

# Algeria's GSPC and America's 'War on Terror'

by [Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](/experts/jonathan-schanzer)

Oct 2, 2002

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jonathan Schanzer \(/experts/jonathan-schanzer\)](/experts/jonathan-schanzer)

Jonathan Schanzer, a former terrorism finance analyst at the Treasury Department, is senior vice president at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.



## Brief Analysis

Last week, intensified Islamist violence prompted Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to launch his military's largest counteroffensive against radical Islamic elements in five years. The target of this ongoing operation is the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a breakaway faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). GSPC deserves special attention in America's "war on terror" for its extensive ties to al-Qaeda and its devastating effect on Algeria.

## Background

Radical Islamic violence erupted in Algeria in 1992 when the military nullified a sweeping electoral victory for the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Led by the GIA (formed in 1993) and the armed wing of the FIS (known as the Islamic Salvation Army [AIS]), Islamists launched a ruthless campaign against the government, the military, and civilians that included school burnings, religiously motivated killings, and bombings. Their goal was to overthrow the secular Algerian government and replace it with an Islamist regime.

As the war raged, it became apparent that the majority of the Islamist combatants adhered to the rigid and utopian Salafist branch of Islam, which excludes all but one interpretation of the religion -- that revealed by the Prophet Muhammad and his "salaf," or companions. Between 1996 and 1997, Salafist violence reached its zenith. The GIA massacred thousands of Algerian civilians thought to support the regime and oppose their jihad. After a decade of violence, the death toll is estimated at 150,000.

## Enter GSPC

The massacres of 1996-1997 led to significant fragmentation among Algerian Salafists. The GSPC was formed in 1998 by Hassan Hattab (aka Abu Hamza), who left the GIA and condemned "shedding the blood of innocent people in massacres." Hattab's group rose to prominence after Bouteflika's January 2000 amnesty deadline for Islamists. Although some 5,000 AIS militants surrendered their weapons, the GSPC refused the amnesty, one of only a few groups to do so.

The GSPC began with 700 fighters, but now boasts an estimated 4,000. Its current tactics include attacks at false roadblocks and raids on military, police, and government convoys. Since January 2002, an estimated 900 people have been killed in Islamist-related violence in Algeria. Although the GSPC does not always accept responsibility for its attacks, many believe that the group is behind the majority of such operations, which have increasingly been launched in the heart of the country and its suburbs. The U.S. State Department now calls GSPC the "most effective

remaining armed group" and the "largest, most active terrorist organization" in Algeria today.

#### Ties to al-Qaeda

Before GSPC emerged in 1998, its cadres were part of the GIA. Several hundred GIA members had fought in the Afghan-Soviet war, and many of them had links of one sort or another to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda provided support to those who returned to Algeria and formed the GIA in 1993, but the GIA was by no means an al-Qaeda front; it was a separate group with which al-Qaeda felt some affinity and therefore aided.

Once established in Algeria, the GIA launched several attacks against the country's patron, France. On August 3, 1994, five French embassy officials were killed and one was injured when GIA guerrillas attacked a French compound in Algiers. In December 1994, the GIA hijacked Air France Flight 8969 and unsuccessfully attempted to blow up the Eiffel Tower. A 1995 bombing campaign attributed to the group in Paris killed seven and injured more than 100. In 1996-1997, however, the GIA was responsible for a rash of massacres in Algeria that claimed the lives of thousands and led to the group's decline; its indiscriminate tactics alienated it from the majority of Algerians and, surprisingly, from al-Qaeda.

By rejecting the GIA's brutal tactics, the GSPC attracted the financial and logistical support al-Qaeda. The Algerian *el-Khabir* newspaper has even asserted that the GSPC was created by bin Laden himself, though Algerian authorities have every reason to exaggerate such links. Nevertheless, French intelligence recently confirmed just how tightly the two groups have worked together. Moreover, the U.S. State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001* report noted that GSPC "adherents abroad appear to have largely co-opted the external networks of the GIA," including recruits, finances, false documents, and weapons. This network has helped to facilitate GSPC attacks not only in Algeria, but worldwide.

For example, the State Department has accused "Algerian extremists associated with the GSPC of planning to disrupt the Paris-Dakar Road Rally" in 2000. In addition, Italian police arrested several suspects linked to a GSPC cell in Milan on April 4, 2000, while four individuals thought to be members of a GSPC cell in France were arrested in connection with a plot to bomb a Christmas market in eastern France in 2000. The Algerian suspects implicated in the millennium bombing plot are also thought to have ties to the GSPC, although the evidence is not yet definitive.

#### GSPC after September 11

Soon after the attacks of September 11, 2001, a press release appeared in the Algerian *al-Youm* daily, allegedly penned by Hattab, threatening that the GSPC would "strike hard" at "American and European interests in Algeria if they implement their threats to attack Arab and Muslim states . . . [or] if they continue to harass [the] Islamist network in the U.S., U.K., France, and Belgium." Several days later, on September 23, 2001, President George W. Bush's Executive Order 13224 blocked the finances of the GSPC and other terrorist groups. On March 27, 2002, the group was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. government. In May 2002, the State Department documented the growing strength of the GSPC in *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2001*, noting that "civilians have been attacked" despite the group's alleged focus on government targets.

Indeed, the GSPC's global profile has expanded significantly over the past year. In late September 2001, Spanish police announced that they had dismantled an al-Qaeda cell of six Algerians belonging to the group. They were in possession of false passports and sophisticated forgery equipment. In January 2002, the *Observer* in London obtained a GSPC video imploring viewers to "kill in the name of Allah until you are killed" and to "fight all the sick unbelievers." In April, Dutch authorities arrested several Algerians accused of supporting the group's terrorist activities. Most recently, two Algerian men arrested in Pakistan on September 21 were believed to be members of the GSPC.

#### Implications

As America's "war on terror" enters its second year, the GSPC remains relatively unnoticed, despite the fact that it is among the most active of the twenty-seven groups commonly listed under the aegis of bin Laden's network. The GSPC's surge in terrorist activity is a painful reminder that even loosely affiliated and relatively obscure al-Qaeda subgroups can destabilize the Middle East, terrorize Europe, and perpetrate acts of violence around the globe.

President Bouteflika met with President Bush in November 2001, and the two leaders promised to cooperate in the fight against terrorism. But words are not enough. Algeria's GSPC has emerged as a critical arm of the al-Qaeda network that demands sustained attention in counterterror efforts worldwide.

Jonathan Schanzer is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #666

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



## BRIEF ANALYSIS

# Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

## TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)