

From GSPC to AQIM: The evolution of an Algerian Islamist terrorist group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and its implications for the Sahara-Sahel region

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I. Introduction

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Algeria's largest and most active Islamist terrorist organization, was formerly known as the *Groupe salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*, and usually referred to by its French acronym (GSPC, Salafist¹ Group for Call/Preaching and Combat). It began in the late 1990s as a splinter faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), then fighting a bloody insurgency against the Algerian military government with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. GSPC/AQIM eclipsed its predecessor and remains active not only in Algeria but also in the neighboring Sahelian states. Best known for its raids and bombings against Algerian military bases and convoys, the group has also perpetrated kidnappings of European tourists and terrorist attacks in Mauritania and Mali. It has likewise been linked to planned strikes in Europe, as well as to smuggling and human trafficking across the vast Sahara. This article will ex-

1. Salafism is an ideology or movement within Islam that harks back to the "pure" Islam of the age of the al-salaf al-salih (the Prophet's companions and immediate successors), uncorrupted by later innovations such as medieval jurisprudence and Sufism. This form of Islamic fundamentalism focuses on the classical texts and is characterized by extreme rigor. Salafism derives from writings of the thirteenth-century Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya.

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amine the transformation of the GSPC, whose stated goal was the overthrow of Algeria's long-ruling secular nationalist government, into AQIM, a participant in the global jihad allegedly committed to the destruction of the "Far Enemy."

Little known outside Algeria, the GSPC burst onto the international scene in early 2003 with the spectacular kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in Algeria's southern desert massifs. The kidnapping was resolved after the German government reportedly ransomed the hostages. But the perpetrators, led by a mysterious GSPC amir (leader) named Amari Saïfi (a.k.a. Abdelrezak El-Para²), were tracked down in a dramatic four-country chase across the desert, culminating in the capture of Saïfi in northern Chad. This joint action, reportedly given logistical support by US forces of the European Command (Eucom), was generally credited to the new Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), the first organ of the US program of securitization of the Sahel, which involved Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. Though groundwork for the PSI had begun before the kidnapping, Saïfi's daring action and the GSPC itself quickly became the principal justifications for the American initiative. Congress subsequently expanded the PSI into the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), involving nine North and West African countries, including Algeria, Ameri-

2. Saïfi was known as "El-Para" because he had served in Algeria's paratrooper corps. "Paras" are considered elite forces in armies of some Francophone African countries.

ca's new African partner in the War on Terror.³

The US and Algeria forged ahead with their securitization programs in the Sahel despite concerns that a US military presence in the region would make the security situation there worse, not better, and allegations that Saïfi might have been abetted by elements of the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS, Department of Intelligence and Security),⁴ Algeria's military intelligence agency (Johnson 2009: 7). Meanwhile, the GSPC, under another mysterious desert amir, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, appeared to be moving in the direction of "hybrid" terrorist organizations, as concerned with contraband trafficking as with anti-government resistance.⁵ By early 2007 the GSPC had morphed once again into AQIM, an Al-Qa'ida affiliate pledging loyalty to Osama bin Laden's global jihad. It will be argued that changes in the posture of the GSPC/AQIM suggest that the organization is more concerned with its own survival than with either of its previously stated goals: overthrowing the Algerian government or advancing global jihad (Filiu 2009: 223). It will also be argued that the US and Algeria have made use of and perhaps exaggerated the threat posed by GSPC/AQIM to justify their own goals: for the Americans, a military and economic foothold in Africa; for Algeria, the continued rule of its authoritarian government.

A. Background

The GSPC emerged from the civil disorder that convulsed Algeria in the 1990s when Islamist militants attempted to overthrow a secular, authoritarian government. Sometimes called "*La sale guerre*" (the dirty war), this brutal war started in 1992 and continued into the new century. Since gaining independence from France in 1962, Algeria has been dominated

3. In addition to Algeria and the four Sahelian states, the TSCTP (originally called the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative, TSCTI) embraced Senegal, Morocco, Tunisia, and Nigeria (Motlagh 2005: 1).

4. Algeria's Research & Security Directorate (DRS) is the Ministry of National Defense's main intelligence agency, responsible for internal security, counter-intelligence, and military security (Special Operations.com/Algeria).

5. University of Paris terrorism expert Xavier Raufer has discussed what he calls hybrid groups that blend crime, trafficking, and Islamism, saying that such groups flourish in areas of weak authority. He considers men like Saïfi and Belmokhtar as typical of the hybrid pattern (Katchadourian 2006).

by the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN, National Liberation Front), a political party derived from the heroic liberation movement that expelled the French after a protracted armed and popular struggle. While the FLN always had Islamic overtones, it was from the start a secular-nationalist liberation movement on the Nasser model.⁶ During the struggle to build the new independent state, Algerian Islamists fought alongside the FLN but they were marginalized by Mohammad Ahmad Ben Bella's quasi-socialist government after 1962 (Kepel 2002: 55). President Houari Boumedienne (1970-76) introduced the one-party system and also focused power within the military elite, bypassing the FLN political structure (Bothe 2008: 2). By the late 1970s, Islamists began to simmer with resentment over the FLN's secular policies and military rule. Algeria's first militant Islamist group, the Mouvement islamique armée (MIA, Armed Islamic Movement), appeared in 1982. Also known as the Bouyali Group after its founder Mustafa Bouyali, the MIA fragmented after Bouyali was killed by security forces in 1987. President Chadli Bendjedid introduced limited political reforms in October 1988 in the wake of the so called couscous riots⁷, including allowing multi-party elections (Kepel, 2002: 159-162; Botha 2008: 2, 4).

The Front islamique du salut (FIS, Islamic Salvation Front), Algeria's first official Islamic political party, was founded in 1989 after the FLN allowed, for the first time, political openings. The FIS won the municipal elections in 1990 and a majority in the first round of legislative elections in 1991.⁸ Faced with the prospect of an outright electoral victory by an already gloating FIS, a military junta seized power in early 1992. Militant factions of the FIS vowed to turn to violent means to claim what had been denied them through the electoral process (Kepel 2002: 169, 175; Darling 2004). By the early 1990s, hundreds of Algerian militants who

6. Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, leader of the Free Officers Revolution of 1952, founded a one-party, quasi-socialist state that became a model for other Arab and African post-colonial states.

7. The so-called couscous riots erupted in Algiers in 1988 due to endemic poverty and frustration with the regime's corruption, exacerbated by recent influxes of rural migrants (Kepel 2002: 159-165).

8. As is typical in Francophone Africa, the first round in an election cycle is municipal elections, which choose local governments in the communes. The FIS won control of a majority of Algeria's communes. Then follow the first round of legislative elections, in which the FIS won a majority in the National People's Assembly, carrying 188 seats to the FLN's fifteen seats.

had trained and, in some cases, fought alongside the Afghan mujahidin in their jihad against the Soviets began returning to Algeria. These Algerian “Afghans,” as they were called, usually had little actual combat experience, but they nurtured hardened Islamist ideologies.⁹ Flushed with a sense of victory, they wanted to establish an Islamic Algerian state. Some of the “Afghans” merged with the remnants of the Bouyali Group, including Qari Said, a son-in-law of Osama bin Laden and former manager of a hostel for Algerian jihadis in Peshawar (Botha 2008: 7). Said rejected the political process outright, dismissing the FLN government as apostates. Other returning “Afghans” supported the FIS, which sought reinstatement of the electoral system (Hafez 2000: 573; Filiu 2009: 214-217).

B. GIA

The armed groups rose to prominence after the military intervened in the political process in early 1992. It declared a state of emergency, deposed President Bendjedid, outlawed the FIS and imprisoned its leaders, and detained thousands of Islamic activists in Saharan concentration camps. In October 1992 leaders of armed Islamist factions convened a meeting at Tamesguida, attempting to form a united front. But after a surprise raid by security forces aborted the meeting, suspicions of infiltration by DRS double agents prevented any such unity (Hafez 2000: 574). The GIA formed in late 1992 as a loose umbrella group of certain disparate Islamist movements fighting the Algerian military for control (Darling 2004; Botha 2008: 7). Sidestepping the FIS, it soon took the lead in what became a jihad to establish an Islamic state. The GIA represented a challenge to the FIS's leadership of the Islamist movement as much as it did opposition to the government. Radical “Afghans,” such as Qari Said, were partly responsible for the polarization between the FIS and the GIA. The GIA commenced its campaign of terror in early 1993, attacking military posts, but also non-military targets, including foreigners, intellectuals, and journalists. By late 1993 the FIS regretted conceding leadership to the intransigent, extremist GIA. In July 1994 the more moderate FIS formed the Armée islamique du salut (AIS, Islamic Salvation Army) as an armed alternative to the GIA. The AIS, in its public statements, allowed for the possibility of a return to the electoral process, while the

9. Some of the Algerian “Afghans” took to sporting Afghan garb, distaining the traditional Algerian djellaba.

GIA did not (Hafez 2000: 576-577; Filiu 2009: 217).

In October 1994 Djamel Zitouni became national amir of the GIA. Zitouni concentrated more on the power struggle with the AIS than on opposition to the government.¹⁰ In January 1996 the GIA publicly declared war on the AIS, labeling them apostates also. At the same time that civil war raged between the military junta and the Islamists, another civil war was being fought between the GIA and the AIS (Hafez 2000: 579; Kepel 2002: 256, 266-267; Filiu 2009: 219). Later that year the radical Antar Zouabri became national amir of the GIA. Zouabri blamed the civilian populace for not supporting the jihad. The death toll in the conflict soared as GIA fighters concentrated their attacks on “collaborating” civilians. Zouabri issued a *fatwa* titled “The Great Demarcation,” labeling the entire Algerian people *kufir* (impious) for failing to support its campaign against “*le Pouvoir*,” the government. This hard-line policy cost the GIA both international credibility and domestic support (Kepel 2002: 255; Botha 2008: 8; Darling 2004). Prominent Arab jihadi groups, including Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), broke publicly with the GIA over their excessive resort to *takfir*¹¹ (Darling 2004). The bloodiest year of the Algerian civil war, 1997, saw over forty separate massacres of civilians, most attributed to the GIA, and the overall death toll approached an appalling 150,000 (Schanzer 2002; Hafez 2000: 580; Filiu 2009: 220).

C. GSPC

It was in this milieu that the GSPC emerged, growing out of elements of the GIA leadership, including Hassan Hattab, Shaykh Abou al-Baraa, and Saïfi/El-Para. These dissidents rejected the GIA's policy of attacking civilians, allowing only military targets. Hattab broke with the GIA in late 1996 because of the group's excesses. The AIS, also disgusted with the GIA's brutality,

10. Zitouni was also responsible for the GIA's targeting of “Crusader” France, a campaign of bombings in Paris in 1995 aimed at punishing France for aiding the Algerian junta (Guidère 2006: 2)

11. *Takfir* refers to the process of condemnation or “excommunication,” and harks back to the extreme policies of the thirteenth-century Hanbali jurist Ibn Taymiyya, whose excessive religious exclusivity had long been championed by radical Islamists. The London-based jihadist publication *Al-Ansar* repudiated Zouabri's *fatwa*. Zawahiri, in particular, cited the GIA's “dangerous deviations,” meaning its constant widening of the circle of *takfir*. Even bin Laden had condemned Zouabri's *fatwa* (Filiu 2009: 219).

declared a unilateral cease-fire with the government in October 1997, thus setting the stage for later government offers of amnesty (Botha 2008: 5). The GSPC formed in 1998, vowing to concentrate attacks on security forces, not civilians (Hafez 2000: 582-583; Filiu 2009: 220). Hattab became the new group's leader, al-Baraa its ideologue, and Saïfi, a field commander. Al-Qa'ida and bin Laden, having repudiated the GIA's anti-civilian attacks, gave their blessing to the GSPC. By 2000, though still adhering to the GIA goal of an Islamic state in Algeria, the GSPC had also verbally embraced Al-Qa'ida's ideology of global jihad (Schanzer 2002; Darling 2004; Ulph 2006: 1).

Meanwhile, the wider Islamist movement in Algeria became more moderate, accepting the electoral process and even allowing women's participation in it as well as in the economy at large (ICG 2004: 2). President Abdelaziz Bouteflika offered an amnesty to Islamist rebels in September 1999. Most groups accepted, and by the January 2000 deadline some 5,000 AIS militants had surrendered their weapons (Kepel 2002: 275; Botha 2008: 5). But the GSPC refused amnesty. By 2002 the GSPC claimed to have over 4,000 fighters and was concentrating its attacks on Algerian military convoys and bases. In September 2002 Bouteflika ordered a crackdown on the GSPC, Algeria's largest anti-Islamist operation in five years (Schanzer 2002). The Group responded with stepped-up raids, including an attack led by Saïfi on a convoy near Batna in January 2003 that killed forty-three soldiers (Katchadourian 2006; Mellah & Rivoire 2005). Despite the GSPC's new global rhetoric, Hattab remained committed to national jihad, but his leadership was challenged by rival amirs who had a more internationalist outlook, including Nabil Sahraoui, Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdelwadoud), and Saïfi. Saïfi's kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in the Tassili Massif was a challenge to Hattab (Filiu 2009: 220, n. 34). In September 2003 Hattab was deposed as GSPC leader for the more radical Sahraoui. Saïfi, meanwhile, along with Belmokhtar, was extending GSPC operations to Algeria's Sahelian neighbors.

In a global context, the GSPC's most threatening aspects were its reported links with Al-Qa'ida and the expansion of its activities beyond Algeria to Europe and to the Sahelian countries. At the time of the GSPC split, Al-Qa'ida was seeking to disassociate itself from the GIA and welcomed the GSPC because of its pledge

not to attack civilians. Amar Makhulif (a.k.a. Haydar Abu Doha), a London-based Algerian trained in Qa'ida camps in Afghanistan, had been one of the first to urge Hattab to split from the GIA. Abu Doha helped reorganize the GIA's former European networks under Qa'ida aegis with GSPC control (Keats 2003; Katchadourian 2006). US intelligence estimates suggested that there may have been as many as 800 GSPC operatives in Europe in 2006 (Motlagh 2006). By that time the GSPC had claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist actions involving the Sahelian countries, especially Mauritania and Mali, and was deeply implicated in regional smuggling and trafficking activities.

D. AQIM

Ever since the deposition of Hattab as chief amir of GSPC, the Group had been torn between the long-stated goal of overthrowing the FLN military government, or national jihad, and the appeal of the global jihad, with its focus on the Far Enemy. The US invasion of Iraq in early 2003 intensified this debate. Hattab's ouster in favor of Nabil Sahraoui in August 2003 was a victory for the "internationalists" within the Group. While Hattab had denied any link with Al-Qa'ida, Sahraoui declared his support for brother jihadis in other countries, from Chechnya to the Philippines (Filiu 2009: 220). However, before he could accomplish much in this regard, Sahraoui was gunned down by security forces in a shoot-out in June 2004 (Black 2009). Four months later Droukdel became amir, also boasting internationalist credentials.¹² The US invasion of Iraq became a major recruiting tool for the global jihad. Indeed, Iraq brought the GSPC and other national resistance jihads in line with Al-Qa'ida. It allowed the Group to recruit young would-be jihadis who wanted to fight in Iraq. While many were actually funneled there, many others stayed and joined the GSPC, which helped compensate for the depletion of recruits due to Bouteflika's amnesties¹³ (Filiu 2009: 221). The apparent success of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) was the

12. To signal his internationalist credentials, Droukdel chose as his *kunya* (symbolic paternity) Abu Mussab, the same kunya as Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi and Abu Musab al-Suri, two leading supporters of the global jihad and Al-Qa'ida (Filiu 2009: 221) (see notes 17-18).

13. Amnesties offered by the Algerian government to Islamist fighters included the February 1995 Law of Clemency (*rahma*); the June 1999 Law of Reconciliation, offered months after Bouteflika took office; and the August 2005 Charter for Peace and Reconciliation.

catalyst for the GSPC merger with bin Laden (Guidère 2006). Gradually Droukdel began to echo political statements of Al-Qa'ida, Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of AQI. GSPC-Qa'ida links grew as the Group funneled activists from other North African countries to Iraq. Droukdel's expansion of GSPC activities into the Sahara-Sahel region, including access to contraband and human trafficking routes, facilitated the funneling of militants to Iraq, while at the same time boosting his global posture (Filiu 2009: 222).

In June of 2005, one year after Droukdel assumed leadership, GSPC fighters attacked a Mauritanian military barracks at Lemghiti in the far north of the country, killing fifteen soldiers. Led by Belmokhtar, the raid was part of a larger GSPC offensive that killed more than forty military personnel in Mauritania and Algeria. This offensive was commended by Qa'ida affiliates on jihadi Web sites (Guidère 2006; Botha 2008: 24). At this time Al-Qa'ida began its vetting of the GSPC, part of a process through which militant organizations are accepted into their global network (McGregor 2006; Motlagh 2005). Droukdel vowed to adopt Qa'ida tactics and hit foreign targets. Between January and October of 2006 the GSPC carried out over 199 attacks, most of them deadly and most against military targets. On September 11, 2006, the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Zawahiri announced the GSPC merger with Al-Qa'ida (Guidère 2006). The Group endeared itself to Al-Qa'ida in three ways: 1) it refused national reconciliation, 2) it targeted personnel of outside powers, including France, and 3) it was operating beyond its borders, especially in Mali and Mauritania (Filiu 2009: 223). In late 2006, GSPC declared its intention to strike Western targets, and Droukdel pledged allegiance to bin Laden. He cemented his pledge with an attack near Algiers, targeting a bus carrying foreign employees of the US firm Brown, Root, and Condor. In January of 2007 the GSPC was formally integrated into Al-Qa'ida, adopting the name "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) (Filiu 2009: 223; U.S. National Counterterrorism Center 2009).

GSPC's merger with Al-Qa'ida had several consequences. First, it weakened the government's amnesty process, especially the National Charter for Peace and Reconciliation, adopted in 2005 (Guidère 2006). Second, AQIM began to adopt Qa'ida tactics as promised, including suicide bombings, heretofore not known in Algeria (Botha 2008: 20), and propaganda videos. The

tactics of the Iraqi insurgency served as models in this regard (Guidère 2006). Third, it began a new offensive that included an attack in March of 2007 on a Russian contracting firm and a double suicide attack on April 11, 2007, against Algiers police stations. This attack, AQIM's first suicide bombing, involved vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) (Stewart & Burton 2009). In December 2007 a truck bombing of UN headquarters in Algiers left thirty-seven dead. AQIM meant the offensive to please its new patrons, showcase its new Qa'ida-like tactics, and highlight its resolve to hit foreign targets (Filiu 2009: 223-224; Botha 2008: 20).¹⁴

The evolution from GSPC to AQIM was now complete. But this evolution affected the security situation in the broader Sahara-Sahel region in unexpected ways. First, GSPC's evolution appears to have had as much to do with ensuring its own survival as it did with advancing either the national jihad or the global jihad. Specifically, the Group became distracted from its goal of overthrowing the Algerian government as a result of its expansion into the Sahara-Sahel region and its resort to contraband trafficking and ransom demands. Second, AQIM ultimately turned away from global jihad because of its inability to abandon the concept of national jihad and because of its relative lack of success in its global program. Additionally, we shall see that both the US and its new partner Algeria made convenient use of, and perhaps even exaggerated, the danger posed by GSPC/AQIM to advance their own agendas. For the Americans, this agenda comprised launching and prosecuting the TSCTP, as well as creating its new Africa command (Africom), thus insinuating themselves into the military and economic affairs of several West and North African countries. Many of these countries have significant petroleum reserves. For the Algerians, the agenda appears to have been to ensure regime survival through the continued denial of meaningful elections and the systematic infiltration and possible abetting of GSPC/AQIM.

II. GSPC/AQIM in the Sahara-Sahel Region

The transformations of the GSPC/AQIM at first glance

14. Droukdel even called for the liberation of Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish enclaves on the Moroccan coast dating from the seventeenth century, thus echoing Zawahiri's call for the liberation of Andalusia (Filiu 2009: 224).

seem to reflect what scholars of jihadist salafism¹⁵ would call a shift from focus on the Near Enemy to the Far Enemy. The Near Enemy refers to waging jihad against local national governments, be they secular-nationalist, such as Algeria, or putatively Islamist but collaborating with the West, such as Saudi Arabia. Until the rise of Al-Qa'ida, most jihad movements had Near Enemy focus. The Far Enemy refers to directing the thrust of Islamist resistance against the United States and Israel. The idea is that the collaborating Middle Eastern regimes cannot be defeated until their Western patrons have been knocked out of the fight (Lacey 2008: 32).¹⁶ The general failure of national jihads in the 1990s in countries like Algeria and Egypt convinced most militants to return to negotiations and the electoral process. Others chose to continue the armed struggle by switching focus to the Far Enemy (Lacey 2008: 21).¹⁷ The evolution of the GSPC into AQIM appears to fit this pattern. A closer examination, however, suggests that this evolution may have been motivated more by group survival than by outside ideological considerations. Besides the differences in name and rhetoric and the introduction of new tactics, including suicide bombings, the major changes in the Group's posture included its expansion into the Sahara-Sahel region and its drift into contraband and trafficking.

A. Expansion into the Sahara-Sahel Region

By "Sahara-Sahel region" I mean the Saharan portions of Algeria and the four Sahelian states solicited by the

15. See note 1. The Salafist package is described by the Syrian global jihadist Abu Musab al-Suri in his Islamic jihad manifesto. Al-Suri's elements include 1) America as the successor to Britain in the Arab world, 2) anti-Saudi rhetoric, 3) the idea that anything after the second Islamic century, the age of the salaf al-salih, is innovation (*bida*), 4) the caliphal ideal.

16. Elements of the concept of Far Enemy emerged in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the revolutionaries' view, the Near Enemy, the Shah, had already been defeated, so their focus was to now be directed against the US and Israel, in their terminology, "Great Satan" and "Little Satan." The concept was further developed by bin Laden and Zawahiri, supported by ideologues like Abu Musab al-Suri (see note 12).

17. Abu Musab al-Suri, who lived in Algeria during the 1990s, says that the failure of the Algerian jihad turned him towards the necessity of global jihad. He describes how the Far Enemy (the US) supports the Near Enemy (hypocritical Arab governments like Algeria's).

American Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI), Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. The GSPC/AQIM is the only organized jihadist group that has operated in all four Sahelian countries (ICG 2005a: 7). The countries most affected by the Group's activities were Mali and Mauritania. Terrorist-type activities attributed to the GSPC first occurred in Mali in early 2002 (Whitelaw 2005). Thirteen deaths were blamed on clashes involving GSPC *razzias* (camelry raids) in Mali near the Niger border in the Kidal Region, the scene of the bloody Tuareg Rebellion of 1990-95. In January 2004 reported GSPC activity near Léré, by the right angle border with Mauritania, disrupted the Paris-Dakar rally, forcing it to alter its route (Le Vine 2007: 92). The GSPC expanded from its original base in the hinterlands of Algiers into the Algerian Sahara and northern Mali partly because it was pushed out of northern Algeria by security forces (ICG 2005a: 7). This pressure would likely have intensified by September 2002, when President Bouteflika cracked down on the militants. The two GSPC amirs most readily associated with the Group's early operations in Mali are Belmokhtar and Saïfi.

The GSPC's presence in Mali attracted international attention in early 2003 when thirty-two European tourists, mostly Germans, were kidnapped near Ilizi, an oasis town in eastern Algeria near the Libyan border. This kidnapping convinced the US to support the Algerian government's war on terrorists and to focus attention on the hitherto largely ignored Sahara. The hostages were seized under the leadership of Saïfi (Katchadourian 2006). The first group of hostages was freed in Algeria in May 2003, but the second group was taken across the Malian border and held until August (Mellah & Rivoire 2005).¹⁸ They were released to Malian authorities amid rumors that the Germans had paid a €5 million ransom (Katchadourian 2006; Le Vine 2007: 91). The incident revealed that the GSPC could operate with relative impunity in the desert regions of northern Mali, and had probably been doing so for some time. Presumably using ransom money, Saïfi subsequently purchased arms in Northern Mali, a region awash in weapons since the end of the Tuareg insurgency. He was taking the arms back to Algeria in early 2004 to rearm GSPC fighters when his convoys were detected by US satellite surveillance and attacked by military forces of both Algeria and Mali. Some of the arms were recovered in Southern Algeria, but the joint

18. One German woman hostage died in Algeria, reportedly of heatstroke, and was buried there.

military action touched off running battles through Algeria, Mali, Niger, and finally Chad between Saïfi and his followers and the security forces of the four countries (Harmon 2008: 400-401). Chadian government forces, with US logistical support, stopped the fleeing militants in a two-day battle in March, killing forty-three.¹⁹ Shortly after the battle in Chad, Saïfi and some fifty of his followers were detained by a secular rebel group called the Chadian Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJT), which had been fighting the regime of Chadian President Idriss Déby since 1998 (Katchadourian 2006).²⁰ After holding Saïfi for several months, the MDJT, with diplomatic help from Libya, handed him over to Algeria, where he was sentenced to life in prison at a semi-secret trial.

The GSPC maintained a similarly limited presence in Mauritania. The government of President Maaouya Ould Taya, overthrown in a bloodless coup in August 2005, regularly released reports of arrests of suspected GSPC activists in Mauritania. Some of these arrests of Islamists were carried out in the sweeps that followed three earlier coup attempts against the Ould Taya regime, in 2003-2004 (U.S. Department of State 2006: 1). One such report mentioned some twenty Mauritanians who trained in a guerilla camp in southern Algeria, location undisclosed.²¹ Seven of these were arrested on their return to Mauritania in May 2005 and charged with plotting acts of terror (Ulph 2005). While some Mauritanian Islamists supported the coup of 2005, links between them and the GSPC, like those of the Islamists arrested earlier, remain unclear. As in the case of Mali, there was only one documented case of GSPC activity in Mauritania, the raid on Lemghiti, a remote military outpost in the extreme northeast of the country, on June 6, 2005. This raid, led by Belmokhtar, resulted in fifteen Mauritanian soldiers killed and seventeen wounded. The GSPC claimed responsibility. Some observers are skeptical about the extent of GSPC

activity in Mauritania, suggesting that the unpopular Ould Taya may have exaggerated links between his political opposition and the GSPC in order to attract aid from the US through the Pan Sahel Initiative (PSI) and the TSCTI, discussed below. There is an odd juxtaposition of events here, as the raid on Lemghiti occurred just five days before the first contingent of US marines landed in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital, as part of Operation Flintlock, the opening phase of the TSCTP (U.S. Department of State 2006: 1). These US troops arrived amid popular protests on the streets of the city. Two months later, Ould Taya was overthrown. Yet the timing of these events does not prove a connection between GSPC activity and opposition to the regime. Islamism seems to be a recent development in Mauritania, a country more typically associated with Sufi brotherhoods. Besides, opposition to Ould Taya seems to have had more to do with popular discontent over his pro-US and pro-Israel policies²² than with Islamism (Harmon 2008: 407; McGregor 2005).

Mauritanian political instability has continued since 2005. The junta leaders who overthrew Ould Taya appointed a transitional government under Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall.²³ Mohamed Vall held elections as promised in late 2006 and early 2007, the first proper multi-party elections in the country's history. Yet another coup occurred in August 2008, led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. After continued instability, Abdel Aziz was elected as a civilian president in July 2009. Throughout this period of instability, GSPC/AQIM terrorist attacks continued, many led by Belmokhtar. In December 2007 four French tourists were murdered in a brutal attack that forced the cancellation of the Paris-Dakar Rally. In February 2008 the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott was raked with gunfire, indicating continued resentment over Mauritania's diplomatic relations with the Jewish state (Filiu 2009: 224; Johnson 2009: 7). In November 2009 three Spanish humanitarian workers were kidnapped en route from Nouadhibou to Nouakchott (Badiane 2009: 1). Yet, as in 2005, it remains unclear to what extent these incidents were connected with the country's ongoing political instability.

19. Some of the dead fighters were reportedly from Niger, Nigeria, and Mali, indicating the GSPC's ability to recruit in the Sahelian countries (Katchadourian 2006). A riveting day-by-day account of these running battles is given by Keenan (2009).

20. This admittedly difficult-to-believe episode occurred after Saïfi and his men attempted to surrender to the MDJT fighter, assuming that they were fellow jihadis.

21. There is no firm evidence of GSPC training camps in the Sahara; however, Anneli Botha (2008: 25-26) makes reference to "mobile" training camps run by the Group in desert areas of Mali and Niger.

22. Mauritania opened diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999, one of only a few Arab states to do so. These relations were subsequently severed in 2009.

23. The successful coup was led by Vall with the support of a military junta called the Military Council of Justice and Democracy.

B. Smuggling

An alternate analysis of GSPC/AQIM's Saharan expansion notes the Group's involvement in smuggling of arms, cigarettes, and other contraband, as well as human trafficking, all practices that are widespread in the unpoliced desert region (Leao 2005: 33; ICG 2005a: 18). Routes carrying people, weapons, drugs, and especially tobacco cross the Sahara to Europe, typically directed by Tuareg nomads using SUVs and cell phones (Wilson 2009). Major Holly Silkman, public affairs officer of Eucom, has said that trafficking in arms, drugs, and people, along with poverty and unemployment, create "potential for instability" in the Sahara-Sahel region (Motlagh 2005: 2). Indeed, the political instability associated with such practices is one of the things that first attracted US interest in the region. Perhaps the most lucrative single contraband commodity in the region is tobacco. Cigarettes pass in containers through the northern Mauritanian town of Zerouate to Kidal in Mali. From there they go by smaller trucks to Algeria and thence to Europe, entering untaxed through Italy (ICG 2005a: 18). Journalist Kate Wilson claims that cigarette smuggling²⁴ "has provided the bulk of financing for AQIM" (Wilson 2009). Links between smuggling and Islamist terrorism go back to the early years of the GIA. Mourad Si Ahmed (a.k.a. Djafar al-Afghani), first of the GIA's chief amirs, had formerly been a contraband trader (Kepel 2002: 263). This smuggling connection grew in 2000 as Hattab expanded the GSPC to include Saharan "outlaw" networks. But Hattab, an "Algerianist,"²⁵ was reluctant to access fully the Saharan smuggling routes. It was Droukdel, an "internationalist," who took full advantage of the smuggling networks, thereby enhancing his global stature, though the arch-smuggler among the Islamist militants of the Sahara was Belmokhtar (Filiu 2009: 222).

Belmokhtar, described by Wilson as the "lead smuggler," was nicknamed "untouchable" by French intelligence in 2002. He was from Ghardaïa in the northern Sahara on the main route from Algiers to the south and the oil fields. He trained in Afghanistan in 1991 and returned to Algeria to join the GIA in 1992

24. The leading cigarette brands along the smuggling routes appear to be Marlboro and Gauloises.

25. An Algerianist was an Algerian militant who chose to focus on national jihad, as opposed to an "internationalist," who would focus on global jihad.

at age twenty. Having followed Hattab to the GSPC in 2000, he was given the lead in the Group's southern zone and ordered to concentrate on weapons procurement.²⁶ Belmokhtar used cigarette smuggling to raise money to purchase arms. He smuggled cigarettes himself and taxed other smugglers, earning another nickname, Mister Marlboro (Black 2009).²⁷ Smuggling and contraband continue to be major activities of AQIM operatives. A Reuters news release of January 2010 implies, without convincing proof, that AQIM smugglers are involved in airborne contraband drug trafficking in cocaine. This cocaine is allegedly procured via the FARC in Colombia and flown on "outlaw" jets to West Africa for transit to Europe along AQIM's Saharan smuggling networks (Reuters 2010). In what may be some corroboration of these allegations, the BBC reported that in 2009 an EU delegation held talks in Algiers with Algerian officials about Saharan drug trafficking. The report cites EU concern about drugs destined for European consumers transiting through Africa, with heroin coming from Kenya, and cocaine coming from West Africa, allegedly converging in the Sahara (Ilias 2009). Furthermore, in December of 2009, US federal prosecutors announced the arrests in Mali of three Malians by DEA agents. Posing as FARC smugglers, the agents arranged with the Malians to transport cocaine across the Sahara for transshipment to Europe. The indictment stated that the Malians alleged that they had paid AQIM to provide protection for earlier such shipments (Volman & Zoubir 2010: 24). As for Belmokhtar, as late as April 2009 he was still procuring arms for AQIM. He has reportedly taken Tuareg wives in northern Mali and "woven himself into the fabric of the region" (Black 2009).

In this analysis, the GSPC/AQIM, at least in its Sa-

26. Recall that, after the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s, weapons remained easily accessible in northern Mali.

27. By 2006, as the GSPC was preparing to merge with Al-Qa'ida, Belmokhtar was focusing on smuggling and arms trafficking more than on Islamic struggle (Black 2009; McGregor 2006: 2). US intelligence believed him to be recruiting Islamists in northern Mali, and the Defense Department considered an air strike against him, though the evidence for his smuggling and trafficking activities was more conclusive. Vicki Huddleston, former US ambassador to Mali, said that Belmokhtar was supporting the Kunta Arabs and their smuggling activities, not terrorists, and she convinced the DOD to call off its considered strike (Katchadourian 2006). The Kunta Arabs are an ethnic group of the Sahara that claim descent from Arabs, not Tuaregs, and who were involved in the regional unrest at the time of the Tuareg rebellion of the previous decade (Harmon 2008: 410).

haran operations, would qualify as a “hybrid group,” involved in crime, trafficking, and Islamist insurgency, and flourishing in areas of weak authority.²⁸ Other examples of hybrid groups, according to Wilson, would be Colombia’s FARC and the Taliban. Numerous observers have noted GSPC involvement in smuggling and trafficking, citing especially Belmokhtar. Yet Belmokhtar is also a bona fide Islamist insurgent, having trained with the mujahidin in Afghanistan in the early 1990s and led raids against Algerian and Mauritanian military targets.²⁹ The question that remains to be answered as AQIM moves into its second decade of organized Islamist struggle is which side of the Group will become more important, the jihad side or the contraband trafficking side.

C. Failure of Global Jihad

By the end of the 1990s, Algerian security forces had largely contained the Islamist threat. Key leaders had been killed or captured, and most jihadis were conceding defeat and laying down their arms (Gerges 2005: 131). The government organized elections and Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected president. Shortly after taking office, Bouteflika held a referendum on the “*Concorde Civile*,” an agreement that amounted to a national amnesty bill, which Algerian voters approved in September 1999. The Islamists knew they were defeated and most accepted reconciliation. Thousands of fighters appealed for amnesty, surrendering their arms (Kepel 2002: 274-275; Aggad 2005: 1; Botha 2008: 5). The majority of Algeria’s Islamists turned away from the GIA’s radical vision for more accommodationist tactics. They abandoned the Islamic state and accepted women’s roles beyond nurturing. Meanwhile, Algerian society as a whole did not seem to rally to the banner of armed struggle, preferring to vote in elections in 1995, 1996, and 1997, and supporting state-armed civilian self-defense militias in large numbers. Only the die-hard jihadist salafis like the GSPC were still pursuing armed rebellion. Eventually, sparse local support would force the Group to move into the Sahara and turn to trafficking for material wherewithal, and to external jihad networks such as Al-Qa’ida for legitimacy (ICG 2004: 2). This legitimacy would come at the cost

28. See note 5.

29. Saïfi also fits this hybrid pattern. He and his followers were smuggling arms from Mali into Southern Algeria when they were detected, leading to their pursuit and capture (Harmon 2008: 401).

of the Group’s acceptance of global jihad. However, as we shall see, the Group’s embrace of global jihad could not change the domestic political situation—armed struggle had failed, as it had in Egypt, and salafis would have to return to the political process. Nonetheless, the GSPC still had an estimated 4,000 fighters in 2002, and attacks on military convoys and bases continued (ICG 2004: 2; Schanzer 2002).

There had always been a certain degree of tension between national jihad and global jihad in the Algerian Islamist movement. The “Afghans” were inspired by global jihad because of their experience in Pakistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the GIA’s self-proclaimed goal had always been “jihad in Algeria.” Jean-Pierre Filiu addresses this issue, saying “the national framework of the armed struggle was explicit” (Filiu 2009: 218). This same tension between national vs. global jihad continued under the GSPC/AQIM. Hassan Hattab, for example, was an Algerianist, focused on national jihad. With the death of Antar Zouabri at the hands of security forces in February 2002, the GIA falling apart, and the AIS long gone, Hattab preferred to retrench and concentrate on the GSPC’s Kabilia strongholds in the mountains east of Algiers. However, Hattab’s Algerian strategy was challenged by other amirs with a more global outlook, including Sahraoui, Droukdel, and Saïfi. Saïfi’s kidnapping of the thirty-two hostages in early 2003 can be seen, therefore, as a direct challenge to Hattab’s national jihad approach (Filiu 2009: 217-220). Hattab was deposed in 2003 by the internationalists in favor of the more globally oriented Sahraoui (Darling 2004).

Besides expansion into the Sahara and the Saharan reaches of the Sahelian states, especially Mali and Mauritania, the GSPC’s claim of global jihad manifested itself in two ways: outreach to Islamist organizations in neighboring Maghreb states, and attacks on foreigners, including tourists, and on foreign installations. The GSPC’s linkage with militant Islamist groups in neighboring North African states appeared to be leading to the creation of a true regional jihadi network. The main organizations with which GSPC built links included the *Groupe islamique combattant tunisien* (GICT, Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group) the *Groupe islamique combattant marocain* (GICM, Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group),³⁰ and the Libyan

30. The GICM has been linked to the Madrid bombings of 2004, and the GICT gained international notoriety because it had recruited the suicide bombers that killed Northern Alliance leader

Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Some of these groups already had links to the global jihad. The LIFG, for example, was founded in 1995 largely by Libyans who had trained and/or fought in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater during the Afghan jihad against the Soviets (Filiu 2009: 223; Roggio 2007). The GSPC's links with these neighboring national jihad movements enhanced the Group's global credentials. Militants from Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and even Mauritania began to pass through the GSPC's organization en route to Iraq, where some became suicide bombers. Eucom officials estimated in 2006 that up to one-fourth of the foreign fighters captured in Iraq were from Africa, most from countries that make up the Sahara-Sahelian region (Gearon 2006: 24). These recruits often entered Algeria through the Saharan smuggling and human trafficking routes, making these routes a key asset of the GSPC (Filiu 2009: 222). By 2006, the LIFG, along with the GICM and the CICT, had loosely merged with the GSPC, creating what appeared to be a genuine regional network linked to the global jihad, supplying fighters for the "front" in Iraq (Roggio 2007).

Attacks on foreign targets, including attacks on foreign installations beyond Algeria's borders and on foreign interests within Algeria, were also manifestations of the GSPC's global jihad. One of the first such attacks was the raid on the Lemghiti army barracks in Mauritania in June 2005. Second was the December 2006 attack near Algiers on a bus carrying foreign employees of Brown, Root, and Condor, which killed the Algerian driver and wounded six foreigners, including four Britons. The third incident was the March 2007 attack by AQIM on the Russian contractor Stroytransgaz, which killed one Russian and three Algerians. The attack on Brown and Root, a Halliburton subsidiary, had been meant to show solidarity with Iraq, as the attack on the Russian firm was intended to show solidarity with Chechnya (Filiu 2009: 223). Next was the devastating bombing of UN headquarters in Algiers in December 2007. In 2008 came the February gunfire attack on the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott, the June murder of a French engineer and his Algerian driver in Boumerdes just east of Algiers, and the August bombing of a bus, which killed twelve local employees of a Canadian aid organization. While these attacks allowed GSPC/AQIM to claim that it was attacking foreign targets, in reality most of the victims were Al-

Ahmad Shah Massed in the Punisher Valley in September of 2001, one day before the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington

gerians (Filiu 2009: 222-224).

Meanwhile, the tide continued to turn against armed struggle in the name of an Islamic state. In September 2005 Algerians voted in a referendum to back a new government amnesty program for Islamist rebels. The yes vote on the government's Charter of National Reconciliation and Peace officially ended more than a decade of civil war. However, once again, the GSPC rejected the offer, leaving it the only armed salafist group still fighting (Aggad 2005: 1, 5). The amnesty took effect in March 2006, and despite official rejection by the Group, many GSPC fighters took advantage of it, including three high-ranking leaders who surrendered to Algerian authorities in June. By mid 2006 the GSPC was losing much of its remaining influence in Algeria, and even Hattab, who had accepted an earlier amnesty offer and was in custody, was urging his former comrades to lay down their arms (McGregor 2006; Ulph 2006).

By the time that GSPC officially became AQIM, global jihad in Algeria had failed. Inroads into the Sahara had been significant, and had raised alarm among US policy makers, but they appeared to have more to do with kidnappings for ransom and contraband trafficking than with global jihad. The Maghrebian terror network composed of national jihad groups from several North African countries under AQIM aegis appeared effective, but that connection too would soon unravel (Daragahi 2009). The Group could not, except for its Saharan Brigade,³¹ attack effectively beyond Algeria's borders. Initiatives undertaken by the internationalist wing of GSPC/AQIM did not succeed in integrating the Algerian Islamist movement into the global jihad. Nor did they succeed in slowing the prevailing trend among Algerian Muslims away from armed jihad altogether, a trend that had manifested itself in a series of publicly supported amnesties and the surrender of thousands of fighters. In effect, global jihad in Algeria meant local suicide bombings backed by internationalist rhetoric. Despite such rhetoric the Group remained focused on its strongholds in Kabylia and on its Saharan support groups (Filiu 2009: 225-226). AQIM remains an Algeria-based phenomenon, with little linkage with the other Maghrebian armed Islamist groups, while its attacks in Mali and Mauritania are unsophisticated, though at times deadly

31. In late 2007 AQIM's Saharan force was renamed the Tarq bin Ziyad Brigade after the Arab amir who led the Moorish conquest of Spain beginning in 711 A.D.

(Stewart & Burton 2009). Nonetheless, the attempt by the GSPC/AQIM to turn global and embrace the campaign against the Far Enemy, especially the thrust into the Sahelian countries, did succeed in one respect: It got the attention of American Global War on Terror (GWOT) warriors and led to a massive securitization program in the region.

III. US and Algerian Securitization Initiatives

Daniel Volman, an African security analyst, lists the primary US interests in Africa as 1) opening a new front in the GWOT, 2) gaining access to Africa's energy supplies, and 3) competing with China for access to Africa's resources (Volman 2008: 37). The Cheney report³² of May 2001 called for increasing American attention to the development of and access to Africa's oil supplies in order to reduce dependence on Middle East oil (Klare & Volman 2006: 612). Algeria is Africa's third largest oil producer, behind Libya and Nigeria, and the US is the largest foreign investor in Algeria's hydrocarbon sector. Most of Algeria's oil is produced in its Saharan southern regions (Zoubir 2009: 982-983). Therefore, it is evident that the US interests in Africa in general and in the Maghreb and its Saharan extension in particular revolve around oil and security, two major concerns of the George W. Bush administration even before the events of 9/11. Both the US and Algeria have undertaken extensive securitization initiatives in the Sahara-Sahel region since 9/11. However, as we shall see, the motives behind these initiatives appear to reflect concerns other than security alone.

A. US Security Goals in the Sahara-Sahel Region

Needless to say, after 9/11 the security element of America's interests in Africa became even more important. President Bush met with President Bouteflika in November 2001 to discuss their countries' cooperation in the fight against terrorism. The Bush administration placed the GSPC on a list of terrorist groups in 2002 (Schanzer 2002). In October 2002 an American counter-terrorism team visited the Sahelian countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad to invite them to participate in the proposed Pan Sahel

32. National Energy Policy Statement released in May 2001 by the National Energy Policy Development Group (NEPDG) chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney.

Initiative (PSI), intended to counter GSPC threats in the region (Katchadourian 2006). The two main goals of the PSI were strengthening the Sahelian states' capacity to fight terrorist organizations and preventing terrorist groups from establishing bases in the region like those Al-Qa'ida had established in Afghanistan in the late 1990s (Zoubir 2009: 989). Though not officially part of the PSI, Algeria, as the home base of the GSPC, was enlisted as a partner in the American anti-terror effort in the region. The kidnapping of the thirty-two hostages by GSPC amir Saïfi in February and March of 2003 convinced the US to work with Algeria's military government against Saharan terrorism. Although the groundwork for the PSI had begun in October 2002, prior to the kidnapping, it was Saïfi's activities that provided the US Defense Department's central justification for expanding American military presence in the Sahel (Mellah & Rivoire 2005; Katchadourian 2006).

Administered by Eucom, the PSI called for military and logistic aid to the four Sahelian governments and deployment of US Special Operations Forces (SOF) personnel to train regional military units in counterinsurgency and contraband interdiction (Klare & Volman 2006: 618). In August 2003, just after Saïfi released the last of his European hostages, General Charles Wald called the defense chiefs of the four targeted nations to a meeting at Eucom headquarters in Stuttgart to discuss implementation of the PSI. The training programs were completed by early 2004 (Zoubir 2009: 990). The subsequent pursuit of Saïfi and his men, beginning in January 2004 in Algeria and continuing across Mali and Niger to his ultimate capture in Chad in March, was hailed as the first success of the PSI. Reportedly, anti-terrorism military units of all four Sahelian countries, trained by US special operations forces, participated in the chase.³³ Originally funded at \$7.5 million, Congress expanded the PSI's budget to \$125 million. Indeed, right after the defeat of Saïfi by Chadian troops, General Wald and other Eucom officials began campaigning for a larger program, the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSCPT). Public Affairs Officer Maj. Holly Silkman de-

33. US and Algerian forces may have also participated in the action against the GSPC band. There were reports that US P-3 Orion naval aircraft, operating out of an Algerian airbase at Tamanrasset in southern Algeria, provided intelligence to Chadian troops and that two US C-130 Hercules transports dispatched on very short notice from Ramstein AFB to airlift supplies to the Chadian forces as they closed in on Saïfi (Katchadourian 2006; Zoubir 2009: 982).

scribed the Sahara as the “Wild West all over again.” Major-General Thomas Csrnko saw the possibility of Al-Qa'ida establishing training camps in the Sahara, and other Eucom officials suggested that fighters from Saharan countries training in Iraq might transit back to North Africa to teach their newly learned techniques to recruits there (Motlagh 2005). As a result of such lobbying, Congress promised funding of \$500 million for the TSCTP and broadened its scope to involve not only the original four PSI countries but also Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, and Senegal (Katchadourian 2006; McGregor 2006). Still justified primarily by the GSPC threat, the TSCTP began operations in June 2005 with Operation Flintlock, providing anti-insurgency training to special units of the armies of seven regional countries (Motlagh 2005). Operation Flintlock's goals were to 1) coordinate security along Saharan borders, 2) strengthen patrols in ungoverned territories, and 3) prevent the establishment of terrorist bases or sanctuaries. It was reprised twice, in mid 2007 and in late 2008 (Motlagh 2005; Zoubir 2009: 990; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 9).

Before the second round of Operation Flintlock had begun, however, the next phase of the American securitization initiative in Africa was already under way, the development of an independent Africa command (Africom). Africom was created in February 2007, ostensibly to combat the rise of AQIM. The new command was to be composed of military and civilian personnel, including officers of the Department of State and USAID. In July 2007 General William “Kip” Ward, an African-American four star general, was appointed chief of Africom. In October Africom was established as a sub-unified command under Eucom. Despite its stated purpose, Africom will also allow the pursuit of three alternate objectives: 1) deploying troops to African trouble spots as needed, 2) training of counterinsurgency and contraband interdiction units in friendly countries who are willing to act as American surrogates in the GWOT, and 3) implementing State Department development objectives. On October 1, 2008, Africom became a fully operational command; however, the new command has had to operate as a section of Eucom out of Germany because, as of early 2010, no African country has agreed to host its headquarters (Roggio 2007; Volman 2008: 37, 38; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 11).

None of these American securitization initiatives—not

the PSI, nor the TSCTP, nor Africom—would have been justifiable on the basis of energy concerns or rivalry with China alone. Defense Department lobbyists needed a credible terrorist threat to pry hundreds of millions of dollars from Congress for these programs. The GSPC/AQIM provided just the right incentive to make these African security organs seem necessary. A question remains as to whether the terror threat posed by GSPC/AQIM to the region was sufficient to warrant the funding and deployment of these initiatives, or whether the US exaggerated the seriousness of the threat to justify its securitization initiatives. One of the first documents to question the seriousness of the terrorist threat posed by the GSPC was the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) report of 2005. This report argued that, while the problems of contraband, human trafficking, and porous borders, exacerbated by endemic poverty and underdevelopment, added up to a potentially threatening mix, the level of terrorist activity was actually relatively low. The report also argued that Islam in the Sahel has traditionally been of a moderate, tolerant variety and that the region does not have a history of Islamist extremism (see Harmon 2008: 397). It concluded that the PSI's focus solely on military capacity, ignoring the region's endemic poverty and weak institutional structures, was not the most effective approach. The report expressed hope that the TSCTP, amplified as it was by economic measures, might be more effective (ICG 2005a: 35). Yahia Zoubir, a Sahel expert at the Euromed School of Management, echoes these sentiments, saying that US securitization programs in the Sahel have focused on “visible problems” of terrorism, human trafficking, illegal migration, and criminal networks, not on the underlying roots of these problems: poverty, underdevelopment, and joblessness (Zoubir 2009: 977). Regardless of the programs' focus, it is clear that the dangers of terrorist attacks and of the establishment of terrorist bases in the Sahel is not as great as Eucom's alarmist spokesmen had claimed. Therefore, it appears likely that the other two stated US interests in Africa, the availability of energy supplies and competing with China for access to Africa's resources, are also important motives of the securitization initiatives.

B. Algeria's Security Goals in the Sahara-Sahel Region

Some observers feel that regional governments, es-

pecially in Mauritania and Algeria, may have also overstated the GSPC/AQIM threat in order to win the support of the Bush administration in its GWOT. Critics of the former Mauritanian government of President Ould Taya repeatedly accused him of invoking the GSPC threat as cover for cracking down on political opponents, some of whom were moderate Islamists with few clear GSPC links. ICG analysts claimed in 2005 that Ould Taya jailed and harassed hundreds of opponents saying they were linked to GSPC, and that he was using the threat of terrorism to deny human rights (ICG 2005b: 4; Motlagh 2006). In spite of Ould Taya's attempts to associate GSPC terrorism with his political opposition, the best known GSPC attack in Mauritania, the raid on Lemghiti in June 2005, may have had more to do with smuggling and trafficking than with overthrowing the government. It occurred in the remote northeast astride established cigarette and arms smuggling routes between Zerouate and Kidal, and it was led by Belmokhtar, better known as a smuggler than as a GSPC amir (McGregor 2006).

In the case of Algeria, the government, especially the DRS, has been accused of exaggerating the link between the GSPC/AQIM and Al-Qa'ida in order to convince the US to provide logistical and political support to its military-led government (McGregor 2006). The establishment seems to be more concerned with its own survival than with either structural reform or ending Islamist violence. The state of emergency instituted at the time of the internal coup of 1992, which was clearly motivated by regime survival, is still in place, despite the fact that terrorist attacks are way down from their peak in the mid 1990s. Notwithstanding some bright spots, such as a relatively free press, Algeria's government remains authoritarian, as do all the governments of the *Union du Maghreb arabe* (UMA, Maghreb Arab Union), yet the regime takes pains to pass itself off as meeting minimum democratic standards, while holding itself up as the protector of Europe from attacks from North Africa-based terrorists. Algeria's brand of authoritarianism is what observers call "electoral authoritarianism," which means managed multi-party elections in which the so-called "opposition" parties are allowed to contest elections, but only after they have been co-opted by petro dollars (Zoubir 2009: 979). It also means periodic manipulation of the constitution to suit party needs. For example, in November 2008 Parliament approved a constitutional amendment abolishing presidential term limits to facilitate

Bouteflika's re-election after he had already served his two constitutionally allowed five-year terms. Thus, the institutional façade of democracy preserves what is in effect a single-party, president-for-life system, like the Nasserite model on which the FLN was based. Algeria's authoritarian regime also receives external support, as both the US and the EU appear to have concluded that it is preferable to maintain relations with an authoritarian government, provided it makes cosmetic democratic reforms, than to allow Islamists to come to power, even if they win elections (Zoubir 2009: 978, 980). It was, we recall, this very attitude that started Algeria down the path of jihad and counterinsurgency back in the early 1990s.

The reality is that poverty and joblessness are fueling jihadism in the Maghreb. Again, little has changed since the early 1990s. One of the reasons for endemic regional poverty is that the Maghrebian states have a poor record of intraregional trade and virtually no intraregional trade agreements. Such artificial hindrances to the free flow of regional trade help create a climate for smuggling and corruption (Zoubir 2009: 978-981). Authoritarian measures, including the state of emergency, remain in place despite the fact that outside observers such as the ICG no longer recognized the GSPC/AQIM as a threat to Algerian state security as early as 2005, the year that Operation Flintlock began (ICG 2005a: 1). The Algerian government also appeared to regard the threat as receding, as it offered another of its amnesty programs that year, the National Reconciliation of 2005. Under its terms the government freed some 2,200 jailed Islamists beginning in February 2006 (Motlagh 2006; Zoubir 2009: 980).

As recently as 2009, journalists and other regional observers continued to question the level of danger posed by AQIM in the Sahel. Some of these critics even question whether US support for regional authoritarian leaders, such as Bouteflika and Ould Taya, may actually do more to provoke an Islamist threat than combat one. Scott Johnson, writing in *Newsweek*, notes that "the violence in the region bears few similarities to large-scale Qaeda operations elsewhere." Citing US military officials, he adds, "Western institutions have largely been spared, and there's no flow of money between the Sahel and other Qaeda cells." He continues, saying that Qa'ida militants in other theaters are "united by dreams regional or of global domination."

By contrast he says, quoting Vijay Prashad, a regional expert at Trinity College, Sahel terrorists have “no global ambitions. They don’t even seem to have local ambitions. They’ve devolved into a gang.” Johnson goes on to suggest the US military presence in the region “may actually attract jihadists to a region where few now exist.” Supporting this suggestion, he quotes Yahia Zoubir, saying, “If you treat it from a solely security perspective, you’re producing more jihadists” (Johnson 2009: 7).

Some commentators have gone so far as to imply that Algeria may even be acquiescing to incidents of AQIM terror, or worse, actually be abetting militants so that the government can use the resulting insecurity as an excuse to maintain power. Similar implications surfaced during the civil war. Terrorism expert Mohammed Hafez analyzes accusations raised in the late 1990s that the regime, or rogue elements within it, including the so-called Patriot militias, may have acquiesced to or even participated in massacres of civilians in order to discredit the GIA during the height of the violence. Hafez discounts these claims, saying that the preponderance of evidence points to the militants as responsible for the killings (Hafez 2000: 580-581). One thing does appear to be certain: The regime—rather, the DRS—systematically infiltrated militant groups throughout the period under discussion. This infiltration goes back as far as the 1980s during the Afghan jihad. One reason that few Algerian “Afghans” actually saw combat against the Soviets was that Osama bin Laden suspected that they were infiltrated by Algerian security forces (Filiu 2009: 214). Suspicions of government infiltration of militant groups emerged again in 1992 after the failed Tamesguida unity conference, mentioned above. Infiltration was likewise believed to be rampant during the massacres of 1996-98, contributing to suspicions of regime complicity.³⁴ Indeed, Hafez claims that “elements within the regime” were regularly accused of either complicity in or acquiescence of the massacres, and that the accusers included amnestied Islamists, Algerian opposition leaders, and international organizations (Hafez 2000: 574, 580). As recently as 2005, Al-Qa’ida Central is believed to have delayed acceptance of the GSPC merger due to concerns over DRS infiltration (McGregor 2006). The case for regime complicity is weak, resting on hearsay

34. Gilles Kepel says that there were allegations that Amir Jamal Zitouni’s bombing campaign in France in 1995 may have been “manipulated” by Algerian special services (Kepel 2002: 266-267).

and innuendo, much of it emanating from enemies.³⁵ The case for regime acquiescence is likewise thin, though perhaps more plausible than the case for complicity. The evidence for systematic, even excessive infiltration of militant organizations by the regime, however, is strong and pervasive. Such evidence contributes to the notion that the Algerian government is making use of Islamist militancy to justify its own heavy-handedness and continuance in power and to garner US political and monetary support for its role as America’s African partner in the GWOT.

IV. Conclusion

The future of the AQIM threat is unclear. As recently as 2006 it appeared to be receding for at least two reasons. First, Algerians seemed to be withdrawing their support from the GSPC, as they did from the GIA in the mid 1990s. Most Algerian Islamists turned away from the Group’s militancy toward more accommodationist tactics, evidenced by the fact that most Islamist rebels, including former GSPC leader Hattab, accepted government amnesty offers. Second, Algerian security forces had arrested or killed important GSPC leaders, including Saïfi, Sahraoui, ideologue Abu al-Baraa, and Abu Bilal al-Albani, believed to be Belmokhtar’s liaison with the Kabylia leadership. Algerian government reports suggested that the GSPC was confined to the southern part of the country and that Belmokhtar, amir of the Saharan Brigade, was again concentrating on smuggling (McGregor 2006).

AQIM terrorist attacks have continued, especially in the Sahara in both Mali and Mauritania, but also in Algeria. These incidents have included attacks on Algerian security posts, attacks on foreigners and foreign installations, and kidnappings of Europeans. Attacks on Algerian security posts include a June 2009 ambush by AQIM in which twenty Algerian gendarmes were killed (Thurston 2009) and the deadliest attack of all, on August 19, 2008, when a VBIED attack on job applicants waiting in line at a Les Issers police station

35. Keenan (2009), levels the most damning accusations against the regime regarding complicity in terrorism, building a case that the DRS was complicit in the mercurial Saïfi’s 2003 kidnapping of the thirty-two Europeans. While he raises significant questions regarding odd behavior and positioning of the security forces during and after the incident and riddles the official explanations with holes, he nonetheless fails to convince. Instead of proving complicity in the kidnapping, he appears to challenge the reader to prove a negative, that the regime was not complicit.

east of Algiers killed forty-eight and wounded forty-five (Stewart & Burton 2009).³⁶ Attacks on foreigners and foreign installations include the June 23, 2009, shooting of American humanitarian worker Christopher Leggett in Nouakchott and the suicide bombing of the French Embassy on August 8, 2009, also in Nouakchott (Badiane 2009: 2). Kidnappings of Europeans include the February 2008 kidnapping by the Saharan Brigade of two Austrian tourists in southern Tunisia (Guitta 2008). More Europeans were seized between December 2008 and May 2009, including UN workers and tourists. British tourist Edwin Dyer was kidnapped along with three other hostages in southern Algeria on January 22, 2009. The others were released, but Dyer was held, mostly in Mali, until he was beheaded on May 31 after a second ransom deadline had passed. AQIM operations in Mauritania continued into late 2009 when three Spanish humanitarian workers were seized, and a French hostage Pierre Cammatte was seized in Mali in November but released in February 2010 after a prisoner exchange was completed (Badiane 2009: 2; Thurston 2009; BBC News 2010).

Malian security forces went on the offensive in February 2009, capturing an AQIM base near the Algerian border and killing two dozen militants. AQIM responded in July, attacking a desert patrol in the far north and killing nearly a dozen Malian soldiers (Thurston 2009). Alex Thurston says that two factors are generating AQIM violence: lawlessness in the Sahara and the ongoing political crisis in Algeria. He notes that virtually none of the root causes of the violence of the 1990s Algerian civil war have been addressed. Meanwhile, Algeria is moving ahead with a new securitization initiative that included an August 2009 meeting at Tamanrasset, where Algerian military commanders and those of the Sahelian countries discussed coordinated strategy, including the formation of a unified military command to thwart AQIM activities in the Sahel (Nacer 2009: 2; Volman & Zoubir 2010: 19). At the same time, President Bouteflika was said to be considering a new offer of amnesty. Mali, for its part, seemed to be opting for a show of force, including the capture of the AQIM base. Thurston suggests that such

36. Further complicating matters, in 2008 Tuareg rebels again started making trouble for the Malian military in the country's northern Kidal Region, a center of the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s. The Alliance, the main Tuareg militant group, seems to be hostile to AQIM as well as to the Malian government, so it is unclear how their activities will affect the security situation in the Sahara (Guitta 2008).

a two-pronged strategy may be a good way to address the two countries' respective problems, political crisis in Algeria and lawlessness in Mali (Thurston 2009).

All the while, many observers insist that the danger of terrorism in the Sahel is overblown. Scott Johnson notes that in the Sahara there are no training camps, no madrassas full of radical devotees from which to recruit, no Deoband-type Islamist ideology,³⁷ only indigenous Sufi brotherhoods, and that most Sahelian people condemn the violence of the extremists. Johnson adds that there is no money flowing in from or out to Qa'ida cells (Johnson 2009: 2). Jean-Pierre Filiu claims that in Algeria, AQIM has failed to turn the people away from accommodation with the regime and back to jihad, and it has failed to internationalize its movement. Despite its global claims, its struggle remains a national one. For example, it has not been able to hold on to the Maghrebian jihad network that it tried to build in 2006-2007 (Filiu 2009: 224-225). The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) announced its own direct alliance with Al-Qa'ida in November 2007 in a display of independence from AQIM (Roggio 2007). By 2009 AQIM was down to about 1,000 fighters, and contraband trafficking had become a bigger problem than terrorism in the Sahel (USNCTC 2009; Zoubir 2009: 992). Furthermore, in a stunning reversal of Al-Qa'ida's fortunes in North Africa, LIFG announced in December of 2009 that it was renouncing Qa'ida violence altogether and reconciling with the Kadafi government (Daragahi 2009).

The future of US involvement in the Sahara-Sahel region and more broadly in Africa also remains unclear. The Obama administration appears to be following in the footsteps of the Bush administration in its securitization and militarization of the continent. For example, the Obama administration appears to be strengthening the US-Algeria partnership. Current US policy is that Algeria will take the lead in the region in undermining AQIM so that the US can avoid conspicuous responsibility. Algeria has indicated that it is willing to play this role, as it demonstrated in calling the August 2009 meeting in Tamanrasset to discuss coordinated military action among its Sahelian neighbors. In addition, the Obama administration announced in October of 2009 the delivery of a new security assistance pack-

37. Deobandi Islamist ideology derives from the nineteenth-century madrasa Dar al-Ulum at Deoband in northern India. It is rampant in Pakistan and Afghanistan, underlying the radicalism of the Taliban and many Pakistani Islamist movements.

age to Mali consisting of Land Cruiser pickup trucks, replacement parts, uniforms, and communications equipment. The purpose of this aid package, provided under the Counter-Terrorism Train and Equip (CTTE) Program, is to enhance internal security and border control. It is intended to help Mali deal with AQIM activities. Yet there appears to be no guarantee that Mali will not use such equipment against Tuareg insurgents, as it has done in the past. Meanwhile, the Obama administration still lists AQIM activity as the main reason for continued US involvement in the Sahel, while the TSCTP, backed by Africom, remains the focal point of US efforts against AQIM (Volman & Zoubir 2010: 19). Indeed, Obama appears to be expanding US military activity further in Africa than his predecessor did. In December 2009 the US confirmed that it is considering creating a 1,000-man marine rapid deployment force for Africom for intervention in African hot-spots. This increasing reliance on militarization comes despite the fact that US military aid in Africa ties the US to what are often repressive, unstable, and undemocratic regimes. Obama claims that such military aid is in conjunction with non-military activities meant to address the underlying issues of poverty and corruption. Yet the civil aid thrust in Africa has been weakened over the past several years by chronic underfunding for DOS and USAID, leaving military assistance, such as the CTTE Program, the only viable approach. So Obama relies on military aid, despite the risk that it may ultimately exacerbate regional security problems (Volman n.d.: 2-3).

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, AQIM is again declining in military effectiveness both in Algeria and the Sahel. The Group continues to mount small-scale attacks, especially kidnappings for ransom, and to expand its contraband trafficking. Anneli Botha adds that AQIM no longer poses a threat to the Algerian government, but it can disrupt the security of the country and alienate foreign interests (Botha 2009: 32). Meanwhile, the FLN is still in power in Algeria, and the Obama administration is still going ahead with Africom and other military programs. Therefore, the current situation appears to bear out the arguments advanced in the introduction. First, AQIM is more concerned with its own survival than with either overthrowing the Algerian government or advancing the global jihad, having failed in both of these goals. Second, the US and Algeria have exaggerated the level of terrorist threat posed by GSPC/AQIM

in order to pursue their own security agendas. In addition to security, these agendas include, for the Americans, a military and economic foothold in North and West Africa, especially in oil-producing states, and for Algeria, the continued rule of its authoritarian government.

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