

Groupe Islamique Armé

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: October 1992

Disbanded: 2004

First Attack: August 1994: The GIA attacked the French Embassy in Algiers, leading to the deaths of 5 French officials (5 killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: August 17, 2002: Militants suspected of having ties to the GIA attacked and killed 26 civilians in Bokaat Laakakcha, a secluded village in Chlef province, Algeria (26 killed, 0 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

The Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), or the Armed Islamic Group, was an Islamist extremist group based in Algeria. The group was founded in October 1992 as Islamic activists and radicals increasingly began to reject the political process as a means to establishing an Islamic state. The GIA sought to overthrow the Algerian government and establish an Islamic state ruled by Shariah law. The group quickly gained notoriety as Algeria’s most dangerous extremist group for its indiscriminate targeting of civilians and its campaign of high-profile terrorist attacks. In the mid 1990s, in its most active period, the group established bases in France, Belgium, Italy and Britain, as well as its native Algeria. The GIA’s best known attacks included its hijacking of an Air France flight in Algiers in December 1994, a series of subway bombings in Paris in 1995, and a campaign of Algerian village massacres in the late 1990s. In 1998, the GIA became divided over the issue of attacking civilians, and a group of militants, led by Hassan Hattab, split to form the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Many GIA members

eventually defected to join the GSPC or Al Qaeda (AQ). The group reportedly stopped operating in 2004, after the majority of its leadership was arrested or killed.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA), or the Armed Islamic Group, was an Islamist extremist group based in Algeria. Armed Islamist groups in the country began to consolidate after June 1991, when state security forces clashed with and arrested leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a moderate Islamic political party. These events suggested to many Muslim activists that they could not achieve their goal of an Islamic state through political means, a conclusion confirmed by the 1992 military coup that prevented the FIS from taking political office.³ In October 1992, Algerians who had fought as part of the mujahideen in Afghanistan joined with Muslim activists and radicals to form the Armed Islamic Group. The GIA operated as a disorganized collection of armed groups until May 13, 1994, when the main armed groups in Algeria united under the GIA label. The newly consolidated group released a unification communique, which reaffirmed its commitment to Shariah law and the Salafi ideology, justified its implementation of violent jihad while rejecting peace processes with the government, and declared the GIA the only legitimate jihadi organization in Algeria.⁴ The GIA developed a conflictual relationship with the FIS around 1993, as it rejected the party's reliance on electoral processes to achieve an Islamic state. The organization clashed repeatedly with the Islamic Salvation Front, the armed branch of the FIS, until 1996, when the GIA killed top ISA leaders and activists.⁵

From its inception, the GIA sought to overthrow the Algerian government and establish an Islamic state ruled by Shariah law. The group quickly gained notoriety as Algeria's most dangerous extremist group for its indiscriminate targeting of civilians, particularly journalists and intellectuals, and its campaign of high-profile terrorist attacks. The GIA's tactics evolved over the course of its operation. From 1993, the organization launched a high-profile terror campaign that concentrated on targets in Algeria. From late 1994, beginning with the hijacking of an Air France flight, the group expanded to attack international targets and foreign interests in Algeria. In this period, the organization launched a series of deadly bombings of subway lines, markets, and tourist attractions in Paris.⁶ Beginning in 1996, the GIA shifted to targeting Algerian civilians in large-scale brutal attacks that involved decapitation and throat-cutting and decimated entire villages.⁷ In the mid 1990s, in its most active period, the group established bases in France, Belgium, Italy and Britain, as well as its native Algeria. During this time, the GIA also began publishing the Al-Ansar newsletter, one of the most prominent extremist publications.⁸

The GIA received much of its support from the Algerian diaspora in Europe, especially France, which provided financial and recruitment assistance.⁹ The organization had few alliances with other Algerian militant groups, as many of them criticized the GIA's killing of innocent civilians, particularly its brutal tactics against moderate Muslims.¹⁰ The GIA was allegedly linked to Al Qaeda (AQ) through GIA leader Sheik Othman, designated by Osama bin Laden as a spiritual advisor for Algerian militant groups.

By the late 1990s, the Groupe Islamique Armé was severely weakened by internal divisions; several smaller militant groups splintered off from the GIA in protest of its massacres of civilians and moderate Muslims and alleged collaboration with Algerian security forces.¹¹ One such splinter group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, later known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), quickly became the GIA's main regional rival. In 1999, the Algerian government began granting official amnesty to fighters that renounced militant groups, leading many members to leave the GIA.¹² The organization suffered further losses in 2004, when Algerian police forces launched a widespread crackdown on local militant groups. Several top GIA leaders were killed or apprehended and over 400 militants from GIA and GSPC were arrested.¹³ The group reportedly stopped operating in 2004, as the majority of its remaining members defected to join the GSPC or Al Qaeda (AQ), or form new, autonomous groups.¹⁴

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Abdelhak Layada (January 1993 - 1993): Layada, also known as Abu Adlane, was a former member of the FIS and the first emir of the GIA.¹⁵ Layada was arrested in Morocco in 1993 and sentenced to death; in 2006, he was released as part of the Algerian government's amnesty program.¹⁶ He allegedly regretted the GIA's slaughter of civilians after his imprisonment.¹⁷

Djamel Zitouni (September 1994 – July 1996): Zitouni served as head of the GIA until his death in 1996. Under Zitouni's leadership, the GIA intensified attacks on civilians and launched a campaign of attacks in France.¹⁸

Antar Zouabri (1996 – February 2002): Zouabri was the longest-serving leader of the GIA. He oversaw the GIA's brutal massacre of civilians in the late 1990s, a strategy justified in the "Sharp Sword" political manifesto. Following his death, factional conflict significantly weakened the GIA.¹⁹

Rashid Oukali (April 2002 – July 2004): Oukali, also known as Abu Tourab, succeeded Zouabri as head of the GIA. He allegedly threatened to kill all Algerians that did not join the "holy war" against the government.²⁰

Omar Mahmoud Othman (1994 - 2002): Othman, also known as Abu Qatada, was a radical Jordanian Salafi cleric and editor of Al-Ansar in the mid 1990s. Osama bin Laden allegedly designated Uthman as spiritual advisor for several Algerian militant groups, allowing Uthman to serve as a link between GIA and AQ.²¹ Based in the U.K., Othman supported the development of militant cells in Britain. He was acquitted and released by Jordanian officials in 2014, after facing long periods of imprisonment in Jordan and British.²²

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

There are no publicly available size estimates for this group.

D. RESOURCES

The GIA received much of its funding from the Algerian diaspora in Europe, especially France, which provided financial support and recruitment assistance through extortions, smuggling, and charitable donations collected through mosques.²³

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.

The Groupe Islamique Armé was based in Algeria and carried out most of its operations in western and central Algeria and Algiers. In the mid 1990s, in its most active period, the group also established bases in France, Belgium, Italy and Britain.

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

The GIA sought to overthrow the Algerian government and wage total war as a means to establish an Islamic state ruled by Shariah law.²⁴ On May 13, 1994, the GIA released a unification communique which reaffirmed its commitment to Shariah law and the Salafi ideology, justified its implementation of violent jihad while rejecting peace processes with the government, and declared the GIA the only legitimate jihadi organization in Algeria.²⁵

In 1996, the GIA released a 60-page political manifesto, “The Sharp Sword,” laying out emir Zouabri’s Salafist orthodoxy. The document further justified the GIA’s strategy of slaughtering civilians and blamed the Algerian community for failing to fulfill its religious duty to battle against impious enemies.²⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In May 2002, the GIA allegedly conducted a brutal massacre of 34 civilians in the Chlef Province, in northern Algeria, in order to disrupt the elections scheduled for the end of the month.²⁷

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The GIA gained notoriety as Algeria’s most dangerous extremist group for its indiscriminate targeting of civilians, particularly intellectuals and journalists, and its campaign of high-profile terrorist attacks. The group launched hijackings, bombed civilian sites using IEDs, and ambushed Algerian security forces.²⁸

The GIA’s tactics evolved over the course of its operation. From 1993, the organization launched a high-profile terror campaign that concentrated on targets in Algeria. From late 1994, beginning with the hijacking of the Air France flight, the group expanded to attack

international targets and foreign interests in Algeria. Beginning in 1996, the GIA shifted to targeting Algerian civilians in large-scale brutal attacks that involved decapitation and throat-cutting and decimated entire villages.²⁹

GIA militants regularly targeted Jews, Christians, and moderate Muslims. In addition to publishing inflammatory rhetoric against Jews and Christians in its magazine, *Al Ansar*, the GIA publicly executed Muslims who supported diplomacy with the government.³⁰ The GIA was also known to attack foreigners in Algeria. Between 1992 – 2002, the group killed over 100 foreigners, primarily Europeans, in the country.³¹

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.

August 1994: The GIA attacked the French Embassy in Algiers, leading to the deaths of 5 French officials (5 killed, unknown wounded).³²

December 24, 1994: The GIA hijacked an Air France flight in Algiers, allegedly planning to crash it into the Eiffel Tower. GIA militants, disguised as security agents, executed three passengers before French commandos killed the attackers (3 killed, unknown wounded).³³

July – October 1995: The GIA launched several deadly bombings using IEDs in France on Parisian subways, outdoor markets, a Jewish school, a high-speed train, and the Arc de Triomphe. The suspects were convicted for their crimes in France in 2002 (10 killed, 200+ wounded).³⁴

March 27, 1996: The GIA kidnapped and executed 7 monks from the Tibehirine monastery in Algeria (7 killed, 0 wounded).³⁵

August 1, 1996: The GIA bombed the home of the French Archbishop of Oran, Algeria, a strong supporter of inter-faith dialogue. Both the archbishop and his driver died in the attack (2 killed, 0 wounded).³⁶

January 1997: The GIA was responsible for a campaign of Algerian village massacres leading up to Ramadan that resulted in the deaths of over 300 civilians. On the first day of Ramadan, GIA militants attacked two villages in the western Relizane province, killing 78 villagers (300+ killed, unknown wounded).³⁷

July 5, 2002: On Algeria's Independence Day, GIA bombed a major market place in Larbaa, 20 kilometers from the capital city (35 killed, 37 wounded).³⁸

August 17, 2002: Militants suspected of having ties to the GIA attacked and killed 26 civilians in Bokaat Laakakcha, a secluded village in Chlef province, Algeria (26 killed, 0 wounded).³⁹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- United States Foreign Terrorist Organization: October 8, 1997 to October 15, 2010.⁴⁰
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: March 2001 - Present.⁴¹
- UNSC “ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List”: October 6, 2001 to Present.⁴²
- Government of Canada Listed Terrorist Entity: July 23, 2002 to Present.⁴³

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The GIA developed a reputation for indiscriminate targeting of civilians, especially intellectuals and journalists. After 1996, the GIA began to target Algerian civilians in large-scale brutal attacks that involved decapitation and throat-cutting and decimated entire villages.⁴⁴ These violent tactics alienated many Algerian civilians and supporters the GIA had acquired at the beginning of the Algerian Civil War. However, the GIA allegedly maintained positive relations with the Algerian expatriate community in France, which provided financial support and recruitment assistance to the group.⁴⁵

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

In 1998, the GIA became divided over the issue of attacking civilians, and a group of militants, led by GIA leader Hassan Hattab, split to form the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Hattab was allegedly concerned that the GIA's violent tactics alienated Algerian civilians and supporters it had acquired at the beginning of the Algerian Civil War.⁴⁶ The GIA had a conflictual relationship with the GSPC. Many GIA members eventually defected to join the GSPC.⁴⁷

The GIA was allegedly linked to Al Qaeda (AQ) through GIA leader Sheik Uthman, as AQ leader Osama bin Laden designated him as a spiritual advisor for Algerian militant groups. The GIA initially received financial & logistical backing from AQ; bin Laden allegedly sent wire transfers of money to the GIA members that planned the deadly French bombings of 1995.⁴⁸

The Groupe Islamique Armé rarely collaborated with other Islamic militant groups in Algeria, as many of them criticized the GIA's killing of innocent civilians and its brutal tactics against moderate Muslims.⁴⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Algerian security forces allegedly infiltrated GIA leadership, though there has not been independent confirmation of these claims. Some sources suggest the Algerian security services encouraged the group to use violent tactics as a way to diminish its popular support.⁵⁰ These sources claim that while several of the massacres in 1997 took place close to Algerian army barracks, no forces came to assist the Algerian civilians.⁵¹

MAPS

- North Africa

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- ²⁵ Hafez, Mohammed M. 2000. “Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria,” Middle East Journal 54, no. 4. Autumn 2000.
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