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Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Murabitoun

Overview

AQIM was formed when the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) “united” with Al Qaeda in 2006 and renamed itself in 2007. AQIM has conducted bombings against Algerian state targets, attacks on security forces in Algeria and the Sahel region of West Africa (Mauritania to Niger), and kidnappings, including of Westerners, across the region. AQIM has also reportedly provided support to other Africa-based violent extremist groups. U.S. officials have assessed AQIM to be focused on local and Western targets in North and West Africa, potentially including U.S. interests and personnel.

Al Murabitoun was formed in 2013 through the merger of two AQIM splinter factions: Al Mulathamun Battalion (the Masked Ones, also known as the Battalion of Those Who Sign in Blood) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA or MUJAO after its French acronym). In 2014, the State Department described Al Murabitoun as “the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel,” citing its “stated intent to attack Westerners and proven ability to organize complex attacks.”

Both groups have leveraged instability in North and West Africa to expand their scope of operations. In 2012, AQIM and MUJAO claimed control over parts of northern Mali. French military operations in Mali and the wider Sahel, launched in 2013, have killed or captured several AQIM commanders and disrupted their logistical networks. However, both groups appear to have retained the capacity to move through the region and commit attacks.

Leadership

AQIM’s emir, Abdelmalik Droukdel, an Algerian national, is reportedly based in northeastern Algeria. Long-reported leadership disputes within AQIM have erupted since 2011, as several of AQIM’s former Sahel-based commanders have joined or founded new groups.

Mokhtar bel Mokhtar, an Algerian national who was previously a Sahel-based commander for AQIM, founded Al Murabitoun after publicly splitting from AQIM in 2012. Some press reports place Bel Mokhtar in southwestern Libya, but these have not been confirmed by U.S. officials.

Objectives

AQIM and Al Murabitoun rhetoric broadly focuses on achieving an Islamic caliphate in Algeria and throughout North Africa, and on countering Western influence, notably that of former colonial power France.

Figure 1. AQIM



Source: AQIM social media

Areas of Operation

AQIM has claimed responsibility for, or otherwise been implicated in, killings of civilians and local security force personnel, along with kidnappings, mostly for ransom, in Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. Al Murabitoun and its component groups have claimed responsibility for attacks and kidnappings in Algeria, Niger, and Mali. Both groups have reportedly pursued ties to Islamist extremist organizations in Tunisia and Libya, and elements of both are reported to be active in Libya.

Algeria. AQIM claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in Algiers in 2007-08 targeting the prime minister’s office, Constitutional Council, U.N. office in Algiers, and a police precinct, killing dozens of people. Sporadic AQIM attacks on Algerian police and military institutions have continued outside Algiers, occasionally killing a dozen or more people at a time, although the frequency of such attacks has decreased since 2013. Al Murabitoun’s Bel Mokhtar claimed responsibility for a January 2013 attack near In Amenas, in southeastern Algeria, that involved seizing control of a natural gas facility. Over 800 people were taken hostage, and 39 civilians were killed, including three U.S. citizens. The four-day siege ended with an Algerian military assault against the compound. MUJWA’s first attack was the kidnapping of three humanitarian workers from the Western Sahara refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, in 2011.

Niger. AQIM has conducted multiple kidnappings in Niger. Two French citizens were kidnapped in the capital, Niamey, in 2011, and were killed during a French rescue attempt. In May 2013, before the merger of Al Mulathamun and MUJWA, the two groups claimed joint responsibility for twin suicide bombings in northern Niger against a Niger military base and a French-operated uranium mine. At least 20 people, including the attackers, were killed. Al

Murabitoun was implicated in smaller-scale attacks in western Niger, near the capital, Niamey, in late 2014.

Mali. AQIM has long had a presence in Mali, which has served as a hub for kidnap-for-ransom operations and other fundraising. AQIM and MUJWA asserted territorial control in parts of northern Mali in 2012, in coordination with a Malian-led extremist group. France's military intervention in January 2013 restored nominal Malian state control and weakened—but did not eliminate—these groups' hold. Since then, AQIM and/or Al Murabitoun have been implicated in, or have claimed responsibility for, attacks targeting French, Malian, and U.N. military forces, along with Malian civilians. In early 2015, the U.S. intelligence community told Congress in unclassified testimony that AQIM and its affiliates “will probably seek to increase the frequency and scale of attacks in northern Mali.”

Mauritania. Between 2005 and 2009, AQIM carried out multiple attacks on Mauritanian security forces and foreign nationals in Mauritania (see below). In 2008, AQIM used small arms to attack the Israeli Embassy in the capital, Nouakchott. No fatalities were reported.

Tunisia. In June 2014, AQIM claimed responsibility for an attack on the home of the then-Interior Minister of Tunisia, in the western town of Kasserine. The following month, the group's media wing released a statement praising a Tunisia-based militant group, the Okba Ibn Nafaa (alt: Uqbah Bin Nafi) Brigade.

Attacks against U.S. interests

AQIM claimed responsibility for the 2009 murder in Mauritania of American citizen Christopher Leggett, who was reportedly conducting missionary work. State Department officials stated that AQIM was linked to the attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, but did not detail its role. According to the State Department, AQIM has urged its supporters to attack U.S. embassies and kill U.S. ambassadors.

As mentioned above, three U.S. citizens were killed in the In Amenas hostage-seizure attack in southeastern Algeria in January 2013; seven more escaped during the attack.

Size, Financing, and Capabilities

According to the State Department, as of 2013 AQIM had under a thousand fighters in Algeria and a “smaller number” in the Sahel. Sources of funding reportedly include kidnap-for-ransom, involvement in smuggling operations, local “taxation” and extortion, and possibly aid from supporters in Europe. In 2012, U.S. officials described AQIM as the “best funded” Al Qaeda affiliate.

The U.S. government has not released a detailed unclassified assessment of Al Murabitoun's size and capabilities, other than public statements referring to the group's “proven ability to organize complex attacks” (as noted above). Mokhtar bel Mokhtar and other leaders in the group have long been associated with kidnapping-for-ransom, smuggling, and other criminal fundraising activities. Al Murabitoun may also receive funding and other support from other extremist groups.

Relationship with Al Qaeda and AQ Affiliates

AQIM's “union” with Al Qaeda was announced by Al Qaeda's then-deputy leader Ayman al Zawahiri in 2006. The Obama Administration considers AQIM an Al Qaeda “affiliate.” In July 2014, the group publicly reiterated its pledge of allegiance to Zawahiri, who is now leader of Al Qaeda. However, news reports suggest that the group's members may be torn over whether to switch allegiance to the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS.

Al Murabitoun is a splinter faction of AQIM, an Al Qaeda “affiliate.” In April 2014, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar swore allegiance to Zawahiri in the context of the split between Al Zawahiri and the Islamic State.