, provided the answer to that struggle. The U.S.-led invasion provided the impetus for young recruits to join the GSPC in order to be trained and sent into battle in Iraq. The war in Iraq and the ensuing insurgency popularised the notion of jihad and soon the GSPC was inundated with volunteers from around North Africa that included fighters from Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia who were willing to help their

brothers in Iraq. Reminiscent of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets, the war in Iraq “became a magnet for thousands of activists in the Arab world and beyond.”²⁸

Realising that this was the opportunity for the GSPC to establish itself in the global arena, Droukdel pursued closer relations with Al Qaeda by initiating conversations with Al Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda Iraq.²⁹ The public endorsement of the kidnapping and execution of two Algerian diplomats in Bagdad by Al Qaeda Iraq in July 2005 had a positive impact on the rapprochement between the Al Qaeda affiliate and its North African counterpart. Despite its focus on international jihad, the GSPC had not lost sight of its local objective. In 2005, the group launched an attack on a military outpost in Mauritania, killing 15 military personnel.³⁰ Assuming Al Qaeda’s tactics of attacking foreign targets, the GSPC bombed a bus carrying foreign employees of a U.S.-owned firm in 2006, killing the driver and injuring 6 employees.³¹ Gradually, the GSPC adopted Al Qaeda’s modus operandi in its denunciation of the amnesty offered by Bouteflika’s government while targeting the Far Enemy such as France and the U.S. and their ability to successfully execute manoeuvres outside the Algerian borders in Mauritania and Mali, for instance.

A partnership between the GSPC and Al Qaeda grew increasingly closer as both sides realised its importance and mutual benefit. GSPC saw this partnership as producing global exposure and legitimacy in the eyes of the worldwide Salafi-Jihadist movement. For Al Qaeda, it had a practical basis as it sought to access the widespread network of GSPC cells in Europe.³² Hence, on the 11th of September 2006, Al Qaeda celebrated the fifth anniversary of its attacks on American soil with the announcement of the integration of GSPC into Al Qaeda. Four months after its official merger with Al Qaeda, the GSPC officially announced that it would from that time onwards be known as *Qaedat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami* or Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The birth of AQIM

On September 11, 2006, Al Qaeda deputy leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced the official merger of the group and the GSPC. In a communiqué released three days later, the GSPC acknowledged Zawahiri’s message by pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda:

We are glad to inform our Islamic nation and our Muslim brothers around the world about the great news which the mujahedeen have been waiting for ... the news of the merging of the Salafist Group for Prayer and Combat in Algeria with Al Qaeda... We have decided to swear bayat to Shaykh Usama Bin Laden and to continue our jihad in Algeria as soldiers under his command, for him to use us in the cause of Allah when and where he sees fit.³³

Four months of careful consideration and consultations with Bin Laden finally led to the leaders of GSPC changing the group’s name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The hiatus between the pledge of allegiance and the actual name change has resulted in scholars examining the relationship between AQIM and Al Qaeda more closely in terms of ideology and modus operandi.

Al Qaeda and AQIM espouse the Salafi-jihadism ideology that is anti-Western with the objective of establishing an Islamic caliphate ruled by a caliph under sharia law. Similarly, both groups adopt violence as a justification or a duty in their quest to attain their goals and have little tolerance for other forms of Islam. In 2014, Abdelmalek Droukdel reiterated AQIM’s objectives by renewing the group’s loyalty to Zawahiri when he pledged, “an

allegiance to jihad to liberate Muslim lands and affirm Islamic sharia law in it and bring back the Caliphate that is based on prophetic principles.”³⁴

In the initial phase following the amalgamation, AQIM displayed Al Qaeda’s modus operandi of “high profile coordinated attacks against symbolic targets, active use of the media and investment in lengthy preparations and timing.”³⁵ Yet, AQIM struggled to shed its GSPC identity into the Al Qaeda one due to the prevailing social and political environment exemplified in the fact that each organisation had a different “far enemy.” For Al Qaeda, this took the form of the U.S., while AQIM’s primary enemy was France. Liepman and Chivvis interestingly highlight that it was not coincidental that Droukdel sought closer relations to Al Qaeda during the period when the latter’s propaganda was directed against France.³⁶ Another problem that underscored the failure of AQIM to totally adopt Al Qaeda’s identity relates to the group’s composition. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 2008, Droukdel admitted that the majority of members of this organisation were Islamists of Algerian nationality.³⁷ In light of the latter, scholars concluded that the GSPC’s name change was merely a marketing strategy that the group utilised to gain more exposure in order to enlarge their pools of recruits.

Furthermore, after analysing AQIM media and internet propaganda messages, Torres Soriano concludes that the GSPC exploited its merger with Al Qaeda to improve its image and elevate its profile since “its leaders did not intend the merger to mark a drastic change in the group’s existing strategies or objectives.”³⁸ Harmon echoes this statement when he notes that for the GSPC, the merger had more to do with survival than advancing local or global jihad.³⁹ He further argues that, besides the differences in name, rhetoric, and the introduction of new tactics that included suicide bombings, the major changes in the GSPC’s posture included its expansion into the Sahara-Sahel region and its drift into contraband and trafficking.⁴⁰

Regardless of the reasons behind the change of name, it appeared that the renaming had reinvigorated AQIM to attain its objective with earnest. The adoption of a new name propelled the group from a mere insurgency to a more flexible network organisation capable of inflicting significant damage.⁴¹ To examine the impact of the evolution of AQIM within its political and social context, it is important to analyse its renewed operational structure.

AQIM: operational structures

An examination of the current structure within which AQIM operates reveals that the merger had little impact on the restructuring of the GSPC. In other words, AQIM had retained the previous structures and operations that its predecessor had put in place albeit with minor adjustments. Prior to its union with Al Qaeda, the GSPC divided its area of operations, which included Algeria and certain parts of the Sahel, into nine geographical zones with an emir as the leader. After its emergence, AQIM set out to restructure these nine zones into four main katibs⁴² or branches divided into north, south, east, and west.

The north/central section, formerly zones 1, 2, and 3 of the GSPC, covers the capital Algiers and its suburbs, Kabyle, and the east coast of Algeria. This Katiba was the most active of the four (as of 2013) as it comprised the largest number of fighters ranging between 500–800 men who planned their operations from the Aures mountain region.⁴³ Conversely, the least active is the west Katiba, previously GSPC’s zone 4 and 8, consisting of the western part of Algeria that extends to Morocco and the south-western part of Algeria. Zones 5, 6, and 7 in the eastern part of

Algeria have been restructured into the East section that extends from the south of Tunisia, the eastern part of Algeria, to the north of Niger. This katiba, also known as Katibat Tariq ibn Zayyad, was established by Amira Saifi in 2003 but later came under the leadership of Yahia Abou Ammar Abid Hammadu (alias Abdel Hamid Abou Zeid).⁴⁴ This branch of AQIM, under the guidance of Abou Zeid, has evolved into one of the most “terrorist” branches. In addition to the killing of two foreign hostages in 2009 and 2010 respectively, the commander of the Katibat Tariq ibn Zayyad was also reported to assist and train Boko Haram militants in Niger.⁴⁵

The southern branch, also known as Katibat al-mulaththamin, whose emir is Khaled Abdul Abbas, more commonly known as Mokhtar Belmokhtar, comprises former zone 9 that encompasses south-western Algeria, northern Mali, and Mauritania.⁴⁶ Contrasting the katiba of Abou Zeid, whose primary operation is terrorist activities, this branch focuses on criminal activities such as smuggling of weapons, contraband, and stolen vehicles.⁴⁷ This is due to the fact that its leader Belmokhtar is more influenced by monetary gain rather than purely terrorist activities. However, it is important to recall that Belmokhtar and his militants had been involved in terrorist attacks both during his time in the GSPC and in AQIM.⁴⁸ In recent times, due to the military pressure on AQIM militants in the central region, the southern katiba had superseded it to become the most active of the AQIM branches. Belmokhtar gradually became a pivotal player within AQIM as he formed important networks with different Arab and Tuaregs tribes in the Sahara region, particularly in Northern Mali.⁴⁹

The decentralization of power model of AQIM (where the leader of each region had his own autonomy) contributed positively towards it becoming the most active and feared jihadist group in the Sahel region. Yet, it also had some disadvantages of instigating a clash between the emir of the group and its commanders. When AQIM’s emir Droukhal feared that Belmokhtar was growing too influential, he replaced the latter with the former head of the information committee, Yahia Djouadi.⁵⁰ Anticipating that his life might be at risk, Belmokhtar retreated into Mali where he continued his exploits and established alliances. He eventually formed his own jihadi group in 2012 called the Masked Brigade, which would later change its name into Al Mourabitoun, which would eventually join the AQIM Sahara branch in 2017. The ongoing rivalries within AQIM, combined with external threats from the Algerian and international security forces, had left AQIM with reduced capacities and propelled the group to adapt to its social environment while at the same time remaining faithful to its objectives.

The various adaptations and fragmentations of the group can be associated with what Shapiro identifies as a “meta-strategy of survival,” where survival becomes the highest achievement of the organisation.⁵¹ The deconcentration of power left local emirs of the katibas to interpret the survival of the group in their own ways, which is often contrary to central command due to problems of communication. Bencherif denotes the AQIM’s model of centralised and deconcentrated power model as a “contradictory structure [that] necessarily leads to tensions and fragmentations.”⁵²

Growth: AQIM and its reign of terror

In the immediate aftermath of its merger, AQIM began its terror campaign in 2007 with more ardour than its predecessor—with seven synchronised bombings aimed at various police stations in Algeria, killing 8 persons and injuring over 10. Yet, the first major attack of AQIM and the worst ever in over a decade in Algeria occurred on the 11th of April 2007, when AQIM coordinated carefully planned double suicide attacks in Algiers to

commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Ghriba Synagogue bombing that symbolised Al Qaeda's first attack on North African soil. The first blast targeted the office of the prime minister, killing over 12 and wounding 118. The second attack was on the police station, which resulted in 11 fatalities and over 40 injuries.⁵³ This was the first incident in which AQIM introduced suicide bombing as a strategy to destabilise the enemies, thus departing from the traditional *modus operandi* of the GSPC or even the GIA. Suicide attacks featured as AQIM's signature from this point onwards and on September 6, there was an assassination attempt on the Algerian president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, when he was visiting the city of Batna. Although the president was unhurt, the explosion resulted in the death of 16 people. On December 8, another suicide attack on the naval barracks in the coastal city of Dellys killed 30 people.⁵⁴ Thus far, by targeting government offices and military officials within Algeria, AQIM had confined itself to a local jihad. However, the next assault would characterise the seriousness of AQIM as a source of both local and global terror.

Over a year after its formation, on the 11th of December 2007, AQIM launched a cautiously planned double suicide mission in the capital city Algiers, targeting the United Nations building and the Algerian Constitutional Court Building. Adopting Al Qaeda tactics, the two suicide bombers drove two separate trucks laden with about 800 kg of explosives into the buildings. The first suicide bomber, identified as 64-year-old Rabbah Bechla, drove one truck into the United Nations while 32-year-old Larbi Charef conducted the second suicide attack. The resulting explosion killed over 38 people, among whom were 17 UN workers, and wounded over 170 others. AQIM instantly claimed responsibility for the attack on its website with the bold statement that the assault was "another successful conquest ... carried out by the Knights of the Faith with their blood in defence of the wounded nation of Islam."⁵⁵

In the eyes of AQIM, the choice of these two targets had symbolic values, as the constitutional court was overlooking elections for the apostate government of Algeria while the UN exemplified the international enemy of Islam. This assault was the second time a UN building was attacked by Al Qaeda affiliates. The first one was the bombing of the UN offices in the Cana Hotel in Baghdad in 2003 in which Al Qaeda Iraq (AQI) members characterised the UN as a tool that the West utilises to dominate Muslims and as such, the UN became an open target for jihadist groups⁵⁶ as "the attack on 11 December 2007 signalled AQIM's intentions not to limit their attacks to foreign workers and companies, but to target others, including humanitarian and diplomatic representatives."⁵⁷ With these attacks, AQIM reinstated the original approach of the GIA of targeting foreign nationalities.

Despite the escalation in suicide attacks the following year, the casualties were not equivalent to those of the previous year, when AQIM was at its zenith in Algeria. In August 2008, there were over 125 people killed, where the most vicious attack happened when a truck packed with explosives drove into a police academy, resulting in 43 fatalities.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, AQIM could not match its deadly spate of violence that it had initiated the previous year, resulting in a drop in the number of fatalities. In 2009, the most notable assaults were the execution of British hostage Edwin Dyer and the bombing of a convoy of Chinese engineers protected by Algerian forces that killed 24 individuals. In June 2010, AQIM claimed responsibility for the death of 11 Algerian soldiers while also detonating a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device at another police checkpoint, resulting in 10 fatalities (7 police officers and 3 civilians).

In March of the same year, the group launched its first suicide bombing attack in Niger and in August, Mauritania was the recipient of its first suicide attack by AQIM. Overall in

2010, fatalities caused by the attacks of AQIM amounted to over 80 people and the areas affected included Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.⁵⁹ The following year witnessed a greater focus on kidnapping for ransom than on violent attacks. The most infamous attack was the detonation of an improvised explosive device (IED) by an AQIM-trained member targeting the French embassy in Mali. Henceforth, violent assaults by AQIM declined as the group began focusing on kidnapping for ransom.⁶⁰

This downward spiral of violence can be attributed to two factors.⁶¹ Primarily, the effective military strategies in dealing with AQIM militants have proven successful in dealing with the terror threat. Secondly, the fact that Al Qaeda in Iraq was fighting Sunni nationalist insurgencies provided a negative image for the Al Qaeda affiliates around the globe, especially AQIM. Additionally, the increase in suicide bombings as a method of jihad and its indiscriminate attacks against civilians also dealt a blow to the recruiting image of AQIM. Realising the latter mistake, AQIM, in its propaganda and media website, attempted to downplay the number of local casualties of its attacks and instead emphasised the number of foreigners killed. Some scholars have also associated the Arab springs, especially the Libyan uprising, as contributing towards the decline in the ranks of AQIM as its members went to assist its allies in the overthrow of Qaddafi and his government in 2011.

The expansion of AQIM: from Algeria to Mali

From 2008 onwards, AQIM was under increasing pressure from successful military campaigns by Algerian security forces. This led to a decrease in both the number and propensity of attacks by the group. It eventually sought refuge in neighbouring Northern Mali, where it received much needed respite. Not only did Northern Mali shelter AQIM militants from the Algerian security forces, it also provided the group with a safe haven to conduct its various activities and plan new attacks. Furthermore, the region would become the epicentre of AQIM's theatre of operations for the next few years, as this contributed towards its transformation from being less politically/ideologically motivated to more economically driven.⁶² Contributing factors towards this change include a lack of governance and the formation of alliances with local populations through marriage bonds and forging ties with networks of drug traffickers.⁶³

Forming relationships with the locals should be perceived through the lens of the notion of "social space," where it is governed by rules of legitimation and domination.⁶⁴ As Bencherif highlights, the operations of jihadist groups can be understood by focusing on the internal dynamics and interactions with social space.⁶⁵ In the case of AQIM, the group took advantage of the Tuareg's grievance towards the government and the transformation of their tribal system to attract socially disadvantaged and unemployed youth. As Campana and Ducol note, the Tuareg's rebellion in 2007 opened up the space for AQIM to present itself as a social alternative to former rebels.⁶⁶ As such, through its discourse and resources, it has managed to attract young Tuaregs to join its ranks and participate in kidnappings in the name of the jihadist group.⁶⁷ It is important to note that the strategies used by different groups depends on the opportunity that allows them to penetrate the relational dynamics of a social space, and for AQIM, the 2007 disarmament process failure and the transformation of the Tuareg social order provided the perfect moment.

In relation to its modus operandi, AQIM changed its focus from explosive attacks aimed at causing voluminous casualties to kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking. It is important to note that although kidnapping for ransom had been part of AQIM's

tactics for funding since its inception (and during its time as the GSPC), the ratio of kidnapping for ransom to terror attacks had almost doubled since the 2008/9 period. However, the 2012 Northern Malian insurgency provided the perfect opportunity for AQIM to restore its image as a terror group focused on political objectives of establishing an Islamic state in its area of operation. State failure as a result of a lack of governance structures in Northern Mali, compounded with the rebellion of the Tuaregs against the Malian government in the north of the country, provided AQIM with a perfect opportunity to accomplish the objective for which it was created, that is, extend the Islamic caliphate beyond Algeria.

Joining forces with the local battalions and Ansar Al Dine, AQIM and its followers began controlling sizeable areas while implementing sharia and at the same time opening training camps. The establishment of a UN mission in Mali had the adverse effect of propelling more recruits to join the jihadi factions. Adapting to the new environment, AQIM began establishing its own economic system within the area it controlled through employment and income-generating activities, including the recruitment of combatants and auxiliaries (guides, drivers, informers, paramedical staff); the supply of foodstuffs (cereals, sugar, tea, etc.), fuel, tyres, spare parts, and weapons; and subcontracting hostage taking and hostage keeping.⁶⁸

Gradually, AQIM and its allies started gaining the trust of the people, with increasing popularity gained at the expense of the dwindling legitimacy of the government and local traditional leaders. Moving away from its exclusively Algerian composition, AQIM began recruiting members from all parts of Africa such as Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, amongst others, and some even arrived from countries as far away as Pakistan and Afghanistan in order to wage jihad. Realising that its security forces were not equipped to face the insurgents who were advancing upon the capital city of Bamako, the Malian government made a desperate appeal to the international community for help as it perceived that defeat would have been imminent.

The French government responded to the plea by the government of its former colony by preparing for a military intervention in Mali. In January 2013, the French military launched operation *Serval* against the advancing jihadist groups. Supported by the U.S., the British, and its allies, the French intervened with airstrikes and ground assaults, occasioning the death of over 300 jihadist fighters.⁶⁹ A few weeks later, the foreign forces wrestled back the areas occupied by the jihadists such as Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal from AQIM and its fighters. In the process, the jihadists dispersed and sought refuge in neighbouring countries and the Sahel. While operation *Serval* could be deemed successful in terms of military prospects, it would be obviously ambitious to assume that the operation had totally defeated AQIM. Actually, it is more accurate to state that the French intervention incapacitated the political and social functions of the AQIM organisation and consequently led to AQIM gravitating more towards becoming an economically motivated entity. Nonetheless, since 2012 there has been an increase in attacks from AQIM affiliates in Mali, with the most prominent ones occurring in 2016.

Expanding the economy of terror in the Sahel

As previously mentioned above, in the wake of operation *Serval*, AQIM reduced its terrorist attacks and turned its attention to engaging in criminal activities for financial gain. There is little doubt that terrorist groups require funds in order to run their operations. Since the

international community considers terrorist groups illegitimate, the only avenue for these groups to raise funds for their survival is through involvement in illegal activities. It is no different for AQIM, which derives its funds from illegal activities consisting of kidnapping for ransom (which is its highest source of income), drug trafficking, and illegal smuggling of illegal contraband.⁷⁰ To understand the relationship between criminal activities and terrorism within AQIM with the view to counterterrorism measures, it is imperative to examine separately the activities from which it derives its income.

Kidnapping for ransom (KFR)

Since its withdrawal in Northern Mali, kidnapping for ransom became the primary source of income for AQIM. Unlike the GSPC, whose kidnapping of 32 tourists was more of a terrorist act, kidnapping for ransom by AQIM tilts more towards a criminal activity for profit nowadays. A study conducted by Wolfram Lacher concluded that the estimated amount of ransom fees between the period 2008 and 2012 were in the region of between \$40 and \$65 million, with the price per hostage ranging between \$1.5 and \$4 million.⁷¹ The ECOWAS Peace and Security Report, however, puts the annual AQIM earnings through KFR at approximately \$163 million.⁷² In terms of conducting negotiations in the wake of a kidnapping, AQIM follows a usual pattern that comprises providing proof of detention followed by a ransom paid by those who seek the release of the hostages. The release is often “partly open” in that hostages are released and “partly closed” where ransom money is paid in secret by the actors.⁷³ Jihadist groups such as AQIM justify KFR as a weapon of war against the infidels and the apostates, and any hostage is treated as a prisoner of war.⁷⁴ It is for this reason that the jihadists have no qualms in executing their hostages should their demands not be met by the government. Two such cases that received worldwide media attention were the killing of British hostage Edwin Dyer in 2009 and Frenchman Michel Germaneau in 2010. Nonetheless, the profit that AQIM has obtained from the KFR since 2008 has continued to increase. Since the KFR activities have proven to be a lucrative source of income for AQIM, it is not surprising to notice a continuous increase in hostage kidnapping by the group. To this extent, as Daniel Benjamin observes, “no group has made a bigger name for itself in the kidnapping-for-ransom business than Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).”⁷⁵

Drug trafficking and contraband smuggling

Although AQIM’s involvement in drug trafficking and contraband smuggling can be traced back to the era of the GSPC, the group has since grown more adept at this form of illegal activities as it has been featured as one of its specialities. This success of AQIM within the drugs and illegal smuggling arena can be attributed to its former commander of the southern region, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, “who epitomizes the intersection of crime, corruption, and terror in the vast territory from North Africa to the Sahel.”⁷⁶ The increasing involvement of AQIM in the drug trafficking field has led to the group forging alliances with local terrorist groups such as the Movement for the Unity of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and international drug cartels, resulting in an increased flow of drugs within the Sahel region.

In recent times, there has been a gradual expansion in the drug flow from South America to West Africa.⁷⁷ From there, the drugs find their way to Europe through

different smuggling routes of the Sahel. Upon their arrival on the Western shores of Africa in countries like Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Benin, and Ghana, the drugs are transported on inland routes through Northern Mali to Algeria, Morocco, and Libya where they are then transported either by plane or by boat to their ultimate destinations. One piece of evidence purporting to relate to drug trafficking in the Sahel is the case of the “Air Cocaine,” a Boeing 727 that was discovered in the town of Tarkint in Mali after it was shot down before take-off. During the investigation, it was discovered that the plane carried between 7–10 tons of cocaine from the airport in Venezuela and its final destination was Morocco.⁷⁸

Morocco has emerged as one of the most vulnerable countries for drug smuggling and trafficking due to its geographical proximity to Europe. In October 2010, Moroccan authorities disrupted a major drug trafficking syndicate consisting of links between drug cartels in Latin America and AQIM. A month later, Malian officials arrested six prevalent drug traffickers who had links to AQIM.⁷⁹ Due to the scarcity of research data in drug trafficking, it has become difficult to assess the full extent to which AQIM benefits from the drug trade. Despite this impasse, through the distilling of the information that is available, it is possible to assess the impact of drug trafficking within the Sahel region. Peter Pham highlights this problem when he notes that it is difficult to ascertain the direct role that AQIM has within the drug trafficking flow.⁸⁰ However, he argues that in addition to AQIM offering protection to drug smugglers, drug cartels, and contraband dealers, there is little doubt that the group stands to benefit financially from these illicit trade networks in the Sahel.⁸¹ Consequently, as terrorist groups become more fixated on the financial benefits of the drug trade, they slowly drift from their original *raison d'être* to share similarities with drug cartels as drugs and terrorism coexist across the globe in a marriage of mutual convenience.⁸² As state-sponsored terrorism has declined, these dangerous organizations have looked far and wide for resources and revenue to recruit, corrupt, train, and strengthen their regime. Many drug-trafficking groups have stepped up to fill that revenue void.

Another form of illegal activities through which AQIM financially benefited is cigarette and arms smuggling. In the domain of cigarette smuggling, Belmokhtar has proven to be the talisman, as he earned the moniker “Malboro Man” due to his financial successes in such operations in the Sahel.⁸³ The money obtained through narcotics and other forms of smuggling goes towards buying weapons for the group. One of the reasons that terrorists engage in counterfeit trade is because it has a low-risk profile. Furthermore, terrorists engage in counterfeit operations in two ways, namely, directly or indirectly.

AQIM falls within the first category as it is directly involved in illicit activities rather than operating through third parties. Direct involvement means that the group is personally engaged in the production, distribution, and sale of the illicit goods and the funds obtained are redirected towards financing the operation of the group. Furthermore, “terrorist organizations with direct involvement include groups who resemble or behave more like organized criminal groups than traditional terrorist organizations.”⁸⁴ While it can be argued that AQIM’s engagement in these illegal trades is more geared towards funding purposes, at the same time, it is also evident that AQIM has, in recent years, predominantly focused on kidnapping for ransom and drug trade as its sole activities. This begs the question as to whether AQIM is merely a hybrid group that is involved in crime, trafficking, and insurgency or if it is still focused on the jihad or the illegal trafficking/kidnapping for ransom side.⁸⁵

Criminal terrorists or terrorist criminals?

Since its emergence as an Al Qaeda affiliate from the GSPC in 2008, AQIM has not only spread its reach in the Sahel but also obtained millions of dollars from its operations in that region. In this regard, AQIM can be perceived as a group that is focused more on generating profit rather than launching jihad and establishing an Islamic state as was its original objective. Meanwhile, this perception is challenged by the 2012 events in Mali which demonstrated that AQIM is not solely focused on criminal activities as means of profit but can also resort to military action when the opportunity presents itself. The fact that AQIM controlled the large territory of Northern Mali (assisted by other jihadist groups) shows that the political motivations of the group are still relevant to the group's functioning. Attempts to assess the type of group AQIM has evolved into have separated scholars into two groupings.

The first category views AQIM as primarily a terror group involved in criminal activities to fund its campaigns.⁸⁶ To this end, AQIM still adheres to its primary motive of establishing an Islamic state through the use of jihad while the funds serve as a means to finance its operations and recruit new jihadists into its ranks. As such, the group still retains its original motivation that serves as a propellant to its functioning and evolution. The second category illustrates AQIM transforming into an organized crime group that uses terror tactics solely for economic gain.⁸⁷ In this view, AQIM is a group that appears to act with ideological and religious ideals, but is actually only interested in obtaining ransom money and engaging in criminal activities for profit. In this regard, the group adheres to its original ideology only in as far as it is a political façade to attract recruits. Although these two categories provide a basis for which to understand the phenomenon of AQIM, they are limited as they embody an either-or paradigm. As a means to rectify this shortcoming, it is merited to assess AQIM through the lens of the convergence framework as it makes for a better categorization of the group in its current state.

Within the crime-terror continuum discussed above, Makerenko introduces the convergence thesis whereby a terrorist group and an organised crime organisation converge into one entity where their tactics are indistinguishable from one other.⁸⁸ Another aspect of the convergence thesis posits that some terror groups adopt criminal tactics as a means to finance their operations. In this aspect, the convergence occurs through the blending of the crime-terror nexus within the same space and time. Within this context, "a hybrid entity emerges and simultaneously displays ideological and economic motivations by perpetrating acts of politically motivated terrorism *and* engaging in OC for profit maximisation."⁸⁹ While this may resemble the second category, the difference is that the hybrid group can be defined either as terrorist or criminal and thus can be easily overlooked by both anti-crime and anti-terrorism agencies.

It is rather evident that "AQIM has proven itself to be rather resilient, transforming itself to adapt to changing conditions in the Maghreb."⁹⁰ From its beginnings as the GIA with a Salafist-Jihadist ideology to its merger with Al Qaeda, AQIM has transformed into one of the most notable terrorist groups operating in North Africa. In its various transformations, AQIM evolved from being a predominantly Algerian organisation to an entity with different nationalities at the helm. This phenomenon can be attributed to the consequences of AQIM's convergence resulting in demographic changes. While the group capitalised on the grievance of the population to enter the governance arena (the

case of Northern Mali), it has also become an infamous player in the domain of kidnapping for ransom and drug trafficking. Because of its successful adaptation to its environment and context, the Sahel for instance, it has become difficult to distinctly separate the political and economic motivation of AQIM. Therefore from the information gathered and the data examined, it can be argued that since AQIM displays ideological (Salafist-Jihadist propaganda and statements) and economic (kidnapping for ransom, drug trafficking, arms dealing) motivations, it falls under the categorisation of being a hybrid entity.

As such, AQIM is “comfortably rooted in both ideology and profit, constantly shifting [its] strategies and tactics as [it] evolves,”⁹¹ and this evolution of AQIM into a hybrid entity can be attributed to its link with Al Qaeda and the steady expansion of its sphere of attack due to its political economy of the terror and crime nexus.⁹² The French military operations may have thwarted AQIM’s sphere of attacks in that many of its fighters have been killed and as such cannot effectively launch devastating attacks against foreign targets. It is with this in mind that Pham alludes to the fact that,

The AQIM of the future may come to consist of only a few hundred hardcore terrorists waging international jihad against the West and its allies, while being supported by an affiliated criminal organization of several hundred.⁹³

This statement proved prescient as the period following operation Serval has witnessed an increase in terror attacks on UN peacekeepers, foreign targets, and even civilians. Moreover, it is concerning to note that these attacks were perpetrated not only by AQIM but by groups affiliated to it. From this, it appears that AQIM is supported by splinter groups in conducting terror acts under the banner of ideology such as Ansar Al Dine, Al Mourabitoun, and the recently formed Macina Liberation Front. In March 2017, these three groups joined AQIM’s Sahara branch to form the Jamâ’ah Nusrah al-Islâm wal-Muslimîn (Group to Support Islam and Muslims) or JNIM. The new group is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, the former leader of Ansar Dine.⁹⁴ On March 19, 2017, Al Qaeda Central issued an official statement congratulating the new group on its alliance.

The fact that AQIM’s religious and political ideology is further extended in the newly formed JNIM is a cause for concern. Rather than being defeated as many commentators purport, it appears that AQIM has once again reinvented itself, but this time it took the form of the merger of smaller splinter groups. From the available information, it appears that the political motivation of AQIM is carried forward by splinter groups that share the same ideology. Yet, this leads to another concerning eventuality: have AQIM’s economic motivations also been carried forward through those splinter groups/drug trafficking groups? Due to the lack of available information, there is a need for further research in that area as it falls beyond the scope of this current article.

Conclusion

Through its plethora of criminal activities, AQIM has established itself as one of Al Qaeda’s wealthiest affiliates. Despite its economic successes, AQIM has responded to its critics who claim that it has transformed into an organised crime organisation that is profit motivated by launching various attacks on security personnel and civilians alike in the Sahel region. In January 2016, AQIM resurfaced after a long hiatus with an attack on the Cappuccino and

Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Armed AQIM members attacked the hotel in the capital, killing 30 and wounding 56, among whom were people of 18 different nationalities.⁹⁵ The Ouagadougou attack was the first major operation by an Al Qaeda affiliate in Burkina Faso, indicating that the group was slowly extending its reach beyond its comfort zone of Mali and Niger.⁹⁶ Three months later, in March 2016, AQIM further transcended its milieu when three of its members launched an attack on a popular beach resort in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast. The attackers fired on beach-goers at the L'Etoile du Sud resort, killing 16 people including two security forces.⁹⁷

It is important to note that although AQIM failed to achieve the goal of the global jihad for which it was formed, it remains one of the most dangerous groups in North Africa. The resilience of the group is characterised by its adaptation to the various situations and contexts that it encounters. When Algerian security forces managed to expel the group into the Sahel, it reinvigorated itself within the confines of Northern Mali, which it eventually controlled. Meanwhile, it reduced its terror attacks while at the same time increasing its criminal activities and generating millions of dollars. After the French military defeated AQIM fighters in Northern Mali, forcing them to find refuge in the Sahel, the group later resurfaced but as different splinter groups adhering to the same ideology. For instance, Al Mourabitoun, whose leader is none other than the former AQIM commander Belmokhtar, has been responsible for numerous attacks in Mali on both civilians and security forces. The difficulty in combatting the terrorism of AQIM is due to its being a hybrid group that exhibits both criminal and terrorist characteristics. Until counterterrorism measures address this conundrum, groups such as AQIM and JNIM will continue to capitalise on opportunities to “reorganise and expand their reach—at the expense of more innocent victims.”⁹⁸

Notes on contributor

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