

Al-Qaeda's North African Franchise: The GSPC Regional Threat

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Brief Analysis

On September 29, Algerians will vote on President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's proposed Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, a policy that would provide amnesty for most of the one-thousand Islamic terrorists the government believes are still hiding in Algeria and neighboring countries. Between three hundred and five hundred of the terrorists still at large belong to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). This cadre of Afghanistan-trained, al-Qaeda-linked militants was behind the September 24 ambush of a police patrol east of Algiers that killed eight people. These holdouts have shown no interest in a government amnesty, despite the Algerian population's clearly waning interest in Islamist-inspired political violence.

In addition to their domestic terrorist campaign, radical Algerian Islamists constitute the largest national grouping in al-Qaeda behind Saudis and Yemenis. Algerian jihadists have been involved in successful or thwarted attacks in the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Iraq. The connections these Algerians made in Afghanistan span the globe, while the weakening of the original al-Qaeda leadership has created an opportunity for local "franchise" groups to take the initiative in global jihad. As al-Qaeda decentralizes, the GSPC's network in northern Africa and the Middle East is expanding and now poses a serious international threat.

The GSPC in Northwest Africa

Unregulated borders, weak institutions, inadequate policing, and smuggling networks characterize the Muslim-majority Sahel region and make it a natural staging ground for the GSPC. Several high profile examples of GSPC activity south of Algeria in the last two years illustrate the ease of movement terrorists enjoy in this region. In separate incidents in February and March 2003, the GSPC took a total of thirty-two European tourists hostage in southern Algeria. The perpetrators then took the hostages to northern Mali, where Mohktar Benmokhter, a key leader of GSPC, is believed to have married the daughter of a local tribal leader earlier in 2003. The hostages were held there for six months until they were released in Gao, Mali. The perpetrators then fled through Niger to Chad, where GSPC leader Ammar Saifi (also known as Abderazzak el Para) was captured by a Chadian rebel group and ultimately extradited to Algeria.

Many Algeria watchers believed that the capture of Saifi effectively neutralized the GSPC. However, military encounters with GSPC militants in several Sahel countries throughout 2004 and 2005 suggest the group's continued activity in the region. In March 2004, the Chadian army engaged remnants of the group on the Libyan border, killing

twenty-eight terrorists. The next month, police in Niger arrested one and killed three GSPC militants traveling through the country, and in the autumn of that year the GSPC clashed with the Malian army on the Mali-Algeria border. The most dramatic GSPC attack so far in 2005 was the June 4 raid on a Mauritanian military base in Lemgheitty, in which up to 150 terrorists burned military vehicles and killed fifteen Mauritanian soldiers. The militaries of Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria have since been pursuing the perpetrators across national borders. In July, the GSPC shot down an Algerian military helicopter on a reconnaissance flight over Mali.

The Iraq connection

While it pushes south, the GSPC has become increasingly active in Syria and Iraq. The group has provided propaganda and ideological support to the Iraqi terrorists as well as sending cadres to engage in terrorist operations there.

The GSPC website and newsletter indicate strong sympathy for the Iraqi jihadists' cause, encouraging young Algerians to travel to Iraq to join the terrorist campaign. In December 2004 and again in May 2005, radical Islamist websites announced the formation of a "new" jihadist group in Algeria. One of the names under which the group is organizing, al-Qaeda in the Land of the Berbers, is remarkably similar to al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, one of the group names Abu Musab al-Zarqawi uses to take credit for attacks in Iraq. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but the GSPC has gone beyond that to suggest targets for the insurgents: in July, Al-Sharq al-Awsat reported that the GSPC issued a communiqué calling on the Zarqawi network to target French nationals in Iraq. On July 23, the GSPC website posted a statement congratulating Zarqawi's group on the abduction and eventual murder of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad.

More worrying, however, are reports that Algerians are heavily represented among foreign fighters in Iraq. In June, the U.S. military announced that approximately 20 percent of suicide bombers there are Algerian. Another 5 percent are Moroccan and Tunisian, and arrests in Algeria this summer suggest that the GSPC may be helping funnel some of these North Africans into Iraq. In August, Algeria extradited six Moroccans who allegedly traveled to Algeria to join the GSPC network and whom police believe are linked to an Algerian operative until recently based in Syria. Ten Tunisians were arrested in Algeria on similar charges in 2004, and their fate is still being negotiated by the Algerian and Tunisian governments.

The nature of the GSPC network became clearer in July, when an Egyptian known as Yasir al-Misri (also known as Abu Jihad) was detained in Algeria on charges of using his travel agency as a front to send foreign fighters to Iraq via Syria since April 2003. The allegations against him got a boost from the announcement by Syrian police that in the first six months of 2005 they had deported 150 Algerians suspected of attempting to join the Iraqi insurgency. In September, Syria extradited an Algerian named Adil Sakir al-Mukni (also known as Yasir Abu Sayyaf) whom police suspect of facilitating the transfer of foreign jihadists into Iraq to join the Zarqawi network. Intelligence gleaned from al-Mukni may have helped break up the Moroccan cell that had traveled to Algeria this summer to join the GSPC.

Conclusion

The GSPC has become active well beyond its original base in Algeria. The most immediate threat is to Algeria's neighbors in the region, whose proximity to the center of conflict and domestic conditions make these countries vulnerable to terrorist penetration. The GSPC's cross-border activity in Mauritania demonstrates the potential for even low-intensity operations to destabilize the area. Mauritania's crackdown on Islamists before and after the June attack was a factor in the August coup against President Maaouiya Ould Taya. Disturbingly, just as the GSPC is becoming more active in the Sahel, Mauritania is scheduled to begin exporting oil in large quantities. Mauritania expects to pump 75,000 barrels per day as early as November 2005, with production increasing to 250,000 barrels

per day in the next two years (at \$60 per barrel, that would eventually be worth more than \$4 billion a year to a country with a 2004 GDP of just over \$5.5 billion).

In response to the threat in Africa, in June the U.S. military began training soldiers from nine northwest African countries in border security and counterterrorist tactics. The participants will meet again in early 2006. The Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative is designed to help prevent the GSPC and other radical groups from making further inroads across the region. The initiative is a sound first step in developing security capability in the participating countries, but its benefits will be fully realized only if the countries concerned are able to go on the offensive against the terrorists -- which, for some of the poorer countries involved, may require more direct counterterrorism assistance.

Emily Hunt is Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

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