



Islamist Terrorism in Northwestern Africa

A 'Thorn in the Neck' of
the United States?

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Front cover: A Nigerian girl walks past a wall displaying graffiti and political posters on the eve of presidential elections, April 18, 2003. Copyright AP Wide World Photos/Schalk van Zuydam.

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Introduction

AYMAN AL-ZAWAHIRI, al-Qaeda's second in command, announced a new alliance with the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in August 2006. The announcement was corroborated by a statement posted on the GSPC website soon after. This radical Algerian network is little known in the United States but is one of the top terrorist threats in the northwestern corridor of Africa that runs from Morocco to Chad, is active in continental Europe, and may even have connections to aspiring militants in North America.¹ Zawahiri's statement was little more than de facto recognition of a longstanding relationship between al-Qaeda and Algerian Islamist militants, but his announcement publicized a nascent counterterrorism challenge in northwestern Africa.

Arab North African countries were key recruitment grounds for the 1979–1989 jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Hundreds of North Africans who had participated in the Afghan conflict, known throughout the Middle East as “Afghan Arabs,” began to return to their countries of origin by the end of the 1980s. Their arrival infused burgeoning local Islamist groups, such as the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Nigerian Taliban, with an uncompromising radical outlook, coupled with a set of external connections and expertise. The political conditions underlying the rise of Islamist militancy in northwestern Africa festered throughout the 1990s, blocking a decisive resolution of local conflicts. Radical networks have since metastasized and embedded themselves deeper in society. Simultaneously, the original leadership of al-Qaeda has pursued a strategy of harnessing local groups with local grievances to the wider global jihad against the West.

This strategy's success has been demonstrated by a series of attacks in northwestern Africa and the

involvement of northwestern Africans in important acts of international terrorism, including the September 11, 2001, attacks and the 2004 Madrid train bombings. Following 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 expanding operations throughout Sahelian Africa, funneling of African volunteers to fight in the Iraq insurgency, connections in Europe, and increasingly sophisticated internet propaganda strategy are of particular concern.

The intersection of local conflicts with al-Qaeda's global ideology and technological expertise has prompted U.S. officials to focus on North Africa both as a potential target of attacks and as a safe haven or recruitment ground for terrorists intent on attacking elsewhere. 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—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. TSCTP is an ambitious program in its initial stages, and U.S. government officials are in the process of adjusting to the program's immediate needs and requirements, such as improving language ability and increasing regional specialization among analysts. In addition to these “growing pains,” the participating

1. “A Terrorist's Testimony,” testimony of Ahmed Ressay at the New York trial of co-conspirator Mokhtar Haouari in the millennium plot to bomb Los Angeles International Airport in December 1999. Available online at *Frontline: Trial of a Terrorist* (www.pbs.org). In November 2005, Canadian police dismantled an alleged Algerian terrorist cell. The leader was Brahim Bouchaib, an Algerian who had trained in explosives in al-Qaeda's Khaldun camp. Canadian authorities claimed he was a member of GSPC but did not publicize the exact connection. Bouchaib entered Canada through the United States; he was returned to U.S. border officials who plan to deport him to Algeria.

departments are focused on overcoming several key challenges in the medium term to make TSCTP an effective initiative.

This paper looks at the nature of the terrorist threat in and emanating from northwestern Africa and

addresses some of America's counterterrorism policy challenges in the region, focusing primarily on how the United States can empower local governments to confront a set of terrorists with whom American counterterrorism practitioners have had little contact.

Operating Environment

A TERRORIST GROUP'S operating environment helps determine its structure, opportunities, and modus operandi. Factors including physical and human geography as well as the domestic and international political context can significantly affect terrorists' operations directly and indirectly.

Terrorists' ability to "swim like revolutionary fish"—to paraphrase Mao Tse-Tung—within the sea of the population is crucial to their success in attacking and evading security forces.¹ Most northwestern Africans do not actively collude with militants sympathetic to al-Qaeda and have frequently shown themselves hostile to al-Qaeda's ideology and violent tactics. Terrorists of both local and international origin are on the outer fringe of society. Nevertheless, a host of geographical, political, and historical factors combine to make northwestern Africa a more hospitable environment for Islamist terrorists than suggested by the population's traditional attitude.

Physical Geography

Morocco and Algeria are at the epicenter of terrorist activity in northwestern Africa; however, the expansion of operations, exploitation of the internet, movement of people in and out of the region, and militants' growing participation in organized crime have compounded the international dimension of locally based radical networks. Morocco is acutely vulnerable to organic radical cells that flourish in the slums of important urban centers such as Casablanca and Tangier. The diversity and entrenched nature of political Islamism facilitates extremists' efforts to blend into the population, and radical cells effectively operate under the radar of the security services. An attack against civilian targets on par with the 2003 Casablanca bombings

or the 2004–2006 series of bombings in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is within the realm of possibility. Morocco's substantial tourist industry and strategic location on the Straits of Gibraltar produce a high flow of Western visitors and commerce and provide terrorists with an unusually target-rich environment.

Self-radicalizing urban terrorist cells have been less problematic in Algeria, largely because of the restrictive security environment left over from the civil war. The Algerian security services have established a tight network of informants in Algiers and other important cities and have isolated many of the most hardcore militants in the mountains outside the capital. Several risk factors suggest that Algeria's terrorism challenge may assume a more urban dimension like that of Morocco in the future,² but currently the regime's main challenge is in rural areas of northern Algeria and in parts of the southern desert. Islamic militants, led by the GSPC, have expanded into the Sahara in recent years. More aggressive counterterrorism tactics in urban areas provided an impetus for militants to explore other areas of operation, while lucrative organized criminal opportunities drew them to the desert.³ The Sahara is characterized by immense open space that facilitates illicit trade of all manner of goods. The area would be extremely difficult for even the best-trained and equipped force to police. The security forces in the Sahara region enjoy neither advantage, and terrorists are able to operate with relative impunity in the region even when police forces have the will to prevent their activity. These developments suggest that Algeria's Achilles' heel may be the thousands of miles of pipeline that connect interior oil and natural gas fields to export terminals on the Mediterranean Sea.⁴ The Algerian government effectively guarded its energy resources during the height of

1. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 93. (Orig. pub. 1937.)

2. Algerian police have already boosted security within Algiers following a double truck-bomb attack in October in Reghaia, approximately twenty miles outside Algiers. It is unusual for militants to attack so close to the capital.

3. Salima Tlemceni, "Le Cas Enigmatique de Abderrazak le Para: Revelations sur le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste," *El Watan* (Algiers), April 4, 2006.

4. Algeria has more than 2,400 miles of oil pipeline alone, and more are currently under construction. The newest natural gas discoveries are in the southern part of the country, in vast open spaces that are difficult to defend. Energy Information Administration, U.S. Department of Energy, "Country Analysis Briefs: Algeria," February 2006. Available online (www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Algeria/Background.html).

the Islamist insurgency; the incentive for the regime to continue is strong because Algeria's hydrocarbon sector provides approximately 60 percent of the government's budget revenue.⁵ Nevertheless, al-Qaeda-linked militants throughout the region have demonstrated growing determination to strike at the petroleum and natural gas industry. A significant attack or series of attacks on the pipelines running through southern Algeria cannot be ruled out.

Human Geography

The population of northwestern Africa has been geographically and culturally distant from the Middle East's defining conflicts, compared with the populations of nations at the heart of the region. North Africans tend to be more religiously moderate than their counterparts in the Gulf. The vast majority of citizens in the region do not adhere to Salafist Islam; indeed, many deliberately hold themselves apart from what they consider to be radical tendencies in the "East," including Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless the region has not been entirely insulated from trends elsewhere in the Middle East. Islamic revivalism has been on the upswing since the 1970s, and in the past two decades political Islam has become a popular vehicle of opposition to increasingly undemocratic regimes. External sponsorship of mosques, religious schools, and scholarships for locals to study religion in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran has helped conservative strands of Islam gain a foothold.⁶ This influence has been particularly evident in countries—including Mauritania and Nigeria—that lack a strong central government or have a less rigidly doctrinal tradition of Islam.

Simultaneously, the global audience and appeal of al-Qaeda's message have dramatically expanded since the September 11 attacks. This upward trend is largely attributable to propaganda of the deed; attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, London, and against

important U.S. allies around the world have emboldened many sympathizers with radical Islam. The proliferation of internet, satellite television, and mobile phone technology has facilitated al-Qaeda's propaganda efforts and contact among militants and aspirants. All told, the number of adherents to al-Qaeda's ideology has grown exponentially since the September 11 attacks. Although virulent anti-Americanism has been notably absent in North Africa traditionally, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and one-sided media coverage of American detention and interrogation policies have lent credence in the region to the al-Qaeda narrative, which seeks to portray isolated American actions as a coordinated war against Islam.⁷ Together, these trends have created a current of cultural Islamization and on the margins have increased al-Qaeda's attraction among certain segments of regional youth.

International Islamist Militancy and the GSPC

Just as external trends influence northwestern Africa's civilian population, Islamist terrorists in the region operate in the context of trends in international Islamist militancy. Radical Islamist networks have undergone a significant shift since the September 11 attacks, from a hierarchical organizational model with state sponsorship, a territorial base, and central command to a diffuse "network of networks" spread throughout the globe with no identifiable leadership. Al-Qaeda in particular has transformed from a top-down to a bottom-up organization, in which the onus for perpetrating attacks lies with local cells. Ideological indoctrination and operational formation in training camps—crucial to the success of major attacks prior to September 11—are still possible but more difficult to achieve without apprehension. Internet instruction manuals, chat rooms, and propaganda have helped fill the void. Although the internet can never fully substitute for

5. United Nations Human Development Programme, *2005 Human Development Report: International Cooperation at a Crossroads: Aid, Trade and Security in an Unequal World*. Available online (<http://hdr.undp.org>).

6. According to Moroccan intelligence officials, Shiism is spreading rapidly among North African youth primarily because it permits temporary "marriages" lasting as briefly as one day, allowing less restrictive relations between single men and women.

7. Nigeria had the most lethal riots of any Muslim country in early 2006, following the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by a Danish newspaper. Dozens of people died during the protests.

physical training, the rise of virtual jihad has democratized Islamist terrorism by facilitating the spread of violent Islamist ideology as well as the basic concepts necessary to carry out attacks. Frequently, internet radicalization provides the impetus for an individual to seek a tangible training opportunity. As the number of al-Qaeda followers has grown without the guidance of a leader, the ideology has become more flexible and less coherent, increasing its appeal to a diverse set of individuals. The combination of “do-it-yourself” radicalization and the proliferation of information about methodology and explosives construction have inspired more aspirants than ever before to participate directly in jihad.

North Africa is unusual in that several important trends in international militant Islamism have converged in the region and create an environment in which they can develop symbiotically. Together these factors create a volatile mix in which Islamism, and in some cases violent Islamist extremism, has become a powerful vehicle of political opposition.

The growth in the prevalence of local self-radicalizing cells has been particularly troublesome in Morocco but has also extended to a lesser extent to Algeria and Mauritania. In these countries, al-Qaeda’s global ideology intersects with local anger directed at undemocratic regimes that for years allowed mosques to be focal points of popular political activity. Simultaneously, al-Qaeda has recently renewed its efforts to tap into local grievances to tie them to the global jihad against the West and its Muslim-allied regimes.⁸ One of the keys to al-Qaeda’s resilience has been its ability to co-opt and exploit local, ready-made networks to its ideological and operational advantage.

Additionally, Algeria hosts one of the few long-running Islamist insurgencies in the world, which began with a local focus but by the mid-1990s had

an international network that reached as far as the United States.⁹ The case can be made that popular discontent with the Algerian regime contributed as much to the Islamic Salvation Front’s popularity as did its religio-political agenda. But the bottom line is that the “resistance” against the regime has been and continues to be fought in the name of Islam, with the goal of replacing the military regime with an Islamist state governed by sharia. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat is the latest incarnation of Islamist political violence in Algeria, and although it has a more overtly internationalist outlook than its predecessor groups, the Algerian component of GSPC’s agenda is still very much alive.

In northwestern Africa, all of these factors are developing in a mutually beneficial way. 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 GSPC’s insurgent structure to gain training that otherwise may not have been available 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 elements engage in organized crime, including armed robbery, to fund their activities; such activity compounds the difficulty of defining the terrorist threat in the region.¹⁰

Terrorist activity in northwestern Africa is now a hybrid between traditional insurgent tactics favored by the GSPC and the modern model of small urban cells with international connections that draw inspiration from a global radical ideology. The combination of localized and international Islamist militant activity has implications beyond the immediate damage and

8. In August 2006, Ayman al-Zawahiri announced an alliance with Egyptian group al-Gamaa al-Islamiya; in September 2006, he announced an alliance with the GSPC. www.siteinstitute.org.
9. Annouar Haddam, a representative of the Islamic Salvation Front and GIA, was active in Washington, D.C., during the 1990s. Haddam was invited to lecture at Georgetown University and Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, as well as at mosques around the country. Julien Lariège, *La Menace Djaz'ariste: Islamistes Algériens au Coeur de l'Europe* (Paris: Ellipses, 2005).
10. European intelligence officials note that, more than any other regional grouping, organized crime is a gateway to participation in terrorist networks for North Africans.

casualties caused by violence. Consistent small-scale attacks have a corrosive effect on the ties that bind society, create a sense of fear and mistrust among the population, and destabilize the political and economic environment. Larger-scale isolated attacks can devastate the tourist industry and discourage foreign investment. The net effect can be to hinder political opening and retard social and economic development. Even the perception that northwestern Africa has become a base for international terrorists can have detrimental political consequences and may prompt security forces to adopt a more aggressive posture vis-à-vis the popula-

tion. Over the long term, offensive counterterrorism measures, particularly in the context of an undemocratic political culture, can themselves have a radicalizing effect on the population, thus fueling the cycle of terrorism and extremism.

Security forces in the region vary in resources and competence. Those in the poorest countries may have the will to effectively combat the potential terrorist problem but lack the capability. Those from the most capable nations have spent years addressing the challenge from radical Islamists but may not be fully prepared for the terrorists' next evolutionary stage.

GSPC in Context

THE INSURGENCY in Algeria remains the most consistent source of Islamically motivated violence in the region and thus merits closer examination, particularly because of the Algerian regime's vigorous efforts to portray the insurgency as a spent force, even as militants continue to kill hundreds of people a year. Algerian government officials and external observers who dismiss the threat from the GSPC frequently make the mistake of measuring the GSPC's performance exclusively against that of its predecessor, the GIA. Compared to the GIA's attack capability and quasi-military apparatus at the height of its power, the GSPC appears weak. But focusing solely on the GSPC's insurgent structure and capacity within Algeria is unhelpfully narrow and neglects the GSPC's ability to operate in the context of the global jihad. Indeed, the GSPC is one of the few groups to effectively straddle the divide between local and international Islamist terrorism and to give equal priority to attacking both the "near" and "far" enemies. The group's dedication to its Algerian agenda has been made clear by its statements reaffirming its intention to continue waging local jihad and its refusal to surrender despite multiple offers of amnesty. Simultaneously, the GSPC has issued statements declaring its intention to attack French targets in both Europe and Iraq, has mounted several bombing attempts in France,¹ and has vocally and materially supported the Zarqawi network in Iraq

despite the unpopularity of Zarqawi's methods among the broader Algerian public. Indeed, the GSPC has actually emulated Zarqawi's innovative tactics, releasing several propaganda videos featuring the beheading of a kidnap victim.²

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 with international militant networks. The GSPC was founded in 1998 by a group of Afghan-trained Algerians who were frustrated that the GIA's extraordinarily brutal tactics had damaged the reputation of both Algerian militants and the cause for which they were fighting. This point of view was a marked change from the Algerians' international position in the early 1990s, when many international terrorists considered Algeria to be the next jihadi frontier. Indeed, Osama bin Laden is believed to have donated approximately \$40,000 to the Algerians to build their insurgent infrastructure.³ But by the late 1990s, 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 of the objectives of the GSPC's founding members, most of whom trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan,⁴ was to restore the international reputation

1. The GSPC is active throughout Europe but targets France particularly. French police have effectively thwarted GSPC attacks through intelligence cooperation with North African security services. The most significant cell to date was dismantled in September 2005, when French police thwarted a series of bombings set to occur in Paris as Algerians voted on the National Charter for Peace and Reconciliation, an amnesty program for militants, in late September of that year. Belgian and Italian police thwarted attacks in Brussels and Rome that were part of the same plot. The ringleaders of the group were Safe Bourrada, a French Algerian who had served time for involvement in the GIA's 1995 bombings of the Paris metro, and Ouassini Cherifi, a French Algerian who had been imprisoned in 2002 for providing false documents to an alleged terrorism cell. Cherifi had traveled frequently in Syria, and French investigators believe he was cooperating with the Zarqawi network to funnel Iraqi-trained terrorists to stage attacks in France. Many nongovernmental analysts remain skeptical of European militants' relationship with the Algeria-based element of the GSPC, but the Bourrada/Cherifi cell was dismantled based on intelligence from Muhammad Benyamina, a European terrorism suspect arrested in Oran, Algeria, in early September 2005, suggesting close links to Algeria.
2. Beheading is not a new tactic in the Algerian Islamist insurgency, but publicizing beheadings as propaganda is a new twist that has gained popularity in conflicts outside Iraq. See GSPC recruitment video "The Apostate's Hell—the Second Round: A Video Presentation by the Salafist Group for Call and Combat in Algeria," August 31, 2006. Available (<http://siteinstitute.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=publications207606&Category=publications&Subcategory=0>).
3. In 1993, Osama bin Laden allegedly sent Qari al-Said, an Algerian member of al-Qaeda's shura council, to meet with Islamist rebels in Algeria. Bin Laden ultimately provided approximately \$40,000 to the more radical element of the GIA that rejected a political settlement with the regime. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2006).
4. Hassan Hattab, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Abdelmalek Droukdal, and Ammar Saifi are all believed to have trained in Afghanistan. In an interview posted on the GSPC website, Belmokhtar claimed to have spent time in Khalidin and Jalalabad camps and was a lead GIA liaison to al-Qaeda when bin Laden was

of the Algerian insurgency and to bring the insurgents out of isolation so that they could work more closely with international Islamist networks.

Within Algeria the GSPC has effectively split into two main groupings of militants, one of which operates in the north and is led at least nominally by Abdelmalek Droukdal. The second is based primarily in the stretch of the Sahara desert that encompasses southern Algeria, northern Mali, and Mauritania. These two major groupings are themselves splintering further under pressure from the regime's counterterrorism campaign. The northern grouping is more geographically constrained by Algerian security forces than is the southern cell, and its activities are largely confined to Boumerdes and Tizi Ouzou.⁵ The northern grouping funds itself primarily through kidnap for ransom and armed robbery. Its members frequently set up false roadblocks to intercept civilians and occasionally Algerian soldiers, whom they rob and murder. They also periodically engage in random small-scale massacres of civilians.

The southern grouping was until recently led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, an Afghan-trained militant who, with Ammar Saifi (also known as El Para), masterminded the GSPC's exploitation of the Sahara's conducive operating environment. Belmokhtar had family connections in the region and was able to capitalize on the myriad criminal opportunities there, particularly smuggling.⁶ The southern GSPC grouping traffics cigarettes and marijuana as well as innocuous items, such as

government-subsidized household goods for resale in north-central Africa. It also engages in "Islamic policing" of traditional trade routes, demanding protection money from smugglers who use the routes and occasionally confiscating and reselling items deemed un-Islamic. These activities have led the southern grouping to travel into Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and possibly as far east as Sudan. Intelligence officials believe the southern grouping is periodically able to smuggle weapons and other materiel to the northern cell, blending in with the enormous flow of illicit goods to northern Algeria.

The southern grouping has carried out some of the GSPC's most significant attacks in recent years, although the profit motive may be as decisive as the group's dedication to its cause. In early 2003, the GSPC cell led by Saifi kidnapped thirty-two European tourists, for whom they are believed to have received a \$6 million ransom. In June 2005, several dozen GSPC-affiliated individuals attacked a military base in the region of Lemgheittey, Mauritania, killing fifteen soldiers.⁷ Most recently, GSPC smugglers killed thirteen customs officials in Ghardaia, Algeria. Belmokhtar was reportedly killed in a clash between the GSPC and an armed group in northern Mali in September 2006, although the Algerian government has not yet officially verified those reports.⁸ The potential effect of Belmokhtar's death on the structure and capabilities of the southern cell is unknown.

based in Sudan. Saifi has bragged to journalists that he is personally acquainted with al-Qaeda's top leadership and possessed Zawahiri's satellite phone number.

5. For a breakdown of GSPC attacks by region in Algeria, see Cliff Gyves and Chris Wyckoff, "Algerian Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC): An Operational Analysis," *Strategic Insights* 5, no. 8 (November 2006). Available online (www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2006/Nov/introNov06.asp).
6. Salima Tlemceni, "Le Cas Enigmatique de Abderrazak le Para: Revelations sur le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste," *El Watan* (Algiers), April 4, 2006.
7. "Algerian Islamist Group Leader Reveals Details of His Life, Military Operations," *El Watan* (Algiers), September 14, 2006.
8. According to *al-Hayat* (London), Hasan Faghgha, a Malian Tuareg leader, announced that Belmokhtar had been killed in a clash in northern Mali. His statement ignited a series of skirmishes between GSPC operatives and Tuaregs in the region that have continued through November 2006. See also "Between Tuaregs and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat: A War on Troubled Sand," *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, October 26, 2006.

GSPC'S Growing International Network

THE GSPC HAS BEEN EXPANDING its international activities, and the group's operations may have even more significant implications regionally than domestically. The GSPC has been instrumental in funneling North African insurgents to Iraq. In June 2005, the U.S. Central Command announced that up to 25 percent of suicide bombers in Iraq were of North African origin, primarily from Algeria.¹ Privately, government officials have backed away from that statistic, conceding the difficulty of conducting accurate forensic investigations in a combat zone. However, conservative estimates suggest that at least several hundred North African volunteers are in Iraq, and clearly North Africans play an important role in the insurgency as suicide bombers, foot soldiers, and occasionally mid-level commanders.² These fighters arrive in Iraq with the assistance of a robust militant network that recruits primarily in Algeria and then arranges for the volunteers to transit through Syria. The lure of fighting in Iraq does not appeal solely to Algerians. Algerian security forces have intercepted several cells of Moroccan and Tunisian men traveling to Algeria to meet recruiters, and the Syrian government has expelled hundreds of North Africans on suspicion of attempting to join the Iraq insurgency.³

In September 2005, the Syrian government deported Adil Sakir al-Mukni (also known as Yasir Abu Sayyaf) for aiding foreign fighters to enter Iraq. He is believed to be a key link between the GSPC and the Zarqawi network in Iraq and helped manage the GSPC's website,⁴ where the group has consistently issued state-

ments such as the following, supporting the activities of al-Qaeda in Iraq:

- A statement by Abdelmalek Droukdal congratulating Zarqawi on the murder of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad
- A public letter urging Zarqawi to attack French targets in Iraq
- A statement of mourning over Zarqawi's death

Al-Mukni's arrest led to the detention of a Moroccan cell traveling to Boumerdes to meet a GSPC recruiter for the Iraqi insurgency. The results of other counterterrorism raids in Algeria suggest that the recruitment effort in Algeria is highly coordinated on an international level.

- In September 2002, Algerian forces tracked and killed Imad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan, a Yemeni al-Qaeda member en route to meet then-GSPC leader Hassan Hattab near Batna in southeastern Algeria, possibly in anticipation of a potential U.S. invasion of Iraq. In December 2002, Algerian newspapers reported that the army was tracking one of Alwan's deputies in Algeria for the same purpose.
- In July 2005, the Algerian government announced the detention of an Egyptian known as Yasir al-Misri in Algiers, where he ran a travel agency as an alleged

1. Todd Pitman, "Algerian Insurgents More Active in African Deserts, US General Says," Associated Press, June 18, 2005.

2. According to Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid, approximately 600 Algerians are fighting in Iraq, constituting 20 percent of the foreign insurgents. Reuven Paz puts the number of North Africans much lower, based on tracking known deaths of insurgents. See N. Obaid and A. Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response," September 19, 2005, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C.; and Reuven Paz, "Arab Volunteers Killed in Iraq: An Analysis," *The Project for the Research of Islamist Movements Occasional Papers* 3, no. 1 (Herzliya, Israel, March 2005).

3. In July 2005, the Syrian government announced the extradition of approximately 1,300 Arabs, many of them Algerians, for attempting to join the insurgency in Iraq. This number is in addition to approximately 150 Algerians that the Syrian government had already deported. Ibrahim Humaydi, "Syria to Deport 1240 Arabs Arrested over Iraq," *al-Hayat* (London), July 21, 2005; and "Syria Said to Deport 150 Algerians Suspected of Militant Links," *al-Quds al-Arabi* (London), July 12, 2005.

4. Al-Mukni is from Skikda, a GSPC stronghold, and had been arrested several times in Algeria before moving to Syria. Muhamed al-Shafi, "Syria Deports Algerian 'Extremist,'" *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), May 23, 2005.

front for recruiting and sending North Africans to fight in the Iraq insurgency on behalf of the GSPC.

- In September 2006, an al-Qaeda suspect known as Abu al-Ham was arrested in Algiers on charges of helping the GSPC funnel Algerian men to Iraq. He routed the volunteers through Syria, where he had lived until he moved to Algiers in March 2005.

Fundraising in Europe

The GSPC's European presence is substantial, and operatives there exploit the large North African diaspora for both fundraising and recruitment. Much of the GSPC's network in Europe is based on the remnants of the GIA's web of connections based there throughout the 1990s, evidenced by the 1995 bombings of the Paris metro (which killed twelve people) and the group's affiliation with ultra-radical magazine *al-Ansar*, based in London. The conventional wisdom among nongovernmental analysts is that the European network of North African terrorists severed ties with the Algeria-based insurgency following the discrediting of the GIA in the late 1990s, and that the two sets of militants now operate essentially independently. But arrests in Europe over the past eighteen months illustrate that current GSPC operatives are consolidating and reactivating dormant GIA networks and incorporating a younger and more international set of aspiring militants. European-based operatives have leveraged the GSPC's support for the Iraq insurgency and recently announced a formal alliance with al-Qaeda to tap into the North African diaspora's anger over the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its discontent over perceived marginalization of Muslims in Europe.

The GSPC has been particularly adept at exploiting criminal fundraising opportunities in Europe. Now that the group has received al-Qaeda's official approval, international jihadist fundraising rings may also begin to direct more funds back to Algeria. The amount of money that the GSPC receives from its criminal activities in Europe is difficult to estimate. Many intelligence analysts believe the GSPC is hurting for funds; nevertheless, the GSPC may receive hundreds of thousands of dollars from Europe, and the money flow seems set

to increase. European law enforcement has dismantled numerous criminal cells that are believed to be directly linked to the GSPC in Algeria. A partial list includes the following groups:

- In May 2005, Italian police arrested two Tunisians in Milan. Hamadi Ben Abdelaziz Bouyahia and Lofti Ben Sadok were accused of recruiting North Africans to join both the Iraqi and the Algerian insurgencies. Police believe they were part of a fundraising group that had been operating in Italy for more than five years, led by a Tunisian named Lassaad Ben Mohamed Sassi, whom Italian police had tracked on his travels to Algeria to meet with GSPC operatives there.
- In November 2005, Italian police arrested three Algerians suspected of belonging to the GSPC. Yamine Bouhrama, Khaled Serai, and Mohamed Larbi were also suspected of being members of a cell led by Lounici Djamel, who was sentenced by the Italian supreme court for having provided logistical and financial support to GSPC operations in Algeria. On the basis of transcripts of phone calls, police believe that all of the suspects had connections to aspiring Islamist militants elsewhere in Europe, including Norway, France, Bosnia, and the United Kingdom. (Terrorism charges against two of the three were later dropped, but both were imprisoned on lesser charges.)
- In November and December 2005, Spanish police dismantled two separate criminal fundraising cells believed to be linked directly to the GSPC in Algeria. At least one of the groups was based in Malaga, and both were procuring funds through robbery and credit card fraud to funnel back to GSPC operatives in Algeria.
- In February 2006, Spanish and Algerian police dismantled a cell, based in both countries, that sold false travel and residence documents to illegal immigrants to Europe. The cell had been operating since 2000, and police believe that several dozen GSPC

operatives used documents produced by this cell to migrate to Europe.

- In October 2006, Italian police discovered a cell in Milan that raised funds for the GSPC in Algeria in conjunction with providing funds to other Islamist terrorists around the world. Police believe that money raised by this cell directly funded two attacks in Algeria by the GSPC—one in January 2005 in Biskra, the other in March 2005 at Chlef, which together killed eighteen people. Police were able to track \$2 million in wire transfers to illicit groups, procured from the proceeds of legal businesses the suspects operated in Italy; however, officials suspect that the actual sum transferred to terrorists is much higher than \$2 million because the suspects relied primarily on courier services, which are much more difficult to track.

Recruitment and Training

The GSPC's armed struggle to impose an Islamist regime in Algeria has lost most public support. Hundreds of GSPC members within Algeria have accepted government offers of amnesty, the most recent of which expired at the end of August 2006. Interestingly, however, the GSPC has attracted the attention of militants outside Algeria, some of whom are seeking training with the group and in some cases pursuing cooperative attack planning with GSPC members. The GSPC is most accessible to extremists in Morocco and Tunisia, and in several instances individuals from those countries have been intercepted en route to training with the group. In January 2006, Moroccan police dismantled an Islamist cell that had just returned from training with the GSPC's southern grouping in Mali.⁵ In April 2005, Algeria arrested ten Tunisians who had sought training with the GSPC and were detained on their way to the Meftah mountains to meet Droukhal. They told Algerian police that they planned to attack tourist targets in

Tunisia, and the case was serious enough to contribute to the U.S. State Department's terrorism warning for Tunisia in May 2005.⁶ In August 2006, thirty suspects were detained in Morocco on suspicion of planning attacks against government and tourist targets there. Six of the suspects were originally arrested in Algeria, and Algerian officials claim that they were attempting to contact the GSPC for explosives training.⁷

The GSPC's success in recruiting from other Sahel countries is more difficult to track, but the group appears to be active in northern Nigeria, in the former strongholds of the Nigerian Taliban. The Nigerian government has publicly stated that the GSPC has recruited young men from this area to participate in the Iraq insurgency, and U.S. government officials believe that Nigerian men have trained with GSPC operatives in mobile training camps in the Sahel region. Borno and Kano states in northern Nigeria have become breeding grounds of Islamic radicalization, facilitated by the influx of people and money from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Remnants of the Nigerian Taliban still seek to establish a state modeled on Afghanistan under the Taliban and have instigated significant violence against Nigeria's Shiite population. A few Nigerian trainees may indeed be destined for Iraq, but most appear to return to northern Nigeria where they may ultimately pose a threat to the democratic political process there.

Several cells that have sought cooperative relationships with the GSPC have been led by Europeans of North African origin. A variety of factors may motivate Europeans to look increasingly to North Africa for training and attack opportunities. The first is simply cultural roots; many young, second- and third-generation North African immigrants in Europe seek cultural authenticity and a connection to their nations of origin that they sense they cannot attain in Europe. This desire, combined with a sense of alienation and discontent over the state of Muslim integration in

5. Mohamed Boudarham, "Mueller au Maroc: Les Dessous d'une Visite," *Aujourd'hui le Maroc* (Casablanca), February 8, 2006.

6. "Reports Say 6 Tunisians Planning to Join Algeria's Islamist Insurgency Arrested," Associated Press, April 17, 2006; "Algeria, Tunisia to Discuss Handover of Detained Tunisian Islamists," BBC, July 19, 2005.

7. "Thirty Suspected Islamist Extremists Arrested in Morocco," Agence France-Presse, August 16, 2005.

Europe, particularly for residents of countries that participated in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, can create a strong attraction to Islamist militancy. On a tactical level, training opportunities in northwestern Africa are more accessible and lower risk than traveling to a combat zone. Travel to this part of Africa for business or tourism is common among European citizens and does not raise the same red flags as travel to Iraq, Pakistan, or Afghanistan—the most common destinations for terrorist training. A partial list of dismantled cells follows:

- November 2005 arrest of Mohamed Reha, a Belgian citizen of Moroccan origin, and sixteen others in Morocco on suspicion of conspiring to bomb U.S. and Jewish targets in Tangier and Essaouira, as well as the parliament in Rabat. Reha had planned for several cell members to train with the GSPC in Algeria, which was to be arranged by Khaled Abu Basir—an Algerian based in Belgium believed to be an al-Qaeda operative who was to act as a liaison between the cell and the GSPC leadership. The detainees told Moroccan authorities that the group planned to spread the jihad to neighboring countries following successful attacks in Morocco.
- January 2006 arrest in Algeria of Akil Chraibi, a French student at Montpellier of Moroccan origin. Chraibi was a member of a cell in Montpellier that had sent several young men to fight in Iraq. He was also friends with Said Baha, a student who had fought in Iraq and was later arrested in Morocco on charges of Islamic extremism. Chraibi was an engineering student who became interested in the GSPC's cause, and French police believe he began to study explosives construction before he traveled to Algeria to allegedly train further with the GSPC. Chraibi was released from prison with approximately 2,000 other suspected militants in conjunction with the amnesty offer in February 2006.
- April 2006 detention of nine suspected Islamist terrorists in Morocco, who officials believe were planning attacks on the U.S. consulate in Rabat and

targets in both France and Italy. The cell was led by a Tunisian named Mohamed Benhedi Msahel who was based in Italy at the time, but had traveled to Algeria to recruit militants. Msahel also allegedly recruited extremists in Europe to carry out operations there and in North Africa.

The opportunity to train with GSPC operatives can add an international dimension and operational depth to local radical cells that they may not have otherwise gained. From the GSPC's perspective, such interaction simply helps spread the group's network throughout the region, creating relationships that group members can call upon in future operations.

Parallel Agendas

In Ayman al-Zawahiri's interview with al-Qaeda's media organization as-Sahab, circulated on the internet on September 11, 2006, he announced a formal alliance with the GSPC:

[T]he GSPC has joined Qa'idat al-Jihad, under the blessing and mercy of Allah. We pray to Allah that this event would be a thorn in the neck of the American and French crusaders and their allies, and an arrow in the heart of the French traitors and apostates. We ask Allah to help our brothers of the GSPC to hit the foundations of the Crusader alliance, primarily their old leader the infidel United States, praise be on Allah.

The GSPC confirmed the alliance in a statement posted on its website on September 13, 2006, which affirmed the importance of solidarity among the mujahedin in the face of Western aggression against Islam. "The United States of America can only be defeated by an Islamic United States."

Together, these statements illustrate the marriage of GSPC's domestic and internationalist agenda; by uniting radical Islamists to attack American and French targets in northwestern Africa, the GSPC furthers its goal of undermining the secular Algerian regime while simultaneously damaging the interests of Western nations. The aspirational reference to an "Islamic United States" should be taken seriously despite the

GSPC's inability to achieve it in the medium term. The group's activities clearly demonstrate its ambition to spread jihadist ideology and action throughout the region. So far the group has attracted a modest num-

ber of recruits, but the GSPC in Sahelian Africa will test the United States' ability to counter an emerging terrorist threat proactively, while it is still in the initial stages of development.

TSCTP: Program Overview

THE TRANS SAHARA Counterterrorism Partnership began as an early effort to preempt the emerging Islamist terrorist threat in the region. TSCTP is a multi-agency program aimed at building counterterrorism capacity among indigenous forces in the nine participating African countries: Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. The initiative's initial focus is on making tactical improvements in counterterrorism capability, but the medium-term goal includes assisting local governments in addressing the root causes of terrorism, such as poverty and unemployment among youth populations. The State Department is the lead agency on TSCTP, charged with providing the partnership's strategic leadership and tactical coordination among the key agencies. State Department officials are also responsible for balancing TSCTP with other important State Department efforts, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's emphasis on transformational diplomacy, a series of smaller-scale targeted programs designed to build democratic political, civil, and economic institutions. The Department of Defense organizes military-to-military counterterrorism training, conducted by U.S. Special Forces based at the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) at Stuttgart, Germany. Its involvement in TSCTP is part of a broader effort by the Defense Department to increase the military capability of important African countries, which should limit the necessity for U.S. intervention in situations of civil conflict, terrorism, or genocide.¹

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) element of TSCTP is in the very beginning stages and modestly funded. Ultimately, USAID personnel hope to target humanitarian intervention toward poor populations that are prone to cooperate with suspected terrorists out of economic necessity. USAID's willingness to direct aid based partially on a security rationale is somewhat unusual compared with the agency's European counterparts, many of which refuse to consider security or other foreign policy concerns in aid allocation.² The FBI's involvement in TSCTP is also at a nebulous stage, but the Bureau's participation in training local law-enforcement personnel in intelligence gathering, preventive strategies, and forensic investigation is essential as the potential for isolated urban attacks increases. The FBI currently has strong relations with Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco, in particular, and is looking to expand its presence in Sahelian countries in the near term.

TSCTP's potential for success is high. The partnership's effectiveness in building counterterrorism cooperation depends largely on two elements—the will of recipient nations to incorporate the skills being imparted and the ability to achieve at least some consensus on the extent of the terrorist threat in a given locale. Neither of those factors is a foregone conclusion, but northwestern African nations for the most part appear enthusiastic about increased cooperation with the United States, and local governments are increasingly concerned about the possibility of violent Islamist radicals operating on their territory.

1. The anticipated 2007 budget for TSCTP is approximately \$70 million; by 2012 the budget may be up to \$500 million.
2. Alice Hills, "Trojan Horses? USAID, Counter-terrorism, and Africa's Police," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2006): 629–43.

Empowering the State Department

ENSURING THAT the State Department has the strategic lead in TSCTP in terms of both substance and publicity is currently one of the biggest obstacles to the partnership's success. State Department officials have provided very strong tactical-level coordination for most components of TSCTP. Their most important successes include securing a role in brokering or facilitating operational alliances among TSCTP participants, in some cases between nations that have coordinated very little in the past. In-country diplomatic personnel have effectively organized the activities of the military and other participating U.S. agencies and have provided thorough briefings to officials who are unfamiliar with the region. State Department personnel also oversee a series of smaller in-country efforts that fall partially under the umbrella of TSCTP. Improving domestic institutions, such as reforming the banking sector or helping foster professionalism among journalists, is part of the State Department's effort to strengthen civil society and facilitate foreign investment in the region.

Reasserting Control over TSCTP's Public Image

Room for improvement exists, however, in the strategic leadership provided by the State Department on TSCTP. One of the first steps is for the State Department to reassert control over the public image of TSCTP. To date, EUCOM's proactive publicity campaign for TSCTP has almost entirely overshadowed the State Department's responsibility to coordinate the public image of the partnership. Many journalists who have written about TSCTP seem unaware that the initiative is a multiagency effort that falls under the State Department's authority, which results in publicizing an imbalanced picture of the partnership.

Neither EUCOM nor the State Department is entirely to blame for the situation. The European Command is able to direct far more resources to its public affairs efforts regarding TSCTP and is simply more efficient at answering press enquiries. Furthermore, the

military's activities are more visible and tangible than those of other agencies involved in the partnership and therefore make better media copy. Nevertheless, the military face of the partnership that is communicated by media articles may ultimately have a detrimental effect on public support for TSCTP in the participating countries. The State Department needs to regain control of TSCTP's public image by making officials who work on it more accessible to the inquiries of media and external researchers. Restoring TSCTP's civilian face is an important step in ensuring its continued acceptance among the participants.

Coordinating TSCTP with Other Items on the U.S. Agenda

One of the State Department's most important roles in TSCTP is preventing America's counterterrorism agenda from undermining America's image in the region or derailing other initiatives, such as the promotion of political liberalization or human rights. Counterterrorism interests will be better served if efforts to build democratic institutions continue and, in conjunction with the growth of liberal civil society, political opening is gradually pushed. Promotion and advocacy of human rights is an important part of this process. America's reputation on such issues has been damaged in northwestern Africa by policies including indefinite detention in Guantanamo, the publicizing of the CIA's secret rendition program, and isolated but unfortunate incidents such as the torture scandal at Abu Ghraib.

Frequently, states that have a substantial challenge from radical Islamists or that are considered key partners in the war on terrorism appear to be given free passes on human rights and democracy issues. This appearance may be exacerbated as Islamists' electoral successes among Palestinians, Lebanese, and Egyptians dampen Washington's enthusiasm for democratization. Nevertheless, the State Department has recognized that initiatives already on the agenda, such as promoting good governance and sustainable development, can dovetail well with a counterterrorism

strategy. Northwestern Africa is a poor region, and Mali, Chad, and Niger, particularly, are characterized by some of the lowest economic indicators in the world. Economic factors never fully account for an individual's participation in a terrorist network, but among poverty-stricken populations a strong economic rationale exists for joining or cooperating with regional armed groups that can provide at least a meager salary, regular meals, and opportunities to make money through organized criminal activity. USAID and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) are central to undercutting this rationale through targeted aid that promotes economic growth and stability. The MCC recently awarded Mali a \$461 million grant to finance a major irrigation project and to expand the international airport at Bamako with a view toward strengthening the tourist industry and creating more agriculture jobs. Other northwestern African countries such as Niger are also good candidates for MCC grants, and the MCC can play a valuable role in underpinning the work of other U.S. agencies in the region.

Engaging in the Battle of Ideas

Beyond economic factors, radical Islamist ideology works very much in favor of terrorism recruitment in northwestern Africa. Therefore, evaluation of U.S. strategy is crucial in the "battle of ideas" in northwestern African nations. Although the region has traditionally been far removed from radical Islam, the proliferation of communications technology and media exposes more of the region's youth to extremist Islamism and the terrorist "narrative." Simultaneously, increased investment by Gulf nations and Iran brings money and cultural influence from core Middle Eastern states into northwestern Africa. The State Department has failed to effectively counter radical Islamist propaganda on a global scale; so, unsurprisingly, very little has been done to limit its effect within the region. But the State Department can at least acknowledge and incorporate the role of radical Islamist ideology as it assesses the terrorist threat in the region, and it can take some small steps to try to counter the cultural influence of the extremists by promoting that of

America's open society as an alternative. Such measures could include a greater emphasis on providing American cultural centers that have libraries of English books and magazines and information on the United States in countries throughout the region, as well as hosting cultural events and showing American movies. Many of these cultural centers in Africa began to close following the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania because of security concerns, and their decline or absence has left a major void in poor areas especially. In-country diplomatic personnel may also consider ways to facilitate American cultural events such as concerts and plays by prominent performers. American pop culture continues to grow in popularity in many areas of northwestern Africa, and such events are among the most effective ways of reaching out to regional youth. Furthermore, the State Department might look into providing additional U.S.-funded scholarship and cultural exchange programs to bring talented African students to the United States. Such efforts are already under way with priority countries such as Iran but could have an important effect in northwestern Africa.

Managing the U.S. Military's Image

The deployment of American Special Forces to northwestern Africa has presented in-country State Department personnel with a significant public relations challenge. Many Africans view their own militaries as repressive or corrupt and associate the U.S. military with unpopular foreign policy decisions, such as the invasion and occupation of Iraq. High-profile counterterrorism exercises risk drawing attention to developing military alliances and eliciting an emotional reaction from the population. State Department officials are aware of the need to manage the U.S. military's public image in the region, but guidelines governing the military's behavior appear inconsistent.

The protocol imposed by the Algerian military when American soldiers operate on Algerian territory may provide the best model for keeping the U.S. military's profile as low as possible. The troops are confined to the military base and restricted from visiting the towns unless attired in civilian clothing and accompanied by

an Algerian escort. Such restrictions are onerous for American soldiers but have done the job effectively in Algeria—many civilians in Tamanrasset, a town just a few kilometers from the base camp, are unaware when American soldiers are in the region. The population's ignorance of American activity is unlikely to last as American troops continue to visit southern Algeria and U.S. contractor Kellogg-Brown-Root builds a new Algerian military base near the airport, but the objective should be to limit contact between soldiers and the civilian population to the extent that it is possible.

U.S. soldiers are free to roam the towns in other participant countries, sometimes in civilian clothing, in other instances wearing their uniform and carrying a weapon. Virtually no separation occurs between the civilian population and the troops. Indeed, the arrival of U.S. soldiers in some cases draws a large crowd of townspeople who linger to watch parts of the training. The potential for the military to have an alienating effect is lower in sub-Saharan African nations such as Niger than in Arab North African nations, especially in the near term. But State Department officials recognize the potential for military training to become an irritant to the local population, and they should continue pressuring the Department of Defense to consistently evaluate methods of lowering the U.S. military's profile in the region.

Expanding and Balancing Alliances

Although TSCTP technically encompasses nine nations, the substantive participants in exercises and cooperation are Algeria, Chad, Mali, and Niger. In early 2006, State Department officials gave the military the go-ahead to restore relations with Mauritania, which had been frozen following the 2005 coup against the government of Maouiya Ould Taya. Notably, Morocco and Nigeria—two regional powerhouses that have their own local terrorism challenges—do not participate in most aspects of the partnership, although Morocco's counterterrorism alliance with the United States remains extremely close. In both cases, the State Department has significant room to exercise diplomatic leadership to better incorporate these nations into the workings and objectives of TSCTP.

The emerging U.S. counterterrorism alliance with Algeria threatens to undermine the close relations the United States has traditionally had with Morocco, a moderate regime that has been an American ally for decades. Morocco and Algeria are historic rivals, a situation not helped by Morocco's allegations that Algeria supports the separatist group Polisario in the Western Sahara. Algeria's challenges with the GSPC and other al-Qaeda-affiliated militants make it a natural counterterrorism partner for America, but Rabat is watching warily as the U.S. military cements its alliance with Morocco's powerful neighbor. The decision to locate the African Union Counterterrorism Center in Algiers in early 2006 reinforced the Moroccan government's sense that its counterterrorism partnership with America is being eclipsed. The regime continues to actively communicate its eagerness to build even closer relations with the United States. Although the new alliance with Algeria is important, the State Department could usefully continue exploring ways to engage with Morocco on all diplomatic levels to illustrate the value the United States places on the Moroccan partnership.

Second, the time may have come at least to attempt to incorporate Nigeria into the substantive elements of the partnership. Nigeria is an extraordinarily difficult operating environment because of corruption and inefficiency. However, Nigeria hosts one of the most violent separatist insurgencies in the region and has a simmering problem with radical Islamism in the northern part of the country despite the nominal disbanding of the Taliban. Northern Nigeria provides an appealing networking opportunity for the GSPC, which has allegedly already cooperated with organized criminal gangs there. European intelligence officials believe that Sudan may even be sponsoring some of the more radical Islamist groups that base themselves in northern Nigeria and have noted that some Nigerians have been recruited to train in camps in the Sahel before being reinserted into the ongoing civil conflict in northern Nigeria. Nigeria's enormous youth bulge, the GSPC's (albeit limited) presence, and the possible external funding of extremist Islam suggest that Nigeria will face a growing terrorism problem. Both Nigeria and the United States could greatly benefit from a closer partnership.

Honing the U.S. Military's Performance

THE UNITED STATES has chosen to pursue a global counterterrorism strategy that is primarily military led, and the military aspect of TSCTP is central to the initiative. The military can improve its performance in several key areas, particularly partnership building and threat assessment.

Partnership Building

From the military's perspective, one of the most important advantages of TSCTP is simply the opportunity to establish relations with militaries in the region so that connections are already in place if a crisis necessitates direct or indirect American military intervention. The relationship with Algeria is new and especially important—the United States has not had much opportunity to work with Algerian soldiers, who are secretive and still suspicious of the United States following its essential neutrality during the peak of the Islamist insurgency a decade ago. Historically, Africa has been outside the American sphere of influence, but crises in Somalia and Rwanda in the early 1990s revealed that the need for American military intervention in Africa far outstripped America's ability to competently execute a mission there.¹ European Command is in charge of forty-five African countries in addition to most of Eastern and Western Europe, a diverse area of operations in terms of the expertise required to address the wide variety of challenges that arise there. The situation will be greatly ameliorated as the establishment of a separate African command goes forward.² But regardless of whether TSCTP proceeds under the aegis of EUCOM or a new "AFRICOM," a view to building several key capabilities will help the partnership succeed.

First, linguists fluent in local languages are indispensable to any relationship-building effort. Special Forces teams are currently using French as the lead language,

but frequently the French linguists on the mission have only a mediocre capability. The military is in the process of training soldiers in Arabic, but at the current rate EUCOM will require several years before it can consistently deploy effective Arabic linguists to northwestern Africa. In the meantime, the military must make a more resolute effort to ensure that the best French linguists accompany training teams; it must also push harder to accelerate capability in Arabic and other local languages. Sophisticated language skills are, counterintuitively, not necessary during actual joint military exercises. Nevertheless, speaking Arabic with program participants from North Africa who are moving away from French influences would gain U.S. soldiers significant goodwill and would greatly improve their ability to understand the culture of the operating environment.

Expanded dialogue with the State Department on political and cultural developments in the region would further EUCOM's institutional understanding of northwestern Africa. EUCOM's leadership has so far done a very good job in using educational resources available to them, including receiving briefings from relevant government officials. However, EUCOM may be underutilizing the collective knowledge of USAID personnel. The value of input from USAID employees cannot be overstated in terms of understanding cultural sensitivities and the nuances of the operating environment. USAID puts civilian aid employees on the ground to work directly with the civilian population in the most remote locations, frequently in places from which other U.S. government officials are excluded or cannot go without a local escort. Increasing communication with USAID employees who have worked in the key locales and seeking out nongovernmental experts who have spent significant time in the region can bring important alternative perspectives as the U.S. military continues to fine-tune its activities in northwestern Africa.

1. James Jay Carafano and Nile Gardiner, "US Military Assistance for Africa: a Better Solution," The Heritage Foundation, October 15, 2003. Available online (www.heritage.org/Research/Africa/bg1697.cfm).
2. Ed Royce, "Pentagon Imperative: A Spotlight on Africa," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 14, 2006.

As EUCOM pushes its relationship-building agenda, it should also consider local perspectives on establishing connections with outsiders. Especially in the Arab countries, personnel tend to be wary, suspicious, and slow to fully trust. EUCOM's focus is on building institutional, military-to-military relations, and the structure of the U.S. military dictates that individual soldiers are constantly rotating in and out of EUCOM generally and the TSCTP mission specifically. By contrast, the militaries in Arab North Africa are far more stagnant in terms of personnel shifts, and in some cases the military leadership participating in TSCTP has been in place for decades. Institutional relationship building should be EUCOM's main goal, but it must be complemented with a recognition that regional soldiers emphasize the personal element as well. Clearly EUCOM cannot overhaul its organizational system to conform to the expectations of African militaries. But in the few instances when northwestern Africa truly captures the imagination of an American soldier, the command might consider exploring ways to provide incentives—or at least eliminate penalties—for that individual to continue doing work in the region. The near-constant rotation of soldiers is not a major obstacle, but relations with regional militaries would almost certainly progress more quickly if local troops consistently see a few of the same American faces. The additional institutional knowledge of the region provided by even just a few true experts would be an added benefit.

Understanding and Addressing the Threat

EUCOM has the capability of taking a more comprehensive approach to threat assessment in Sahelian Africa. Several independent analysts have accused EUCOM of inflating the level of terrorist activity there in order to receive more funding. This evaluation is unfair; if anything, EUCOM has understated the threat by focusing almost exclusively on the low-level physical training of terrorist recruits in the desert. Describing the Sahara as the “next Afghanistan”³

raises eyebrows and fails to fully encompass the range of terrorist activity throughout the region. It would be more helpful if EUCOM leaders wove together the myriad elements of radical activity as they plan their operations and address the media. Aspects to bring to the fore include the GSPC's ongoing attack campaign in Algeria, its efforts to recruit fighters from neighboring African countries, its operational and criminal connections to European militants, its emulation of tactics from the Iraq insurgency, and its recently announced alliance with the bin Laden wing of al-Qaeda.

EUCOM would do well to conduct more in-depth studies on key issues that would help provide a comprehensive understanding of the current and potential threat in the region. Topics may include mapping the GSPC's network in the rest of Africa, particularly relations with Nigeria and Sudan; projecting the group's aspirations on the African continent; and investigating the extent of state sponsorship of extremist Islamic schools and centers in the region and examining current or potential GSPC connections to them. EUCOM and State Department planners may also consider better exploiting resources they already have. Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian militants are extraordinarily well connected in Europe, and in contrast to many parts of Africa, the intelligence available on the nexus of North African militants there is excellent. This information should be shared and exploited strategically within the U.S. intelligence community, rather than in an ad hoc fashion. U.S. agencies are well placed to exploit the knowledge of European officials regarding terrorist networks' connections to Africa. Europe hosts important populations of Africans, has historic familiarity with key African nations, and possesses useful information on the movement of its African residents between continents.

“Getting Out Front”

One of the biggest challenges in counterterrorism campaigns is shifting from a reactive to a proactive approach. As EUCOM expands its analytical

3. At a hearing of the House International Relations Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation on March 10, 2005, Chairman Ed Royce referred to the Sahel region as potentially the next Afghanistan. EUCOM officials' analysis supports that assessment of the Sahel.

framework on regional militant activity, more extensively evaluating the *potential* evolution of the threat as well as reacting to its current manifestation would be useful to prepare for possible future scenarios. This analysis is particularly important because some regional military and law enforcement personnel seem unable or unwilling to consider the future. Algeria is the worst offender in this regard. Although the Algerian military continues to pursue aggressive counterterrorism tactics, it continues to evaluate the violence perpetrated by Islamist terrorists in the context of a decade-old framework. The Algerian military consistently minimizes the threat from the GSPC to outsiders—likely in order to reassure foreign investors that Algeria is an attractive investment environment—and seems in danger of believing its own propaganda. Although elements within the Algerian military are worried about the GSPC's escalating violence, they are not likely to have the will or the capability to create a proactive plan to limit the group's influence. The U.S. military, in cooperation with the CIA and State Department, can help fill this void. The following factors that should figure into any threat projection:

■ **The effect of the spread of the internet on radicalization and networking.** Of TSCTP participants, internet access is the most widespread in Morocco. It is no coincidence that Morocco also has the most serious problem with self-radicalizing cells in urban areas. The radical chat rooms, online jihadi literature, unrepresentative media skewed in favor of extremists, and even terrorist training manuals are increasingly available in North Africa and will eventually even reach Muslim communities south of the Sahara. Tunisia and Mauritania are vulnerable, but Algeria will probably face the most significant challenge because of its relatively modern, urbanized culture and history of vocal civil society. Greater access to the internet can play an important role in challenging undemocratic regimes because the government frequently fails to police online speech and activity. The potential also clearly exists for technology to provide a boon for regional Islamist terrorists.

■ **The effect of amnesties and prisoner releases.**

Algeria closed its most recent offer of amnesty, governed by the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, at the end of August 2006. The charter allowed militants who surrendered to be fully reintegrated into society and in some cases to benefit from government assistance in locating a job—a luxury in a society with over 20 percent unemployment. The amnesty program also mandated the release of thousands of militants from prison, including former Islamic Salvation Front second-in-command Ali Belhadj and former GIA leader Abdelhak Layada, among others. Morocco also released substantial numbers of former suspected militants from prison. According to European intelligence officials, the Moroccan regime rounded up several thousand suspects in the aftermath of the Casablanca bombing, but the number brought to trial is in the low hundreds. Some detainees were released without charge, while others are still imprisoned. Regular success in thwarting new terrorist plots has added to the ranks of incarcerated militant suspects, who themselves will likely be released eventually. It is accepted knowledge that imprisonment can have a radicalizing effect on individuals, particularly those who have been unjustly detained and those who encounter Islamist radicals while in jail. It is very possible that detention policies in Algeria, Morocco, and other countries in the region help create radicals who will eventually be released back into society, where they can more effectively spread their views among youths and others. Regional governments are opaque about their policies, but this contingency must be considered.

■ **The potential infusion of capability from the Iraq insurgency.** North African militants have played an important role in Iraq. Many young men who traveled there in the initial stages of the conflict became suicide bombers, but a contingent also has participated as insurgent foot soldiers and commanders. These men will have gained skills in urban combat that they may be able to use effectively upon return to northwestern Africa.

The U.S. military has an opportunity to substantively assist its African partners in preparing for these potential developments. One of the most important things that EUCOM can do is assess the relevant knowledge that the U.S. military has gained in other conflicts and tailor elements of its TSCTP training to impart important skills. An obvious possibility is the transfer of U.S. knowledge about improvised explosive devices that the military has gained fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. African militants have been experimenting with more-sophisticated bomb-making techniques, and African military and law enforcement personnel suffer a knowledge deficit regarding the new technology.

Another important area of focus is urban counterterrorism and counterinsurgency tactics. These are also lessons that the U.S. military has learned in Iraq, and EUCOM should assess what American tactics could be usefully imparted to North African nations in the short term and sub-Saharan nations in the future. A focus on this area would also allow the indirect broaching of respect for civilian life and adherence to international human rights standards. This will be a delicate subject everywhere, particularly in Algeria where elements of

the military feel justified in having committed appalling atrocities in their efforts to eradicate the Islamists in the 1990s. But the concepts can be introduced gradually through the illustration of protocol followed by U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cooperating with the FBI

EUCOM should not hold the monopoly in hands-on counterterrorism training, however. The line between the military and domestic law enforcement is blurred in many African nations. Unlike the United States, where the military is focused almost exclusively on external missions, African militaries are frequently at least partially responsible for domestic intelligence gathering and policing. The U.S. military is ill equipped to train African officials in the most-sophisticated domestic intelligence techniques, tactics to prevent terrorist attacks, or the investigative process following a terrorist incident. The State Department and the U.S. military recognize this void and have an opportunity to more fully incorporate both the FBI and the Department of Justice to dialogue with regional officials about internal interdiction and prosecution of terrorist suspects.

Conclusion

SAHELIAN AFRICA as a whole is not a hotbed of Islamic radicalism. But a unique mélange of international trends and local circumstances makes the region an attractive area of operations for Islamist terrorists. Locally, political Islam has already become a vehicle of protest against undemocratic regimes, giving rise to Islamically motivated political violence in Algeria, Nigeria, and Morocco that is still simmering. The global trend of Islamic revivalism and—on the extreme end of the spectrum—the metamorphosis and spread of al-Qaeda’s ideology have exacerbated local conflicts and flavored the expression of political grievances. As these developments intersect in northwestern Africa, they facilitate terrorists’ efforts to blend with the local population. One can envision a relatively small number of terrorists embedding themselves in society to the extent that the process of routing them would create as many problems as it would solve. Such a development would be problematic for the United States. Terrorism in essence is a tool of the weak against the strong. If left unchecked, a very few individuals can pose a medium-level threat to American objectives and alliances in the region, in addition to potentially undermining the development of the energy sector in key nations, including Mauritania, Nigeria, and Algeria. The prospect of a more coordinated campaign of violence led by transnational militants will test the United States’ ability to:

- Pursue a proactive, assertive counterterrorism strategy without alienating the local population
- Identify solutions that bridge the gap between local and global as effectively as the GSPC and affiliates do in their own operations
- Integrate the capabilities of U.S. agencies to address a challenge that is inherently political and ideological
- Put TSCTP in the context of the broader counterterrorism effort

These objectives are balanced against the reality that northwestern Africa, while important, should not and does not top America’s list of global counterterrorism priorities, and consequently resources for such efforts in the region are limited.

The TSCTP is a positive first step in addressing these challenges. Participating nations are keen to solidify partnerships with the United States, and the United States has a unique opportunity to shape its image in a region that has little historical familiarity or firsthand experience with America. But the Bush administration must ensure that short-term glitches or misjudgments do not create long-term problems that U.S. officials will struggle to overcome in the future.

As TSCTP activities go forward, the highest priority should be achieving the optimum balance between the activities of the State Department and the Defense Department. The U.S. military would be well advised to maintain the lowest profile possible, at least until EUCOM or the new African command can bring linguistic capabilities and cultural intelligence up to standard. As other agencies become more prominent, the military may gradually be able to expand its operations without giving the impression that the partnership is a strictly military alliance. In the meantime, EUCOM is in a position to think creatively about its relations with northwestern African countries and to tailor the training provided so that African militaries derive the maximum value from the American partnership.

Most important, the State Department has an opportunity to provide stronger political and strategic leadership of TSCTP. The most effective way to counter Islamist terrorism is through a combination of military, legal, and political means. The responsibility for coordinating these counterterrorism strands falls squarely on the State Department. Ultimately, the success of TSCTP hinges on the State Department’s ability to help African regimes constrict the terrorists’ political and strategic operating environment. This strategy will involve assisting

local governments in providing political alternatives so that radical Islam is not the sole agent of change in the region, while simultaneously promoting human rights so that the types of atrocities committed by

terrorists become anathema in the region. Although all the agencies involved must adjust and adapt as the partnership moves forward, TSCTP already has the foundations to achieve success.

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