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

AQIM, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), was formed when the Algerian-led Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat formally joined with Al Qaeda and renamed itself in 2006-2007. AQIM's leader reportedly remains in Algeria, but the group's center of gravity has moved southward into West Africa's impoverished Sahel region, and east toward Libya. AQIM has long pursued criminal activities such as kidnapping for ransom and smuggling. In recent years, it also has claimed a siege at a gas plant in Algeria (2013) and mass shootings at hotels, restaurants, and resorts in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire (2015-2017). In March 2018, a Mali-based, AQIM-aligned coalition claimed a relatively sophisticated attack in Burkina Faso's capital that targeted the military headquarters and the French Embassy.

AQIM and its local allies exploited the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Libya in 2011 and the subsequent civil war in Mali to expand their safe-havens and areas of influence. The collapse of the Qadhafi regime in Libya provided a new source of arms and recruits. In Mali in 2012, AQIM and allied groups leveraged a separatist rebellion and political crisis to assert control over a large swath of territory. They ultimately marginalized the separatists, appointed local administrators, and imposed a violent interpretation of Islamic law. AQIM also reportedly provided support to elements of Nigeria's Boko Haram.

The French military deployed to northern Mali in 2013, but despite tactical successes against AQIM and its local allies, it did not fully defeat these groups. French troops have since remained in the Sahel under a regional mission known as Operation Barkhane. AQIM and its allies have returned to asymmetric attacks, targeting French forces, local state entities, UN peacekeepers, and civilians perceived as collaborators. Islamist armed groups have meanwhile proliferated in central and southern Mali, and are active in adjacent parts of Burkina Faso and Niger.

AQIM and related groups in the Sahel have pledged greater unity since 2015, possibly in a bid to outpace France's ongoing military operations, undermine Mali's 2015 peace agreement with northern rebels, and/or respond to competition from a splinter faction that has aligned itself with the Islamic State. AQIM and erstwhile splinter group Al Murabitoun re-merged in 2015, and in 2017, AQIM's Sahel-based "emirate" and Al Murabitoun announced a merger with two Malian-led groups (see below).

AQIM has not claimed attacks outside North-West Africa, and the State Department has characterized it as "largely a regionally-focused group." The group's shifting tactics and opportunism have provoked debate over the appropriate U.S. approach to Islamist extremist groups whose activities are primarily locally oriented, but which pose a threat to U.S. interests and personnel in the areas where they operate.

Figure 1. AQIM Insignia



Source: U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)

Leadership and Related Groups

The purported leader/"emir" of AQIM is Abdelmalik Droukdel (aka Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), an Algerian national reportedly based in northeastern Algeria. AQIM's operations in the Sahel are reportedly led by Algerian national Djamel Okacha (aka Yahya Abou el Hammam). An apparently fractious and decentralized organization, AQIM has cultivated close ties with local communities in the Sahel and has spawned various offshoots and affiliates:

- **Al Murabitoun** ("The Sentinels"), formed in 2013 as the merger of two AQIM splinter factions, Al Mulathamun ("The Masked Ones") and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (aka MUJAO, its French acronym). The group has claimed attacks in Algeria, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and has also reportedly been active in Libya. Founder Mokhtar Bel Mokhtar reportedly survived a U.S. air strike in Libya in 2015, and was reportedly again targeted there by a French strike in 2016; his death has been reported but not confirmed. Al Murabitoun has been designated as an FTO.
- **Ansar al Dine** ("Supporters of Religion"), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, an ethnic Tuareg from northern Mali, and the closely tied **Macina Liberation Front** (MLF; Macina refers to a pre-colonial Islamic state), led by Amadou Koufa, an ethnic Fulani from central Mali. Ansar al Dine has been designated as an FTO.
- **Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen** (JNIM, "Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims"), a 2017 merger among AQIM's Sahel branch, Al Murabitoun, Ansar al Dine, and the MLF, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly. Ties among these groups had already been evident, making the practical significance of the union uncertain.
- **Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade** in Tunisia, which the State Department has described as AQIM-"aligned." Current allegiances are uncertain; reports suggest some elements are loyal to the Islamic State.

- **Ansarul Islam** (“Supporters of Islam”), an emergent Islamist insurgency in northern Burkina Faso. The State Department has listed the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.
- **Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS)**, formed in mid-2015 when MUJAO faction leader Abu Walid al Sahrawi pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. IS-GS has been active along the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Objectives

AQIM propaganda calls for replacing governments in North and West Africa with Islamist regimes, and for countering Western influence, notably that of former colonial power France. The JNIM coalition appears to seek an Islamist regime in Mali (at the national or sub-national level), and the withdrawal of Malian state actors and foreign troops. Its component groups and IS-GS have also pursued communal agendas on behalf of their respective bases in the Sahel.

“Today, Al-Qaeda’s individual franchises focus on exploiting local conflicts... [T]he affiliates have become increasingly responsive to local contexts.” – CNA, *Independent Assessment of U.S. Government Efforts against Al-Qaeda*, October 2017

The degree of antagonism between Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates in North-West Africa is uncertain. While the two franchises may compete for recruits and prominence, some analysts see evidence of cooperation.

Size and Financing

The State Department’s *Country Reports on Terrorism* state that as of 2016, AQIM had “several hundred fighters operating in Algeria and the Sahel, including remote regions of northern Mali and southwest Libya.” The reports do not include a size estimate for other groups listed above.

As of 2012, AQIM’s reported ability to draw millions of dollars in ransom payments led U.S. officials to describe it publicly as the best financed Al Qaeda affiliate, although the current financial ranking of Al Qaeda affiliates is unclear. Cigarette smuggling and cocaine trafficking have reportedly provided additional revenues to AQIM. According to the *Country Reports on Terrorism*, AQIM also “successfully fundraises globally” and has received some funds from “supporters residing in Western Europe.”

Attacks against U.S. Persons

AQIM claimed responsibility for the 2009 murder in Mauritania of an American citizen. Three U.S. citizens were killed during Al Murabitoun’s siege at a gas plant in southeast Algeria in January 2013 (seven other Americans escaped alive); one American was killed in a November 2015 AQIM/Al Murabitoun attack on a hotel in Bamako, Mali; and one was killed in a January 2016 AQIM/Al Murabitoun attack on a hotel and restaurant in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The State Department has also referred to ties between AQIM and the perpetrators of the 2012 attacks on U.S. facilities in Benghazi.

IS-GS claimed responsibility for the attack that killed four U.S. soldiers in western Niger on October 4, 2017. It is reported to be holding a U.S. citizen, Jeffery Woodke, who was kidnapped in western Niger in October 2016, but has made no public claim regarding him.

International Responses to AQIM

France deployed its military to Mali in 2013, at the request of the government, to counter an advance by Ansar al Dine. Partnering with local and Chadian forces, French troops ousted Islamist leaders from major towns in northern Mali, killed or captured several key AQIM figures, and struck AQIM logistical hubs. Since 2014, France’s Mali deployment has been subsumed under Operation Barkhane, an enduring French counterterrorism mission in the Sahel. The U.N. Security Council established a U.N. peacekeeping operation (MINUSMA) in 2013 to help stabilize Mali, but it is not mandated to conduct counterterrorism operations.

The U.S. military provides logistical and intelligence support to Operation Barkhane. The United States also provides counterterrorism assistance to countries in North and West Africa, including under the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a long-running State Department-led interagency initiative. Defense Department-administered security cooperation activities have expanded in the Sahel over the past decade, as Congress has provided increased authorities and funding to build the capacity of foreign partner forces. The United States has also imposed targeted sanctions on AQIM and several related groups, and individual figures within them.

In 2017, five countries known as the G5 Sahel—Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad—proposed a joint force to counter terrorism and other cross-border threats in the region, an initiative backed by France and the African Union. The Trump Administration pledged \$60 million in funding for the force’s constituent militaries in October 2017; other pledges have been made by the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Prospects for the success of the joint force remain uncertain, given enduring mutual distrust and capacity shortfalls among G5 member states.

Relationship with Al Qaeda/Islamic State

AQIM’s “union” with Al Qaeda was announced by then-deputy Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri in 2006. In 2014, AQIM reiterated its allegiance to Zawahiri, now Al Qaeda’s global leader, in the context of the split between Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Al Murabitoun’s Mokhtar bel Mokhtar also stated his allegiance to Zawahiri after breaking away from AQIM, as did JNIM leader Ag Ghaly upon the coalition’s formation in 2017. Abu Walid el Sahrawi’s pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State was recognized by “core” Islamic State media in October 2016. Islamic State leadership has not referred to a full “province” in the Sahel, however, as it has with affiliates elsewhere.

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