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Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Related Groups

Overview

AQIM, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization, was formed when the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat “united” with Al Qaeda in 2006-2007. AQIM then carried out several large attacks against Algerian state targets, but as security forces in Algeria cracked down, it increasingly moved into the impoverished Sahel region of West Africa. There, AQIM attacked military and police posts; orchestrated lucrative kidnap-for-ransom operations, largely targeting Westerners; and engaged in smuggling activities. AQIM’s allure among West Africans initially appeared limited, and some analysts viewed it as a primarily criminal enterprise. However, the group has demonstrated resilience and broader appeal, leveraging instability and security vacuums in Mali, Libya, and Tunisia to expand its reach and lethality. Despite battlefield losses in Mali, AQIM and its offshoots recently carried out several mass-casualty attacks targeting Westerners, notably a multi-day siege at a gas plant in Algeria (2013) and mass shootings at hotels and restaurants in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d’Ivoire (2015-2016).

AQIM’s shifting tactics and opportunism have long sparked debate over the appropriate approach to armed Islamist extremist groups whose activities appear primarily locally-driven, but which pose a threat to U.S. interests in the region where they operate. As of 2012, AQIM’s reported ability to draw millions of dollars in European ransom payments led U.S. officials to describe it as the best financed Al Qaeda affiliate, but at the time, the group had been responsible for a single American citizen death. The inability of West African governments to fully curtail or contain AQIM poses particular challenges to U.S. officials seeking local partners—although France’s military deployment to the Sahel since 2013 has provided new opportunities for U.S. counterterrorism cooperation.

AQIM has cultivated close relationships with local communities in the Sahel, and has long exhibited internal divisions. It has thus spawned a number of splinter factions and affiliates—including a recent proliferation of West African-led groups. Al Murabitoun (“The Sentinels,” a name shared by the 11-12th century Almoravid movement) was formed in 2013 as the merger of two AQIM breakaway factions, Al Mulathamun (“The Masked Ones”) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (known as MUJAO, its French acronym). West African-led Islamist extremist groups linked to AQIM and/or Al Murabitoun include a Malian insurgent group known as Ansar al Dine (“Supporters of Religion”), an emergent Burkina Faso-based group known as Ansar al Islam, and a MUJAO offshoot that has sought affiliation with the Islamic State. Some AQIM figures have also reportedly provided support to elements of Nigeria’s Boko Haram, whose leadership pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015.

Figure 1. AQIM Insignia



Source: AQIM social media

In 2012, AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar al Dine asserted control over a vast if sparsely populated area in northern Mali, taking advantage of an ethnic separatist insurgency and government collapse. They formed locally-led administrative entities and imposed a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, including amputations for thieves and the destruction of cultural sites. France’s military intervened in early 2013, ousting Islamist leaders from major towns, killing and capturing several key leaders, and apparently significantly weakening the group. AQIM and linked groups have since returned to asymmetric attacks in Mali, primarily targeting Malian state actors, UN peacekeepers, and Malians perceived as collaborators, while also expanding their areas of operation into central and southern parts of the country (including the capital, Bamako).

AQIM and related groups have pledged greater unity since 2015, possibly in a bid to outpace French counterterrorism operations, undermine a 2015 Mali peace agreement between the government and northern separatists, and/or respond to competition from local groups aligning themselves with the Islamic State organization. AQIM and its previously dissident offshoot Al Murabitoun jointly claimed the 2015-2016 West Africa hotel and restaurant attacks, and the two groups announced their re-merger in late 2015. In early 2017, AQIM’s Sahel-based “emirate” and Al Murabitoun announced a merger with Ansar al Dine and another Malian-led Islamist insurgent group, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). Ties among these groups had already been evident to observers; the practical significance of the announcement is uncertain.

Objectives

AQIM and Al Murabitoun’s public releases suggest a desire to replace the governments of Algeria and neighboring states with Islamist regimes, and to counter Western influence, notably that of former colonial power France. Ansar al Dine and the MLF appear to seek an Islamist regime in Mali (either as a whole or in sub-regions where

their respective ethnic bases are concentrated), the withdrawal of Malian state actors from the north and center of the country, and the exit of foreign troops.

Leadership

The reported leader/emir of AQIM “central,” Abdelmalik Droukdel (aka Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), is an Algerian national reportedly based in northeastern Algeria. AQIM’s operations in the Sahel are reportedly led by Algerian national Yahya Abu el Hammam. The most publicly known leader in Al Murabitoun is Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, also an Algerian national and formerly a key AQIM figure. Press reports have placed Bel Mokhtar in Libya, where he reportedly survived a U.S. air strike in June 2015. A French air strike reportedly again targeted Bel Mokhtar in late 2016, but his death has not been publicly confirmed.

Ansar al Dine is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, an ethnic Tuareg from Mali’s northern Kidal region. Amadou Koufa, an ethnic Fulani from central Mali, heads the MLF. In an early 2017 video announcing a formal merger among Ansar al Dine and the MLF, AQIM’s Sahel branch, and Al Murabitoun, these groups recognized Ag Ghaly as leader of a newly proclaimed Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (“Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims”).

Areas of Operation

AQIM and its offshoots and affiliates are active in multiple countries across North and West Africa. AQIM attacks have been primarily concentrated in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. The group has also claimed responsibility for at least one attack each in Tunisia (where there is a local affiliate group) and Côte d’Ivoire. Elements of AQIM are also reportedly active in Libya. Al Murabitoun and its component MUJAO have claimed responsibility for attacks in Algeria (including the Western Sahara refugee camps in Tindouf), Niger, and Mali. Al Murabitoun also reportedly has a presence in Libya. MUJAO and its dissident offshoot, the self-described Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS), have threatened to attack Morocco but have not done so successfully.

Ansar al Dine and the MLF appear primarily to be active in, and focused on, Mali. IS-GS has claimed responsibility for attacks in Burkina Faso and may also be active in Mali. Ansar al Islam appears primarily active in Burkina Faso.

In February 2017, authorities in the Senegalese capital, Dakar, arrested two suspected militants from Mali and Mauritania who were reportedly implicated in the AQIM/Al Murabitoun hotel attack in Côte d’Ivoire. This may suggest that group members transit through urban logistical hubs in the region situated outside their perceived areas of activity.

Attacks against U.S. Personnel and Facilities

AQIM claimed responsibility for the 2009 murder in Mauritania of an American citizen who was reportedly conducting missionary work. Three U.S. citizens were killed and seven more escaped during Al Murabitoun’s siege at a gas plant in southeastern Algeria in January 2013 (in which 39 civilians were killed overall and some 800 taken hostage). One U.S. citizen was killed in the

November 2015 AQIM/Al Murabitoun hotel attack in Bamako, Mali, and one was killed in the January 2016 AQIM/Al Murabitoun hotel and restaurant attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. In October 2016, a U.S. citizen who had been working for decades in rural Niger for a Christian aid organization was kidnapped, reportedly by MUJAO. If so, it would be the first kidnapping of an American citizen by an AQIM-linked group.

The State Department has referenced ties between AQIM militants and the attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012, and the Department’s 2015 *Country Reports on Terrorism* stated that AQIM had provided funds to Ansar al Sharia in Benghazi. According to the State Department, AQIM has urged its supporters to attack U.S. embassies and kill U.S. ambassadors.

Size and Financing

According to the State Department, as of 2015 AQIM had “several hundred fighters operating in Algeria and the Sahel.” The U.S. government has not released a detailed unclassified assessment of related groups’ respective size.

Criminal activities, including kidnap-for-ransom and smuggling, reportedly constitute a key source of funding for AQIM. Observers debate the extent to which the group engages directly in drug smuggling. According to the State Department’s *Country Reports on Terrorism*, AQIM also “successfully fundraises globally, including limited financial and logistical assistance from supporters residing in Western Europe.” Mokhtar bel Mokhtar has long been implicated in kidnapping-for-ransom, smuggling, and other criminal fundraising activities. AQIM has reportedly provided funds to affiliated groups such as Ansar al Dine, which also may receive funds from “foreign donors,” according to the State Department. Sources of funding for Malian- and Burkinabe-led groups are unclear.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and/or the Islamic State organization

AQIM’s “union” with Al Qaeda was announced by Al Qaeda’s then-deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri in 2006. The Obama Administration referred to AQIM as a formal Al Qaeda “affiliate.” In 2014, the group reiterated its allegiance to Zawahiri, now Al Qaeda’s leader, in the context of the split between Zawahiri and the Islamic State. The same year, Al Murabitoun’s Mokhtar bel Mokhtar publicly swore allegiance to Zawahiri. In announcing the creation of Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen in early 2017, Ag Ghaly of Ansar al Dine—a group identified by UN sanctions investigators as a local front for AQIM—pledged allegiance to AQIM’s Droukdel and Zawahiri.

In 2015, then-MUJAO figure Abu Walid al Sahrawi split from Al Murabitoun and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. The “core” Islamic State organization appeared to recognize the pledge in a release in October 2016, and this fact has since referred to itself as IS-Greater Sahara.

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