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Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: the evolution from Algerian Islamism to transnational terror

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For over the past half century, Algeria has suffered from on-going political violence and terrorism. The international rise of al-Qaeda has brought this radical movement to this already-troubled North African nation. This scholarly work describes in details how Algerian Islamism has evolved into transnational terrorism. Specifically, this paper will explore how al-Qaeda has now become deeply rooted in the Islamic Maghreb.

Key words: Al-Qaeda, Algeria, Maghreb, Islamism, international terrorism, international security issues.

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2006, al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a videotaped statement calling for the liberation of former Muslim lands from Spain to Iraq. In addition to this expected exhortation to al-Qaeda, in order for operatives and sympathizers to continue their fight against the "crusaders," al-Zawahiri issued another statement that indicated the strategy al-Qaeda would follow to achieve this objective in North Africa. "The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat [GSPC] has joined the al-Qaeda organization ... may this be a bone in the throat of American and French crusaders and their allies, and sow fear in the hearts of French traitors and sons of apostates" (Lund, 2006). In announcing this union, al-Zawahiri established the region of the Islamic Maghreb as a priority for the global Islamic jihad. He also energized the flagging Islamist movement in Northwest Africa, providing it with transnational legitimacy as an al-Qaeda franchise and expanding its mandate from the overthrow of the secular Algerian government to serving as the base for the jihad in the region.

Following the endorsement from al-Qaeda central, the GSPC changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and began a resurgent campaign of violence, making 2007 one of the most violent years in Algeria since the civil war of the 1990's (Jebnoun, 2007).

The renaming of the organization is not a publicity stunt

or act of desperation, but is the culmination of a multiyear evolution toward the current structure from the Algerian Islamist insurgency of the 1990's toward full integration with the contemporary al-Qaeda. The ramifications of this new designation are not yet fully manifest. Algerian terrorists have contributed heavily to the stream of foreign fighters entering Iraq. It remains to be seen if the North African terror network will continue to concentrate its efforts against mostly Algerian targets, or if it will fully embrace the call of the global jihad to both support and initiate attacks against al-Qaeda's enemies elsewhere.

AQIM is distinct from its predecessor organizations in its political objectives, tactics and organizational structure, which reflect its new operational outlook. However, AQIM faces significant challenges from local governments experienced in counterterrorism, a civilian population that is generally unsympathetic to the pan-Islamist ideology and increased US and European involvement in the region. Only by learning from its history and from the history of the global Islamist jihad can AQIM increase its power in the region; by applying the same lessons, counterterrorism forces can deny al-Qaeda the use of North Africa as a foothold into Europe.

History of Islamism in Northwest Africa

The elements that have formed the new AQIM have desired for years to receive recognition as part of the global jihad, but the interests of Islamists in North Africa

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have not always been so aligned with their foreign counterparts. A confluence of local and transnational events beginning in the late 1980's has enabled the transformation of what was once an Islamist political opposition into al-Qaeda's representative organization in Northwest Africa. The current state has only been reached through successive re-organizations that have gradually stripped away those fighters for whom local interests predominate and for whom political accommodation was a possibility.

This transformation was driven by the fundamental disagreement between Islamist political thought and that of the secular government in Algeria. The Islamists held that the only true government could be that of an Islamic State, and that democracy or any other secular government was a government outside the Quran, that is, an apostasy (International Crisis Group, 2004). Through successive radicalization of the core constituents when the more moderate options failed to satisfy this objective, the conflict between Islamism and its opponents was the foundation for all the terror inflicted upon the Algerian people from 1992 to the present.

The evolution of political Islamism and associated extremism are not new to the Maghreb. During the long struggle for independence from French colonial power, the resistance characterized their struggle as a jihad, and termed their fallen as "martyrs" (Takeyh, 2003). The emergence of a secular state after independence provided a target for the objections of those desiring a theocracy, and the failed petroleum economy of the late 1980's cast discredit upon the ruling government and built an audience for Islamist objections. As the ruling government sought to restore its legitimacy through elections in 1991, opposition parties prepared to challenge the incumbent powers from within the system. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) opposition party was legalized in 1989 by the Algerian government in the hope that by keeping the activities of the Islamists out in the open they could be better controlled (International Crisis Group, 2004). After a strong showing in national elections that brought the FIS to the brink of assuming power, the secular military fatefully decided to nullify the election results and seize power (Takeyh, 2003).

The prohibition of the FIS at once removed a political outlet for Islamist energy and vindicated those within the movement that believed violent jihad in the tradition of the Afghanistan insurgency would be the only means by which the faithful could remove the apostates and establish an Islamic state. The ensuing civil war pitted various factions against the military government, with the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) eventually gaining preeminence.

GIA objectives and operations

Heavily influenced by returning veterans of the Afghan War against the Soviets, the GIA's operations were based on an ideology developed in parallel to the Islamist

Taliban. While other insurgent groups sought either a conventional guerrilla warfare victory resulting in an "Islamic State of Algeria" or more modestly, concessions from the sitting government based on the Islamist agenda, GIA sought to bring about the Islamic State through the conversion of society to fundamentalism.

The GIA was formed around a core group of Afghanistan veterans led by Saïd Qari, who had been with Al-Zawahiri in Peshawar and was leader of the Algerian contingent of Mujahedin (International Crisis Group, 2004). Osama bin Laden sent Qari back to Algeria with \$40,000 and instructions to back the faction opposed to reconciliation with the government in order to begin the next great Islamic insurgency (Hunt, 2007). The ideological basis for the GIA's campaign was that Algeria's apostasy was not limited to the government but included the society in general. All Muslims who did not follow the specific teaching that governmental power is derived not from the will of the governed but from the Quran were deemed apostates. This ideology of Takfir wal-Hijra (excommunication and exile) was eventually disowned by the global jihad and was the impetus for the later creation of the GSPC.

The GIA sought to gain popular support not through providing services or pro-voking government response but rather through fear and intimidation. In addition to its war of attrition against the military government, it raised funds by preying upon moderate Muslim middle class merchants with well developed extortion schemes (Takeyh, 2003). It punished non-conformist civilians with death; this tactic eventually led to the massacre of thousands of civilians (Lav, 2007) and did little to gain support. The massacres of Muslims were not well received in the wider Muslim world and they caused the GIA to lose all international support. Although bin Laden himself had been a supporter of the early Algerian insurgency, the global Muslim discontent with GIA tactics and ideology led him to withdraw support (Rabasa, 2006).

GIA operations were not limited to Algerians, although the Algerian front was the predominant focus of its activities. The group is believed to be responsible for the deaths of over 100 foreigners during its main period of activity, including the execution of seven kidnapped French monks. In 1994, GIA hijacked an Air France flight, and in 1995 carried out multiple bombings against civilian targets in Paris (Rabasa, 2006).

Having lost popular support from local Algerians including many of those who had supported the FIS in its bid to create an Islamic State in Algeria and the support of the international jihadist movement led by al-Qaeda, the GIA became largely irrelevant, conducting its last international attack in 1996 (Takeyh, 2003).

Recognizing the strategic and tactical errors committed by the GIA leadership, a regional commander named Hassan Hattab created a splinter group called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 1998.

Origins and evolution of the GSPC

Originally founded as an alternative to the perceived misdirection of the GIA, the GSPC has itself undergone significant transformations in the years since 1998. It has not lost sight of its most important objective of establishing an Islamic State in Algeria to replace the apostate government. However, through successive leadership changes, the organization's objectives have shifted from fighting the near enemy (the apostate regime in Algiers) to a simultaneous and complementary commitment to fight the far enemy: the American and European masters that prop up the apostate regime.

Recognizing the lack of public and international jihadist support for the GIA, Hassan Hattab declared an end to attacks on civilians and a desire to restore international respect for the jihad in Algeria. In the first GSPC communiqué issued in April 1999, Hattab specifically stated that his enemy was the Algerian government and that the community of Muslims (Algerian civilians) should no longer fear GSPC activities (Lav, 2007). Hattab repudiated the doctrine espoused by the GIA that a society itself could be in a condition of apostasy, and instead reinforced the doctrine shared by al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda, that the state alone bears the responsibility for failing to follow the Salafist brand of Islam (International Crisis Group, 2004).

However, with the large scale GIA insurgency effectively defeated, Hattab's GSPC became increasingly irrelevant. The GIA had become so involved with its civil war activities against the civilian population that it no longer had the capability to threaten military defeat of the Algerian government. Furthermore, Hattab's refusal to swear allegiance to al-Qaeda and general inaction from 1999-2003 fueled speculation that he may have been seeking reconciliation with the government similar to that sought by the remnants of the FIS at the end of the Civil War (International Crisis Group, 2004). This theory was vindicated by his endorsement of the Algiers government's National Reconciliation Plan in 2005, which was designed to end the conflict by granting amnesty to former militants.

In Algeria, a geographic division had arisen among the GSPC operational zones. The GSPC focus of operations was in the land north of the Atlas Mountains, containing Algiers and the major population centers; this was the area that saw the most conflict during the 1990's Civil War and was the urban base from which the Islamist ideologues drew their support. In the wide expanses of the Sahara in southern Algeria, and the border region with Niger and Mauritania, two new leaders rose to prominence. Abderrazak le Para (alias Amari Saifi) kidnapped 32 European tourists and held them for ransom in neighboring Mali, eventually gaining a ransom from Germany for their release (Hunt, 2007). This action was the first of several that opened a new area of conflict in a region that Algerian security forces had heretofore

(Group 2004) The southern faction of the GSPC is more international in nature; it has Mauritanian and Nigerian members, moves easily across international borders and attacked a Mauritanian army base killing 15 (Hunt, 2007). The southern faction is also believed to be substantially motivated by financial gain, perhaps being more dedicated to its criminal enterprises than to the GSPC cause. Mokhtar Belmokhtar was the regional commander for the GSPC in the Sahara region and operated a sophisticated smuggling and extortion network through the porous border region (Grynkewich, 2006). The loss of control over this region was another symptom of Hattab's weakness; it was to le Para that al-Qaeda sent an emissary in 2002, and le Para refused to present him to the nominal GSPC leader (Lav, 2007).

The GSPC also inherited the former GIA contacts and networks in Europe that were able to provide logistical support to jihadists during their travels in preparation for operations (Hansen, 2008), but the GSPC did not carry out operations in Europe.

Al-Qaeda Central had backed Hattab as an alternative to the GIA embarrassment but became increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of progress in Algeria while the global jihad movement was under attack in Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Europe and Iraq as a result of the US-led Global War on Terror.

Hattab's plans for reconciliation led to his replacement by the more aggressive Abu Ibrahim Mustafa (alias Nabil Sahraoui) in 2003 (Lav, 2007). It was under the leadership of Abu Ibrahim Mustafa that the GSPC issued an oath of allegiance to Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2003 (Daly, 2005). However, little came of this outreach effort as al-Qaeda Central was still wary of an Algerian group that would continue to put the Algerian cause first. Indeed, subsequent statements did little to reassure al-Qaeda leadership that GSPC was ready to embrace global jihad. GSPC prioritized combat against the "apostate" over combat against the "infidel" and stated that fighting outside Algeria would be desirable only if its hands were not full at home (Lav, 2007), a clear indication that it would continue to fight the "near" enemy at the expense of fighting the "far" enemy.

Abu Ibrahim Mustafa may have been forced into this prioritization by the challenges he faced against the robust Algerian counter-terrorism infrastructure. He continuously faced military setbacks and was killed along with other senior GSPC members in June 2004. Abou Mossaab Abdelouadoud (alias Abdelmalek Droukdal) was appointed the leader of the GSPC upon Mustafa's death (Middle East on-line, 2006). Abdelouadoud inherited a GSPC at a crossroads, with many international observers convinced that the insurgency had been defeated (Janes Intelligence Review, 2006). The Algerian government was attacking on two fronts; the military action that was attriting the small number of remaining fighters and the increased attempts by the central government to offer amnesty to former fighters as part of

the reconciliation plan (Janes Intelligence Review, 2006). To regain operational momentum, it was necessary to change the objectives and tactics of the GSPC.

The Sahara operational zone under Belmokhtar had already begun to metamorphose into an international organization that was self-financing through its organized criminal activities in the border areas. While GSPC activity in the north was at a lull, Belmokhtar initiated an offensive against regional security forces and was believed to command 300 - 500 militants in January 2005 (International Crisis Group, 2004). GSPC in the north would also need to adapt and the foundation had already been laid by the establishment of international contacts and the new opportunities presented by the war in Iraq. Under Abdelouadoud the GSPC would finally complete its movement toward integration with al-Qaeda.

GSPC Involvement in Iraq

The war in Iraq paved the way for the integration of the GSPC with al-Qaeda, established connections between various jihadist groups in North Africa and introduced new strategy and tactics as the group became more international, media-savvy, and decentralized. Iraq was the first large scale international involvement of Algerian jihadists since Afghanistan.

After assuming control of the GSPC, Abdelouadoud began to issue propaganda statements in support of the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi network in Iraq. The GSPC website and newsletter encouraged Algerians to travel to Iraq to take part in the jihad (Hunt, 2005). In expressing solidarity, the GSPC also sought to couple its fight at home with the fight in Iraq. Abdelouadoud sent a public letter to al-Zarqawi suggesting that French personnel be attacked in Iraq, and also sent a note of congratulations when two Algerian diplomats were murdered in Baghdad (Hunt, 2007).

GSPC assistance was not solely limited to public announcements. In conjunction with the Syria-based jihadist network, GSPC proactively sent Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian fighters to Iraq. This support resulted in a large proportion of Algerians in the ranks of the foreign Mujahedin, including 20% of suicide bombers, according to the US military (Hunt 2005). Algerian authorities arrested an Egyptian named Yasir al-Misri in Algiers in July 2005. Al-Misri was using a travel agency as a front for moving GSPC fighters to Iraq (Hunt, 2007). In September 2006, a Syrian al-Qaeda suspect was also arrested in Algiers on similar charges (Hunt, 2007).

The merger with al-Qaeda

The GSPC's main effort in 2005 and 2006 seems to have been the movement of fighters to Iraq to join the foreign fighter groups in jihad. This strategy was directly in support of Abdelouadoud's objective of merging with al-Qaeda. In Algeria, the GSPC was further radicalized by

the amnesty program; those in the group not supportive of the international jihad were enticed to leave the group (Lav, 2007). GSPC had already sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2003 but al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan was hesitant to recognize the group as the framework for its North African front. This was the result of three major concerns held by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. First, the GIA had become beholden to an incompatible ideology that cost them what was supposed to be the next great jihad after Afghanistan. Second, the reconciliation movement in Algeria was prompting the surrender of great numbers of GSPC fighters including the group's founder Hassan Hattab. The membership of the GSPC had dropped from 4000 in 2002 to under 500 in 2006 (Grynkewich, 2006). Third, the commitment of GSPC fighters to the global agenda was questioned as a result of Abu Ibrahim Mustafa's prioritization of the Algerian front over international concerns.

These concerns were addressed by the commitment of the GSPC in sending fighters to Iraq and furthermore in the videotaped statement of Abdelouadoud released in 2006. After discounting the amnesty program as falling short, he provided a positive assessment for future capability; his forces were "going from good to better." He then reiterated the subordination of the GSPC to al-Qaeda stating: "Use us to strike wherever you will, and you will never find in us anything but compliance and obedience" (Lav, 2007). The GSPC of 2006 was so reduced in numbers that it formed an evolutionary bottleneck. When it was renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, its members were convinced of the merit of their internationalist cause and were ready to capitalize on the lessons learned from interaction with the global jihadist movement.

Objectives and operations of AQIM

The formal endorsement of AQIM by al-Qaeda Central was recognition that the objectives of the newest incarnation of North African terror were consistent with al-Qaeda's global jihad. The specific goals of AQIM can be determined from its most recent activities and media statements. In the near term, AQIM seeks to strengthen international ties and carry out attacks in North Africa.

The unification of Islamist movements across North Africa is consistent with al-Qaeda's global agenda. Throughout the world, al-Qaeda seeks to leverage local conditions that engender terrorism to recruit followers that will work toward its strategic goal of establishing the Caliphate throughout the Muslim world. In post-operation enduring freedom al-Qaeda, the centrally-directed deliberate planning that characterized the preparations for the 9/11 attacks and the African embassy bombings is no longer the method of operation. Rather, al-Qaeda Central serves to provide inspiration and connectivity to its ideological analogues throughout the world. By backing the right groups, al-Qaeda can con-

continue to conduct operations without the Afghanistan safe haven. In northwestern Africa, several groups of the Salafist ideology already exist in armed opposition to their governments. Groups from Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya were in close connection with the GSPC and will likely now rally to the AQIM in as much as they have international objectives. The involvement of Moroccan groups particularly in the Madrid train bombing and numerous interrupted plots in Europe, indicate that the GSPC was not the only group with its sights on Europe.

In AQIM's Sahara operating zone, an ideal environment exists to conduct unified training among the North African groups. Able to challenge the state security forces of Algeria and Mauritania, AQIM has established training operations that cater not only to Algerians but to parallel organizations as well. Counter-terrorism operations have disrupted some of this training through arrests of foreign travelers, mostly Moroccans and Tunisians (Janes Intelligence Review, 2006). At least 40 terrorist trainees were arrested in 2005 and 2006 but this provides only an indication of the scope of training activity (Hunt, 2007).

The renaming of AQIM also accompanied an increase in the flow of terrorists to Iraq, al-Qaeda's main front. In February 2007, Spanish authorities arrested a Moroccan member of AQIM who had recruited 32 potential suicide bombers, sent them to train in GSPC camps and then sent them to Iraq (Lav, 2007). Also in February 2007, Moroccan authorities arrested a number of Iraq veterans that had trained with the GSPC (Lav, 2007).

While AQIM is energetically supporting the jihad against the US in Iraq and supporting its neighbors, it has also reversed a lull in attacks against the Algerian government, security forces and foreigners on Algerian soil. Unlike its predecessor organizations, AQIM does not seek to directly challenge the Algerian government with a guerrilla army but neither is it willing to concede to a settlement with the apostates. AQIM has intensified attacks in Algeria, using tactics learned from its international contacts to compensate for its reduced numbers.

New Tactics

AQIM has improved upon the arsenal of weapons and tactics used by its predecessor organizations. By implementing large scale attacks using suicide car bombs and providing rapid media recognition for the martyrs, AQIM has operationalized lessons learned from both other large explosive attacks and the success of video imagery of attacks as a recruiting tool.

According to Jane's Intelligence Review (2006), most GSPC attacks have relied on traditional weapons and standard guerrilla tactics but they began utilizing roadside IED's in 2006. Learning from the operations in Iraq, the group was actively experimenting with cell-phone detonators, a technology uniquely suited to urban terrorism operations. This innovation is only a small part of the

overall transformation of the organization toward more spectacular al-Qaeda-style attacks.

The most significant new tactic is the adoption of high profile synchronized attacks and suicide terrorism. In AQIM's first major operation after the name change, seven car bombs were detonated nearly simultaneously outside police headquarters buildings in northern Algeria on February 13, 2007 (International Crisis Group, 2004). In April 2007, triple suicide bombings in Algiers killed 33 and a suicide truck bomb attack against an army post killed eight in July (Ersan, 2007). Suicide attacks continued through out 2007, culminating in the December 11 attacks on UN and Algerian government facilities in the capital (Jebnoun, 2007). AQIM claimed an explosive weight of 1800 pounds for the vehicle that drove into the UN office complex (Whitlock, 2007), a further indication that spectacular attacks that require significant planning will continue to be the norm. The ability of AQIM to reach important government centers in a well-coordinated operation with complex weapons is the hallmark of al-Qaeda's operations around the world. Furthermore, the decision to attack the UN, a symbol of the Western international order, reinforces recent trends in AQIM targeting. Foreigners in Algeria will continue to be under threat but the attacks are no longer limited to tourists and other soft targets; symbols of power are now under attack. Rather than show the government as powerless to protect outlying security posts or prevent banditry on the roads, AQIM is now attacking hard targets, a strategy directly derived from al-Qaeda Central. These new methods of violence are complemented by a new media campaign that mirrors al-Qaeda's efforts as well.

AQIM maintains a robust web presence, routinely placing speeches from leaders and videos of attack preparations and operations on the web to communicate with potential recruits and the public. Within 12 h of the December 11 suicide bombings, a claim of responsibility was posted on the al-Hisbah Islamic Network, the same website that distributes official announcements from bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. A more detailed statement and photos of the suicide bombers were posted on the AQIM website soon thereafter (Whitlock, 2007). According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, the quality of the web based propaganda that includes recruiting videos and images of training camp is indistinguishable from that of the Iraq or Afghanistan factions (Lav, 2007).

Future Direction and Implications

During the past 15 years of unrest in Algeria, AQIM has evolved from a conventional guerrilla insurgency into a small, agile, well-organized regional hub for al-Qaeda's ideology and tactics. Analysts are still divided as to whether the group with its mostly Algerian leadership will continue to attack targets in Algeria or if it will use its network of contacts in Europe to conduct attacks further north, as Moroccan terrorists did in Madrid in 2004. As of

early 2008, AQIM has clearly demonstrated the capability to conduct mass-casualty attacks against semi-hard targets in the Algerian capital, putting to rest the theory that the Algerian counter-terrorism campaign had successfully eradicated the remaining foes from the civil war. However, AQIM is not currently a threat to the survival of the Algiers government in the near term. If current trends persist, AQIM will continue to operate for the perceived good of the global jihad while working in the area its operatives know best: North Africa and eventually, Europe.

The GSPC was formed when the GIA had lost the requisite popular support to sustain its logistical base but AQIM is no longer dependent upon mass popular support to conduct its activities. Hassan Hattab believed that by ceasing attacks on civilians he could increase popular support to the point that the government would be forced to make concessions. The heirs to the Algerian Islamist tradition do not desire the inclusion of Islamist political parties in an apostate government. While widespread discontent with the government still exists, the ideology of AQIM necessitates that the discontent be tapped for the indoctrination and training of future suicide bombers more than for the formation of an insurgent army. Discontent with US foreign policy is another source of motivation, and the return of veterans from the jihad in Iraq continues to provide North African militants with the most current tactics (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008). AQIM's savvy media campaign is designed to reinforce those factors that allow it to successfully recruit. The fact that it has survived to this point and implemented the resurgence of 2007 indicates that AQIM has successfully balanced the two competing rationales for recruitment. It must ensure that Algerians who want to attack their apostate government have that opportunity but at the same time, provide an opportunity to fight America and the West to those who have been indoctrinated to that end.

AQIM is an important test case for al-Qaeda Central as well. The failed efforts of al-Qaeda in Iraq to effectively combine national and international terrorist objectives has provided a window of opportunity for the US and secular Iraq to reduce the sectarian violence and the attacks from foreign fighters. Al-Zarqawi's failure to recognize the full character of the conflict set al-Qaeda in Iraq on a path that led many Sunni insurgents to turn against it. Al-Qaeda has already failed once in its first attempt to turn Algeria into a popular global Islamist insurgency. With the new and smaller AQIM organization, it hopes to find the formula to turn local discontent into a global call to action.

AQIM has proven itself to be adaptable to changing conditions in Algeria and the surviving core membership of the group understood that the decentralization of the transnational al-Qaeda jihad would require that regional powers take the initiative for recruitment, operations, and propaganda. Unlike a guerrilla army, AQIM in its current form cannot be effectively combated by military means alone. Local counter-terrorism efforts in Algeria and

Morocco continue to result in large numbers of terrorists killed and captured and the amnesty programs have ended the widespread slaughter that characterized the civil war years in the mid 1990's but heavy-handed military operations against small urban cells threatens to increase discontent with the government. As with al-Qaeda Central, the group can be kept fragmented as long as it is denied safe haven (which it may be seeking in the Sahara region of southern Algeria) and communications between cells are impeded. Algeria, its neighbors, the US and its allies need to recognize the changing nature of the Islamist terror threat in North Africa and apply the lessons learned from fighting al-Qaeda and the other transnational terrorist groups to AQIM.

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