

Countering Algerian Terror: Increased U.S. Involvement?

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Brief Analysis

U.S. assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs William Burns visited Algeria on October 25-26, just days after a new Algerian terrorist organization was added to the Treasury Department's list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT). The visit also came amid reports that several Algerian groups with al-Qaeda ties have spawned splinter groups and are gaining ground. The imminent expansion in security cooperation announced at the end of Burns' visit will constitute the strongest ties between the United States and Algeria in decades. Yet, even this expansion may not be enough.

Background: GSPC Activity

The primary terrorist threat in Algeria today is an al-Qaeda affiliate known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The group is active primarily in the provinces east of Algiers, but also has numerous financial and logistical cells that assist the al-Qaeda network throughout Europe. GSPC was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the State Department in March 2002 and placed on the Treasury Department's SDGT list in September 2003.

GSPC was formed in 1998 by approximately 700 breakaway fighters of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), a primarily "Afghan Arab" movement that became increasingly hated in Algeria for its brutal and indiscriminate violence against civilians. Since the mid-1990s, the GIA's numbers have dwindled to an estimated 100 fighters. GSPC, by contrast, has expanded to as many as 4,000 fighters due to both support from al-Qaeda and its own stated opposition to "shedding the blood of innocent people in massacres." Despite breaking its word on this latter issue, GSPC has become the dominant Islamist force in Algeria.

Although violence has diminished greatly since the peak of Algeria's civil war in the 1990s, fighting continues, and GSPC is responsible for much of it. Since the beginning of 2003, some 820 Algerians have been killed in the continuing bloodshed. The worst areas are east of Algiers, particularly in the Kabilya province, where the GSPC presence is strongest.

The most notable incident was the spring 2003 GSPC kidnapping of thirty-two foreigners (from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and the Netherlands). The kidnappers were headed by GSPC leader Amari Saifi (a.k.a. Abderrezak al-Parra). On May 13, Algerian forces recovered some of the hostages in the desert after a four-hour gun battle in which nine terrorists and one soldier were killed. Another group of foreigners, however, remained in

captivity. One German hostage eventually died from heatstroke. On August 18, Germany, with help from Libya, secured the release of the remaining hostages, whom GSPC had transferred to Algeria's neighbor Mali. According to some sources, a ransom payment was made, although the details are unconfirmed. Such a payment could have been made by Libya, which may have given money through the Gaddafi International Foundation for Charity Associations as a means of indirectly financing continued GSPC operations. The payment could also have come from Mali, with the expectation that compensation would be made by the hostages' home countries in the form of increased development aid.

In September, international media reported several battles between Algerian government and Islamist forces. In one raid, fifteen GSPC members suspected of kidnapping the Europeans were killed in hideouts east of the capital, and a significant weapons cache was uncovered. In another military offensive, intensive shelling killed a number of GSPC fighters. In October, Islamist guerrillas operating in the southern Medea region struck back. In one attack, fighters set off a bomb as a convoy drove past and then opened fire, killing eight soldiers.

GSPC has been quite active abroad as well. In 2001, seven men, along with suspected high-level al-Qaeda operative Abu Qatada, were arrested on suspicion of involvement in GSPC's "English cell." Also that year, Spanish police dismantled a six-man cell that had sent high-tech equipment and intelligence to operatives in Algeria. According to President Jose Maria Aznar Lopez, the cell had "financial connections to the terrorist organization led by bin Laden." In September 2002, two Algerians believed to be members of GSPC were arrested in Pakistan with false passports and forgery equipment. In April 2003, Dutch authorities arrested several Algerians "accused of supporting terrorist activities" carried out by GSPC. Finally, the Italian government definitively linked a high-ranking GSPC member in Milan to cadres of Ansar al-Islam, the al-Qaeda affiliate that continues to attack U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

Splintering Terrorist Groups

Algeria's terrorist groups continue to splinter and multiply. For example, the kidnapping of the European tourists constituted the announcement a new faction of GSPC. According to several reports corroborated by French and Algerian officials, Abderrezak al-Parra likely undertook the kidnapping operation without the consent of GSPC leaders, including the group's founder, Hassan Hattab. By mid-October, the Algerian and French media verified that a power struggle had indeed emerged within the group. While some reports suggest that Hattab remains in control, others claim that he has been replaced by Nabil Sahwari (a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim Mustapha). Sahwari released a statement on September 11, 2003, declaring that GSPC operated "under the direction of Mullah Omar and of the al-Qaeda organization of Usama bin Laden."

To further complicate matters, on October 20 the U.S. State Department announced another Specially Designated Global Terrorist group from Algeria known as Dhamat Houmet Daawa Salafia. This group previously operated under the name of Katibat al-Ahual (Horror squadron), a splinter of the GIA led by Mohammed Benslim. According to the State Department, the group "is well organized and equipped with military materiel, and has engaged in terrorist activity in Algeria and internationally. It is responsible for numerous killings since the mid-1990s, and has escalated its attacks in recent years." More pointedly, the statement notes that the "group has links to al-Qa'ida."

Implications

GSPC's operations in Algeria and throughout Europe are an issue of serious concern in the war on terror. Clearly, even this relatively obscure al-Qaeda subgroup has global reach. For historical reasons, however, the United States has largely left this problem in the hands of France. Even as Paris and Washington continue to exchange barbs over Iraq, perhaps Algeria can emerge as one area in the war on terror where U.S. and French interests clearly converge. It is encouraging that Algiers is eager to build a stronger relationship with Washington based on counterterrorism. Although Washington should build on this momentum (evidenced by the 2001 and 2003 meetings between

Presidents George W. Bush and Abdelaziz Bouteflika), any enhancement in military ties should be used as leverage to demand increased democratic and economic accountability and reform. State Department reports indicate that the Algerian government needs to devote more effort toward improving human rights, lifting state controls on the media, and implementing much-needed economic changes. Algerian national elections scheduled for spring 2004 represent an excellent opportunity for the United States to match its commitment to democratic development with its commitment to fighting terrorism.

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