

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: 1998

Disbanded: Group is active.

First Attack: April 2003: AQIM leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar led an operation that took 32 Europeans hostage in Northern Mali. The hostages were eventually ransomed for a total of \$6 million. However, one hostage died in the desert of unspecified causes (1 dead, 0 wounded).¹

Last Attack: June 30, 2018: JNIM, the umbrella organization including AQIM, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing of the Malian headquarters of the G5 Sahel, an international anti-terror taskforce. Two soldiers and a civilian were killed (3 killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

AQIM, originally known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), splintered from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a key participant in the Algerian Civil War, in 1998. In 2006, the GSPC became a formal affiliate of Al Qaeda (AQ) and changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The group is famous for kidnapping Westerners for ransom in North Africa and is active in the drug, arms and human trafficking trade. AQIM is one of the wealthiest terrorist organizations in the world. In March 2017, AQIM's Sahara branch merged with Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), a hierarchical militant alliance principally led by AQIM.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), sometimes referred to as Al Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM), is an Algerian Salafi-Jihadist organization that joined Al Qaeda (AQ) in 2006. Previously, AQIM was known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The GSPC formed in 1998 when several leaders in the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the largest and most brutal Islamist group fighting the Algerian government in the Algerian civil war, split from the larger organization to protest its indiscriminate tactics and excessive slaughter of civilians.³ The GSPC originally garnered widespread public support by pledging to continue resisting the government without targeting civilians. However, the Algerian government's amnesty program in the early 2000s lured many fighters away from the GSPC.⁴

The GSPC soon expanded into other parts of Algeria and greater North Africa. Most notably, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, commander of the GSPC's southern operations from 2003, began to establish cells in the south of Algeria and in Mali as early as 2003.⁵ In August 2003, original leader Hassan Hattab was forced out of the GSPC, ostensibly because he supported reconciliation with the government. He was replaced by Nabil Sahraoui, who pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar in October 2003, although the GSPC did not become a formal affiliate of AQ until 2006.⁶ He was succeeded by Abdelmalek Droukdel, who remains the emir of AQIM.⁷

On September 11, 2006, the GSPC and AQ announced a formal alliance between the two organizations, and the GSPC was renamed Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in January 2007.⁸ It is believed that the alliance was originally facilitated by GSPC leaders who trained and fought with AQ in Afghanistan.

Prior to the alliance, the group's violent activities were limited to kidnappings and guerilla-style attacks on Algerian government targets, usually utilizing small arms. Beginning in 2007, however, AQIM began to engage in larger scale bombings and higher profile kidnappings.⁹ The most notable of these attacks was AQIM's simultaneous bombings of the regional UN headquarters and the Algerian Constitutional Court in Algiers on April 11 2007.¹⁰ Droukdel also began to expand AQIM's activities further across the region, reflecting his desire to establish an Islamic Caliphate across North Africa.

The instability in the wider Middle East following the Arab Spring in 2011 profoundly affected AQIM's operations and capacity. A great number of fighters left the Sahara and Sahel region to fight in the conflicts raging in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Some of these foreign fighters returned to swell AQIM's ranks.¹¹ Furthermore, regional crises led to an influx of arms sent to the Middle East and North Africa, allowing AQIM to augment its arsenal as well as profit from selling old munitions to combatants. Additionally, instability in neighboring Libya presented AQIM the opportunity to expand its operations eastward.¹² During this time, AQIM also established relations with militant groups in the region, exchanging funds, arms and information with Nigeria's Boko Haram, Somalia's the Shabab, and Yemen's Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQAP).¹³

In March 2012, Tuareg militants rebelled against the Government of Mali. AQIM's southern battalions, led by Belmokhtar, worked closely with Ansar Dine and the Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), two other prominent Islamist organizations operating in West Africa, to take control of the rebellion and establish a foothold in northern Mali.¹⁴ Together the groups established Shariah law in the lands under their control and set up training camps for new recruits.¹⁵ In January 2013, a French military operation aimed at re-establishing stability in Mali pushed AQIM and its allies out of most of the country.¹⁶

In late 2012 or early 2013, AQIM's southern front began to fragment. A serious schism between AQIM central leadership under the command of Droukdel and Belmokhtar's southern battalions had been progressively widening for several years. As Belmokhtar's financial resources and prestige grew over the late 2000s as a result of his involvement in high profile kidnappings and regional arms and drug trafficking, so too did his independence from Droukdel's command.¹⁷ Although Droukdel tried to reassert control over AQIM's southern flank by appointing several close allies as regional commanders, harsh French and Algerian military crackdowns on the group in 2012 worsened the divide. In December 2013, Belmokhtar and his divisions in the south split from AQIM, forming the Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB). The AMB's most notable operations were the hostage crisis in January 2013 in eastern Algeria and its twin suicide bombings in Niger in the same year.¹⁸ After multiple coordinated attacks, the AMB and MUJAO merged in August 2013 to form Al Mourabitoun.

Under Belmokhtar's leadership, Al Mourabitoun joined AQIM in December 2015 as a semi-autonomous unit in order to maintain unity against the "occupying Crusader enemy."¹⁹ After the merger, AQIM carried out many deadly attacks, including the mass shooting at Mali's Raddison Blu Hotel in November 2015, the hostage crisis at Burkina Faso's Splendid Hotel in January 2016, and most recently, the bombing of a French-UN military base in Mali in January 2017. On March 2, 2017, the Sahara branch of AQIM and Al Mourabitoun joined with Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) into the unified organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). The merger was allegedly in line with AQ's recent conclusion that Shariah law could not be fully implemented in areas where jihadists did not possess complete control, forcing the group to extend its area of operation. JNIM reportedly operates as a militant alliance with AQIM at the top; in a video explaining the merger, JNIM leader, Iyad Ag Ghali pledged allegiance to AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel.²⁰

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Hassan Hattab (1998-August 2003): Hattab founded the GSPC when he split from the GIA in 1998 in response to the GIA's increasing use of mass violence against Algerian civilians. He remained the leader of the GSPC until August 2003, when he was forced out of the organization because of his desire to negotiate with the Algerian government.²¹

Nabil Sahraoui (August 2003-June 20, 2004): Sahraoui replaced Hassan Hattab as the leader of the GSPC in August 2003 but was killed a year later in June 2004 in a shootout with Algerian security forces. Under his leadership, the GSPC pledged nominal allegiance to AQ and the Taliban.²²

Abdelmalek Droukdel (June 2004-Present): Droukdel, also known as Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, is an engineer by trade and an expert in improvised explosive devices. He succeeded Sahraoui as leader of the GSPC in June 2004 and is credited with allying the GSPC with AQ when it formally became AQIM.²³

Mokhtar Belmokhtar (1998- December 2012, December 2015- unknown): Belmokhtar assumed command of the GSPC's southern battalions in the late 2000s. He is credited with expanding the organization's operations into southern Algeria and Mali. His familial ties to the tribes of the southern Maghreb region allowed him to capitalize on the trafficking trade, augmenting his financial resources. In December 2012, Belmokhtar split from AQIM and founded his own organization, the AMB.²⁴ He later rejoined AQIM in 2015 after Al Mourabitoun merged with AQIM, after which he allegedly served as commander of AQIM activities in Libya.

Abdelhamid Abu Zeid (Unknown-February 2013): Zeid was a top commander in AQIM. In 2012, Droukdel gave Zeid command of several battalions on AQIM's southern front in an attempt to counterbalance Belmokhtar's growing influence.²⁵ He played a key role in the militant takeover of northern Mali and was killed while fighting French forces in the country.²⁶

Yahya Abu Hammam (September 2012 – present): Hammam, also known as Djamel Okacha, served as a commander in AQIM, replacing Zeid. In 2013, the U.S. State Department added Hammam to the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists. He has served as the AQIM emir of the Sahel.²⁷ Hammam was present in the video announcing the formation of JNIM, alongside leaders from Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine, and the MLF.

B. NAME CHANGES

1998: Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The GSPC was created in 1998 when a group of officers in the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) split from the larger organization to protest its indiscriminate use of violence against Algerian citizens.²⁸

January 2007: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). After becoming a formal affiliate of Al Qaeda in September 2006, the GSPC officially changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007.²⁹

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2002: Several hundred (*U.S. Department of State*)³⁰
- 2006: Several hundred (*U.S. Department of State*)³¹
- 2007: Several hundred in Algeria and the Sahel (*U.S. Department of State*)³²
- 2010: Less than 1,000 (*U.S. Department of State*)³³

- 2012: 300 (*The Military Balance*)³⁴
- 2013: 600-800 Fighters (*BBC News*)³⁵
- 2013: Several hundred (*Australian National Security*)³⁶
- 2015: 1000 members in Algeria and smaller numbers in the Sahel region, including Chad, Mali, and Mauritania (*Council on Foreign Relations*)³⁷

D. RESOURCES

AQIM has often been called “AQ’s wealthiest affiliate.”³⁸ The group has raised the majority of its funds from ransom payments and its trafficking activities. It is estimated that over the course of the first decade of the 2000s, the group raised over \$50 million from kidnappings alone.³⁹ Furthermore, the group has become a key trafficker of drugs, arms, and humans both within North Africa and between South America and Europe via Africa.⁴⁰ The tribal connections of many of the group’s leaders helped facilitate AQIM’s entrance into these illegal trades in the early 2000s. AQIM is also believed to receive a smaller portion of its income from donations from sympathizers in Europe, criminal activities such as robbery, and connections with other groups in the region, such as Boko Haram and the Shabab.⁴¹

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

AQIM was originally based in the Kabylie Mountains in Northern Algeria. However, over the course of the 2000s, AQIM expanded into Niger, Tunisia, Mauritania, Chad, Libya and Mali.⁴² The group’s presence in Mali expanded significantly following a coup in Mali that overthrew the Malian Government in late 2012. Within a matter of months, AQIM’s Mali-based battalions, led by Belmokhtar and working in cooperation with Ansar Dine and MUJAO, had captured large swaths of Northern Mali, including the Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. However, by January 2013, French forces had largely pushed AQIM and its allies out of Malian territory to the northern Malian mountains near Algeria.⁴³ In addition to its holdings in North Africa, AQIM is also suspected of having cells spread throughout Europe. Some sources have also reported AQIM operatives fighting alongside other AQ-affiliated groups in the Iraqi insurgency after 2011.⁴⁴

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

AQIM is a Salafi-Jihadist organization. As the GSPC, the group’s main focus was the overthrow of the Algerian government and establishment of an Islamic caliphate in the Maghreb that would enforce Shariah law.⁴⁵ The GSPC expanded this goal in the early 2000s to include the overthrow of the governments of Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mali, and the reclamation of lost Islamic lands in southern Spain.⁴⁶ Despite its alliance with AQ in 2006 and name change the following year, AQIM’s goals did not shift dramatically. Unlike AQ Central, AQIM considers France and Spain, not the United

States, the “far enemy,” and prefers to target regional governments over western nations.⁴⁷ Although AQIM has often threatened to attack France and was quick to praise the Charlie Hebdo massacre in 2015, there is no evidence that AQIM has perpetrated any attacks outside the Maghreb region. It has, however, publicly expressed support for Islamist extremism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Chechnya, and Palestine.⁴⁸

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

AQIM has no known political activities.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

AQIM is most famous for numerous kidnappings of aid workers, diplomats, tourists, and employees of multinational corporations. Many, but not all, of those kidnapped have been western citizens in Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Algeria.⁴⁹ Especially in its early days, AQIM often perpetrated guerilla-style attacks using small arms, in addition to mortar, rocket, and IED attacks.⁵⁰ Its most common targets were the Algerian government or military officials. After 2007, the group began to focus on larger, more sophisticated bombing attacks. The group is known to possess significant quantities of AK-47 assault rifles, various small handguns, Semtex (a multi-purpose plastic explosive), PK 7.62mm GPMGs (General Purpose Machine Gun), and RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades). Additionally, AQIM has been reported to possess SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, .50 caliber DSHKs (armor-piercing machine guns), and NATO-issued F2000 assault rifles. The group’s weapons stores have only increased since the outbreak of civil war in Libya in 2011, which brought an influx of arms to the Maghreb region from the disbanded Islamic Legion in Libya.⁵¹

Although AQIM has often targeted westerners in North Africa, the group has never carried out an attack outside of the region. Although undoubtedly hostile to the U.S., AQIM views France and Spain as the “far enemy,” as opposed to the secular governments of the Maghreb, which it deems the “near enemy.”⁵²

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

April 2003: Belmokhtar took 32 Europeans hostage in Northern Mali. AQIM received ransom payments totaling \$6 million for all but one of the hostages. The remaining hostage died in the desert of unspecified causes (1 killed, 0 wounded).⁵³

September 2007: AQIM claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack in the Algerian city of Batna that was aimed at the motorcade of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Although the president was not injured, 20 others were killed (20 killed, unknown wounded).⁵⁴

December 2007: AQIM conducted simultaneous bombing attacks on the Algerian Constitutional Court, UN Regional Headquarters, and a police station (47 killed, 60+ wounded).⁵⁵

December 2008: AQIM abducted UN Special Envoy, Robert Fowler, and his assistant, Louis Guay, in Niger. They were released in 2009 (no casualties).⁵⁶

March 2012: Following a coup in Mali launched by Tuareg insurgents, AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO, launched an offensive in Mali, eventually taking control of Northern Mali (unknown casualties).⁵⁷

May 31, 2015: AQIM claimed responsibility for a mine that was triggered by a U.N. convoy in Mali that included the U.N. Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)'s commander, Major General Michawl Lollesgaard and the mission's police chief, Abdounasir Awale (3 killed, unknown wounded).⁵⁸

November 11, 2015: Al Mourabitoun and AQIM fighters opened fire on the Raddison Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali and took 170 people hostage, who were rescued later in the day, and demanded the return of detainees held in France (22 killed, 2 wounded).⁵⁹

January 15, 2016: AQIM, working with Al Mourabitoun gunmen, seized the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, firing on local businesses and taking over 200 hostages. The Burkinabe military, aided by French troops, freed 126 hostages in a counterassault (29 killed, 56 wounded).⁶⁰

January 18, 2017: AQIM claims responsibility for a suicide bombing launched by Al Mourabitoun agents at a joint French-UN military base outside Gao, Mali, housing Malian soldiers and rival armed groups (77 killed, 115 wounded).⁶¹

June 30, 2018: JNIM, the umbrella organization including AQIM, claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing of the Malian headquarters of the G5 Sahel, an international anti-terror taskforce. Two soldiers and a civilian were killed (3 killed, unknown wounded).⁶²

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- United States Foreign Terrorist Organization: March 27, 2002⁶³
- UNSC "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List:" October 6, 2001 to Present⁶⁴
- Government of Canada Listed Terrorist Entity: July 23, 2002 to Present.⁶⁵
- New Zealand Police Designated Terrorist Entity: October 17, 2002 to Present.⁶⁶
- Australian National Security Terrorist Organization: November 14, 2002 to Present.⁶⁷
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: March 2001 - Present.⁶⁸

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Although AQIM has extensive business ties with local communities and cooperates closely with locals in its smuggling and trafficking activities, the communities tend to be less receptive to radical and violent Islamism than other parts of the Arab world. Furthermore, views of the United States and the West tend to be positive among West Africans, further reducing the impact of AQIM's radical messages.⁶⁹

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

AQIM began in 1998 as a splinter group from the now-defunct Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the largest and most brutal Islamist group fighting the Algerian government in the Algerian civil war. In 1998, several GIA leaders feared that the group's violent tactics were alienating the GIA from Algerian citizens, leading to the formation of the Salafist Group from Preaching and Combat (GSPC).⁷⁰

AQIM has conflictual relations with Djamat Houmat Daawa Salafia (DHDS), another GIA splinter group, which took control of part of GSPC's support networks beginning 1999, in order to acquire more sources of funding.⁷¹

AQIM's relationship with Al Qaeda (AQ) dates back to the 1980s, when many future leaders of AQIM fought alongside bin Laden and the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.⁷² Although Sahraoui nominally pledged the GSPC's allegiance to AQ in October 2003, the two groups only became formally affiliated on September 11, 2006. The GSPC did not change its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb until January of the next year.⁷³ Often termed a franchise agreement, the AQIM-AQ affiliation has seemingly little to do with ideology and much more to do with monetary and strategic advantages conferred on each group. For the GSPC, joining AQ increased the organization's international profile and boosted its recruitment capabilities.⁷⁴ For AQ, allying with the GSPC allowed it to expand to a new continent, demonstrating its resilience and continued power at a time when the global war on terror was reaching its zenith. Perhaps even more importantly for AQ, however, were the monetary resources the GSPC brought to the union. By 2006, the GSPC was one of the wealthiest terrorist organizations in the world, having raised tens of millions of dollars from ransom payments and trafficking of arms, drugs, and people through North Africa.⁷⁵

Ansar Dine and the Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) are both believed to be splinter groups of AQIM, although the circumstances of their division remain unclear. Both Ansar Dine and MUJAO fought alongside AQIM's southern battalions, led by Belmokhtar, in Mali in 2012. In December 2012, Belmokhtar and his southern divisions are believed to have split from AQIM as well, forming the Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB).⁷⁶ AMB and MUJAO merged in August 2013 to form Al Mourabitoun, or "The Sentinels."⁷⁷ In December 2015, Droukdel announced Al Mourabitoun's merger with AQIM.

The U.S. State Department has claimed that AQIM coordinated and exchanged money, weapons, and information with al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen.⁷⁸

AQIM has a complex relationship with the Islamic State (IS) due to the rift between AQ and IS. In July 2014, AQIM publicly congratulated the IS for its military gains in Iraq while simultaneously urging reconciliation between AQ, its affiliate in Syria and IS. In the same month, AQIM rejected IS's declaration of a caliphate, reflecting internal divisions among AQIM's leadership.⁷⁹

On March 2, 2017, the Sahara branch of AQIM and Al Mourabitoun joined with Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) into the unified organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). The merger was allegedly in line with AQ's recent conclusions that Shariah law could only be fully implemented in areas where jihadists possessed complete control. JNIM reportedly operates as a militant alliance with AQIM at the top; in a video explaining the merger, JNIM leader, Iyad Ag Ghali pledged allegiance to AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel.⁸⁰

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

AQIM has no known connections with governments in the region or abroad.

MAPS

- Global Al Qaeda
- North Africa
- Global Islamic State

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