Al-Qaeda in North Africa:

Local and Global Jihad

Apr 23, 2007

Brief Analysis

On April 14, suicide bombers unsuccessfully targeted the U.S. consulate and an American cultural center in Casablanca, four days after another group of bombers blew themselves up in a confrontation with city police. On April 11, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (formerly the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC) claimed responsibility for two suicide car bombings in Algiers, one targeting the prime minister's office and the other a police station. No group has claimed responsibility for the Moroccan incidents, but together with the Algerian attacks -- which killed 33 and wounded up to 330 -- they indicate that both northwestern Africa and the United States face an acute threat from established regional militant groups allied with international terrorist networks.

Although the recent bombings did not surprise many experts -- who have warned of the growing terrorist threat to the region for months -- they highlight the danger of al-Qaeda's established network as a vehicle of attack against U.S. interests across the region, and perhaps beyond. Such attacks could also inspire local militants throughout Africa to stage their own operations in an effort to draw support from broader jihadist networks.

Former Washington Institute fellow Emily Hunt discussed the danger posed by jihadist groups in North Africa in the February 2007 Institute paper **Islamist Terrorism in Northwest Africa: A Thorn in the Neck of the United States? (templateC04.php?CID=266)** Her main points are outlined in the sections that follow.

GSPC Background

Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second-in-command, formed a new alliance with the Algeria-based GSPC in August 2006, corroborated by a statement posted on the latter's website soon thereafter. Al-Zawahiri's statement -- given in a September 11, 2006, interview with al-Qaeda's media network -- called for "our brothers of the GSPC to hit the foundations of the Crusader alliance, primarily their old leader the infidel United States." Indeed, al-Qaeda's leadership has frequently enlisted local groups to strike against the United States, or the "far enemy." According to al-Qaeda defector Jamal al-Fadl, Osama bin Laden emphasized this strategy: "We have to cut off the head of the snake and stop them. . . . [T]he snake is America."

Al-Qaeda chose a capable partner in the GSPC. Though little known in the United States, the radical Algerian network represents one of the top terrorism threats in the northwestern corridor of Africa -- from Morocco to Chad -- and is active in continental Europe as well. It may even have connections to aspiring militants in North America; the case of American citizen Daniel Joseph Maldonado (who pleaded guilty last week to training with al-Qaeda and fighting with Islamist militants in Somalia this year) illustrates the potential reach of African jihadist networks. Al-Zawahiri's statement was little more than a de facto recognition of a longstanding relationship between al-Qaeda and Algerian Islamist militants, but it publicized the region's growing terrorism challenge.

The GSPC's European presence is substantial, and operatives there recruit within the large North African diaspora. The group has been particularly adept at exploiting criminal fundraising opportunities in Europe. With al-Qaeda's official approval, international jihadist fundraising rings may also begin to direct more funds back to Algeria.

The GSPC's rapprochement with al-Qaeda should not be seen as an entirely new phenomenon, but rather as the culmination of the group's original objective of reintegrating Algeria's jihadists with international militant networks. The GSPC was founded in 1998 by a group of Afghanistan-trained Algerians frustrated that the extraordinarily brutal tactics of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) had damaged the reputation of both Algerian militants and their cause. This constituted a marked change from the early 1990s, when many international terrorists considered Algeria to be the next jihadist frontier. Indeed, bin Laden is believed to have donated approximately $40,000 for the establishment of insurgent infrastructure there. By the late 1990s, however, many prominent international extremists, including bin Laden, had repudiated the Algerian insurgents, while the GIA's unrestrained violence and reputation for being penetrated by the Algerian security service made it a pariah group in Europe. One objective of the GSPC's founding members was to restore the insurgency's international reputation, bringing its participants out of isolation to work more closely with international Islamist networks.

International Network

In light of the formal alliance between the GSPC and al-Qaeda, the activities of Algerian militants must be evaluated in the context of international Islamist militancy. The GSPC's connections in Europe, expanding operations throughout Sahelian Africa, funneling of African volunteers to fight in the Iraqi insurgency, and increasingly sophisticated internet propaganda are of particular concern.

Several important trends in international militant Islamism have converged in North Africa, creating an environment that fosters their symbiotic development. Together, these factors create a volatile mix in which Islamism -- and in some cases Islamist violence -- has become a powerful vehicle of political opposition. The growing prevalence of local self-radicalizing cells is particularly troublesome in Morocco, but has also extended to Algeria and Mauritania. In these countries, al-Qaeda's global ideology intersects with local anger directed at undemocratic regimes that for years permitted mosques to be focal points of popular political activity. Simultaneously, al-Qaeda has renewed its efforts to tap into local grievances, focusing them on the global jihad against the West. One of the keys to al-Qaeda's resilience has been its ability to co-opt and exploit local, readymade networks to its ideological and operational advantage.

In northwestern Africa, the GSPC has benefited from its evolution into a more cellular structure that is flexible, adaptable, and difficult for counterterrorism forces to penetrate. Simultaneously, local self-radicalizing cells have exploited the remnants of the GSPC's insurgent structure to gain training that may have been otherwise unavailable to them. Individuals linked to the Iraqi and Afghani wings of al-Qaeda have been able to operate under the radar in this region, facilitating contacts between local militants and international Islamist networks. Most of these terrorist entities engage in organized crime -- including armed robbery -- to fund their activities. This compounds the difficulty of defining the terrorist threat in the region.

Regarding the important role of North African militants in Iraq, many young men who traveled there in the initial stages of the conflict became suicide bombers; others have participated as insurgent foot soldiers and commanders. The latter are no doubt gaining urban combat skills that they may use upon their return to northwestern Africa.

U.S. Policy

The intersection of local conflicts with al-Qaeda's global ideology and technological expertise has prompted U.S. officials to focus on North Africa as both a potential target of attacks and a safe haven or recruiting ground for terrorists intent on organizing attacks outside the region. The primary vehicle of U.S. counterterrorism policy in northwestern Africa is the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP), a State Department-led effort to integrate and pursue multiagency objectives in the region by working with and empowering local partners. TSCTP encompasses nine countries -- Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia --

across a wide swath of territory with a diverse set of inhabitants. The partnership is envisioned as a long-term initiative focused on assisting local government, military, and police officials in their efforts to constrict the tactical and, ultimately, the strategic operating environment of terrorists in northwestern Africa.

Conclusion

The latest attacks suggest that a worrying number of terrorists have embedded themselves in northwestern African society. Rooting them out will be challenging and could create more problems. Terrorism is, in essence, a tool of the weak against the strong. If left unchecked, a few individuals can pose a medium-level threat to American objectives and alliances in the region and potentially undermine the development of the energy sector in key nations such as Mauritania, Nigeria, and Algeria.

Jake Lipton is a research assistant at The Washington Institute. ❖

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