

# The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: *Expansion in the Sahel and Challenges from Within Jihadist Circles*

By Camille Tawil



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**THE AL QAEDA ORGANIZATION IN  
THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB:**

**EXPANSION IN THE SAHEL AND  
CHALLENGES FROM WITHIN JIHADIST  
CIRCLES**



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## Executive Summary

January 2010 marked the three-year anniversary of the merger between the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French acronym GSPC-*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*) and al-Qaeda central. The GSPC became the official wing of al-Qaeda in North Africa, under the title Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), after a two-year period in which this newly-launched organization seemed to be busy organizing spectacular suicide terrorist attacks against primarily government targets in Algeria, there was suddenly a lull in the major attacks in the third year of AQIM's existence. This was also combined with a glaring lack of visibility of the group's *amir*, Abdelmalek Droukdel (commonly referred to by his nom de guerre Abu Musab al-Wadoud), who did not appear at all in 2009 on any video recording, leading to speculations both inside of Algeria and out that he may be injured or ill. Droukdel released a statement on what he believed was the behalf of Nigerian Muslims in early February 2010. In a message to Nigerian media regarding a recent outbreak of Christian-Muslim violence in the flashpoint city of Jos in central Nigeria, a writer claiming to be the AQIM chief said, "We are ready to train your people in weapons, and give you whatever support we can in men, arms and munitions to enable you to defend our people in Nigeria," and continued "You are not alone in this test. The hearts of Mujahideen are in pain over your troubles and desire to help you as much as possible."<sup>1</sup> The statement, sent via email to several Nigerian newspapers, has not been corroborated as was not accompanied by any video or audio purporting to be Droukdel.

Apart from kidnapping Westerners in the Sahara between the Maghreb and the Sahel region, and a handful of attacks launched in Mauritania in 2009, AQIM seemed to have failed in its attempts to expand its theater of operations to the rest of the Arab countries that make up the Maghreb, a region that consists of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania. Perhaps, the major setback which AQIM faced in 2009 was not only its inability to launch attacks outside its centre of operations in Algeria, but rather the *muraja'at*, or the Corrective Studies, issued during the past summer by the imprisoned leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in Libya. In these Corrective Studies, the imprisoned leaders of the LIFG not only distanced themselves from Al-Qaeda, in effect denying the reported merger that was announced in November 2007 by Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Libi, they went as far as denouncing the indiscriminate killings carried out in al-Qaeda's name and refuting the core logic upon which al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups justify their fight against the Arab and Muslim regimes. Nonetheless, the LIFG's Corrective Studies seemed to agree with al-Qaeda on the need to engage in jihad in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine – places both groups consider as Muslim lands occupied by foreign troops.

This paper will try to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by AQIM in the whole of the Maghreb during 2009 with particular comparison to the previous few years. In doing so, this paper will take into account the activities of AQIM in some – but not all – of the Saharan countries known as the Sahel region. This article will refer to AQIM's activities in Mali, Niger and Chad, or the northern Sahel, a region seen as an integral part of the Southern Zone of AQIM, despite the fact that it lies geographically

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<sup>1</sup> Rafiu Oriyomi, "Nigerian Muslims Snub Al-Qaeda, Urge Caution," *Islamonline.net*, February 2, 2010, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article\\_C&cid=1264250001578&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1264250001578&pagename=Zone-English-News/NWELayout).

outside the traditional Arab Maghreb. I will conclude with an attempt to foresee what trends AQIM will assume over the course of this coming year.

## Key Findings

- Throughout 2009, Algeria remained the operational center of gravity for AQIM. Its leadership continued to operate there, specifically in the Central Zone, east of the capital, Algiers. AQIM appears to have suffered from having lost some of its prominent commanders in clashes with the government forces over the past two years. This loss may have affected the way AQIM operates, as seen from the lack of any more martyrdom operations in 2009. The noticeable absence of these operations may have been the result of marked success achieved by Algerian security forces that were able to dismantle the cells that carried out the series of suicide attacks during 2007. But this could also have been the result of religious reasoning from within AQIM – the group's leadership may have been studying the religious criticism it faced by many Islamic scholars when it carried out its martyrdom-suicide attacks in 2007 and 2008. A resumption of such a method of attacks throughout this next year will indicate whether AQIM has accepted or rejected the arguments for or against carrying out suicide attacks. AQIM's leader would also need to emerge from the shadows. His absence during the whole of 2009 may be justified on the basis of security needs. But if Droukdel's visible absence continues for the rest 2010, then questions will be asked and speculation will gather more momentum as to whether the AQIM *amir* has been toppled, ill, injured, or even killed.
- AQIM may attempt to further its gains this year in the western regions of Algeria. Its attack in Tipaza, in July 2009, was its first operation in the Western Zone. It shall be interesting to see whether this will lead to a confrontation with the *Humat Al-Da'wa* group, or whether the latter will submit to AQIM's advance and merge with it.
- The biggest successes for AQIM in 2009 were the brazen kidnappings it carried out in Mauritania and across the wider Sahel. These kidnappings are a very profitable business for AQIM, as they generate funds from the sizeable ransoms paid to free their unfortunate Western hostages. The more money AQIM receives from these activities, the larger the reserve from which it can draw to acquire more weapons. This vicious cycle is one that will surely lead to more attacks across the Maghreb. There is a danger that many young Muslims across the region who may be attracted to global jihadi ideology may simply think of AQIM as a rogue criminal organization which merely seeks to gain from illegal activities such as kidnapping tourists, a practice that many see as not properly justified from an Islamist point of view.
- The release of the Corrective Studies, issued by the LIFG in Libya, is gaining momentum. These studies are important because they come from leaders who are widely respected by the jihadists themselves across North Africa. These studies are also worth a closer look because they challenge the ideas and ideology of al-Qaeda and similar organizations, by making it entirely impermissible to fight Arab regimes, whatever the justification may be. This conclusion will be a direct threat, mainly to AQIM, which will be asked to justify its fight against the regimes across the Maghreb from a religious point of view. Both al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have yet to refute the LIFG *muraja'at*, or concur with it. Sooner or later they will have to, and then a better judgment on the importance of the Corrective Studies can be interpreted.

## The Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb: Expansion in the Sahel and Challenges from Within Jihadist Circles

### Algeria

In the past several years, Algeria has again been the epicenter of AQIM's activities. Throughout 2009, a continuation of the struggle that has been raging for years to topple the regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika continued. However, it has not gone unnoticed that 2009 was one of the quietest in Algeria in terms of political and Islamist violence in recent years, despite the fact that this Islamic group has been able to mount countless deadly attacks in many provinces across this oil and gas rich North African country. Despite the loss of life that was the result of many of these attacks, only two of them were seen as successful, having inflicted painful losses on the government. In June and July, scores of Algerian security personnel died in two ambushes laid out by AQIM militants both to the east and west of Algiers, making the summer of 2009 one of the deadliest in terms of loss of life among the security forces.

These attacks by themselves may not mean much more than another attack launched by this group. They will definitely not lead to the fall of the Bouteflika government, nor will they lead to government troops deserting their units. In order to have a better understanding of their meaning, one should look at how AQIM has been operating recently in Algeria, so one could conclude whether or not these attacks have occurred within or outside the group's usual theater of operations – i.e. the districts to the east of the capital, Algiers. This is important because it shows if AQIM has been 'expanding' its sphere of influence, or, to the contrary, if that sphere has, in fact, been 'shrinking' due to successes in the government's counterinsurgency plans.

Despite the absence of an official statement confirming this, AQIM is now understood to be operating in Algeria according to a zonal division that is different from the one applied by its predecessors: the GSPC, and before it by the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé* or GIA). Under the GIA and the GSPC, Algeria was divided into nine regional zones, each headed by an *amir*. The nine regional *amirs* were in turn headed by a national *amir*, whose authority normally went unchallenged.

The 9-zone division seems to have been imported, albeit with slight variations, from the national liberation struggle waged by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN, or The National Liberation Front) led a war of independence (1954–1962) against French colonial rule. The FLN party divided Algeria into zones (known as *wilayas* in Arabic): I, the Aurès Mountains in northeastern Algeria; II, the city of Constantine and the northeastern coastline; III, Kabylia; IV, Algiers; and V, the city of Oran and western Algeria. Similarly, the Algerian army to this day divides the country along six military zones: I, the central regions including the district of Blida, to the south west of Algiers; II, Oran and western Algeria; III, Bechar, southwestern Algeria; IV, Ourgla, southeastern Algeria; V, Constantine and eastern Algeria, and VI, Tamanrasset, in the far south of Algeria. In place of all these different divisions, AQIM seem now to have adopted a less complicated method of territorial division. Algeria is merely cut into four different regional zones: Central, Eastern, Western and Southern (Sahara).



## The Central Zone

The Central Zone is without a shadow of a doubt the strongest among the AQIM zones. It extends over the area that borders the Algerian capital to the east, including the Kabyle provinces of Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia and Bouira. It is an area known for its dense forests and inaccessible mountains. These mountains, some reaching as high as 2300 meters, were one of the most difficult regions to control during the era of French colonial rule (1830–1962), and it was there where many of the leaders of the resistance hid themselves. The Islamist rebels used the same region as their Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) predecessors after the cancellation of the elections making the Kabyle regions a perfect hiding place from which to train recruits and plan attacks. For example, the dense forests of Sidi Ali Bounab in Tizi Ouzou were for many years the ‘not-so-secret’ HQ of the GSPC (AQIM now).

The Central Zone is thought to be the place where the National *amir* of the AQIM is hiding, along with some of the high-ranking leaders of his group. Abu Musab Abd Droukdel, who became the national *amir* after the death of his predecessor, Nabil Sahraoui (a.k.a. Abu Ibrahim Mustapha) in 2004, is widely believed to be head-quartered somewhere in this region, which includes Boumerdés, a district that borders Algiers to the east and is one of the most active districts in terms of AQIM’s operations.<sup>2</sup> Many cells have been discovered and dismantled in Boumerdés, but no sooner a cell is dismantled than another one seem to have been reconstructed in its place. For instance, a study by *Ennahar* newspaper (17 November 2009) revealed that Boumerdés came in the second rank in terms of recruits for 'suicide missions' on behalf of AQIM (5 out of 21 suicide bombers came from Boumerdés since April 2007).<sup>3</sup> The capital Algiers came first with 10 bombers recruited from its poor neighborhoods. The same study also revealed that from among the 21 individuals who participated in the 'suicide missions' for AQIM since April 2007 seven were members of the al-Arqam Brigade which is active in Boumerdés (they were not necessarily from this district themselves), compared with eight who were members of the al-Noor Brigade which is active in Tizi Ouzo, AQIM's current HQ, according to *Ennahar*. In addition to its well-know active AQIM cells, the district of Boumerdés seem to have the advantage of being the ‘eastern gate’ to Algiers. It was through that 'gate' AQIM delivered its members who launched the April 11 2007 attacks against the seat of the government in Algiers and a security building in Bab El-Zouar, in Dar El-Baida (east of the capital), killing 33 people.<sup>4</sup>

These statistics released by Algerian daily *Ennahar* listed personal information on all the bombers since 2007, reveal that the eastern districts of Algiers are still without a doubt the heart of AQIM activities in Algeria.

Directly under Droukdel sits the regional *amir* of the central zone, a position that is currently occupied by Abd al-Mou'min Rachid (a.k.a. Moulai Rachid or Houzaïfa al-

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Hayat*, September 13, 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/56257>

<sup>3</sup> See the study of Anis Rahmani, *Ennahar*, November 17, 2009: <http://www.ennaharonline.com/ar/national/20387.txt>

<sup>4</sup> An Algerian court sentenced in November 14, 2009 dozens of suspects in the April 11, 2007 attacks against the Bab El-Zouar police barracks. During the trial, the judge spoke of the role played by a man identified as Adlan who was said to have recruited the members of the cell, and the one who bought the vehicle used in the bombing and went along with the suicide bomber from Thenia in Boumerdes all the way to Bab El-Zouar, where the bomber blew himself up. *Al-Hayat*, November 15, 2009. <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/76540>

Jound or Abu Houzaifa Younis).<sup>5</sup> Houzaifa al-Jound, who is originally from Barraqi, a poor neighborhood in Algiers, was a GIA veteran since 1994, before moving on to the GSPC, and then to AQIM. Barraqi was an area from which the GIA was officially launched in Algeria in October 1992. The GIA's first *amir*, Abd Al-Haqq Layada, comes from this area, as well as many of the hard-core leaders of the Islamist groups. Houzaifa al-Jound became the *amir* of the Central Zone (which encompasses the old Second Zone of the GIA and GSPC) after the death of its *amir*, Hareg Zoheir, who was also known as Sofiane Fasila, in an ambush by the security forces in Tizi Ouzou in October 2007. Fasila was considered the 'second-in-command' and the operational leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb<sup>6</sup>, and was also thought to be behind the bloody attacks that shook Algiers on April 11, 2007. So, for Houzaifa al-Jound to replace his deceased colleague his credentials must have been highly thought of by the AQIM's leadership.

Houzaifa al-Jound's day to prove his capabilities finally arrived on June 17, 2009. His men were waiting for an approaching convoy of paramilitary security personnel, who were tasked with guarding a crew of Chinese workers and engineers supervising the construction of a local highway. Returning from escorting the Chinese around 8pm, the convoy plied the highway between El Meher and El Mansourah near Bordj Bou Arreridj, about 110 miles east of the capital, when AQIM's fighters started firing at the security personnel with rocket propelled grenades and machine guns, before moving on towards their victims to kill off the wounded. In total, 18 paramilitary security personnel were confirmed dead, although two local newspapers put that number at 24.<sup>7</sup>

One of the attackers was reportedly later killed by the pursuing army troops. The rest of the group that laid siege to the convoy managed to escape. The militants must have taken advantage of the fact that their attack took place in an area that sits on the edge between two military zones (the Second, or the Central Zone, and the Fifth or the Eastern Zone), which may have confused the army as to which direction the fighters fled. This apparent confusion may have given the militants ample time to escape undetected.

It should also be noted that there has been a noticeable absence of the *amir* of AQIM during 2009. Droukdel has not featured in any video recording throughout all of last year, despite his group launching a new media outlet under the name *al-Andalus* (referring to the period of Muslim rule in Andalusia, Spain). His last audio statement was issued in April 2009, a week before the presidential elections. In it Droukdel called on the Algerians to boycott the vote.<sup>8</sup> Before that, he appeared in an audio cassette recording in September 2008, in which he lambasted the entrenched political leaders across North Africa accusing them of being "traitors" to the United States and France.<sup>9</sup> Droukdel's absence from the jihadi media sphere raised speculations inside Algeria that he may have been suffering either from the effects of a reported injury during an ambush the by the Algerian army in a mountainous region between Tizi Ouzo and Bejaia, or even suffering from a serious illness.<sup>10</sup> Despite these speculations, there is no hard evidence at all that

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<sup>5</sup> *El-Khabar*, June 21, 2009, <http://elkhabar.com/quotidien/index.php?idc=30&ida=161837>.

<sup>6</sup> "Maghreb al-Qaeda deputy killed in Algeria," *Reuters*, October 9, 2007, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L09732371.htm>

<sup>7</sup> "'At least 18 killed' in Algeria ambush," *Agence France Presse*, June 18, 2009, [http://rawstory.com/news/afp/\\_At\\_least\\_18\\_killed\\_in\\_Algeria\\_ambu\\_06182009.html](http://rawstory.com/news/afp/_At_least_18_killed_in_Algeria_ambu_06182009.html)

<sup>8</sup> Yassin Abdel Baki, *Echoroukonline*, October 20, 2009, <http://www.echoroukonline.com/ara/national/43546.html>

<sup>9</sup> The audio statement was issued on September 23, 2008, <http://www.muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?t=311186>

<sup>10</sup> Yassin Abdel Baki, *Echoroukonline*, <http://www.echoroukonline.com/ara/national/43546.html>

the AQIM *amir* is injured or ill, and the speculations in the Algerian press regarding his fate may be a way to make him come out from hiding and reveal himself. In doing so, he would be making a mistake that will aid Algiers to track and capture him. His supposed email appearance in the Nigerian press only further adds to the speculation about Droukdel's well being and whereabouts.

## **Eastern Zone**

The eastern regions of Algeria were also one of the most active during the insurgency-racked years of the 1990s. But according to the divisions adopted by AQIM, the eastern regions of Algeria look to have been redrawn differently from the days of the GIA and GSPC. The current eastern zone consists now mainly of Jijel, Skikda and the northern parts of Constantine (300 miles to the east of Algiers). Sometimes, AQIM's operations in the Eastern Zone extend further south till the northern parts of Batna, the capital city of the al-Ouras chain of mountains that extend through the eastern parts of Algeria.

Jijel, a coastal district that was a stronghold of the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) which stopped its insurgency and laid down its arms in 1999 in return for a government amnesty, is where the Eastern Zone meets the Central Zone's last district of Bejaia. This seems to be the only clearly defined border of the Eastern Zone; the rest of this zone's borders are not clearly demarcated. In fact, some of this zone's regions have become incorporated within different zones, as will be shown below.

This Eastern Zone is headed by an *amir* known as Mohammed Abu Salah al-Boulaidi, (not be confused with Salah Abu Mohammed, the head of AQIM's media wing). These two men are not the same person, and as is clear from the surname of Mohammed Abu Salah Al-Boulaidi he is a man who originally descends from al-Boulaida region (sometimes written as Blida), a province just to the southwest of Algiers, while the AQIM media spokesman descends from Biskra, in southeastern Algeria.

Since the formation of AQIM in 2007, it has been obvious that the old Eastern Zone has lost some of its most critical sectors that have now been attached to the Southern Zone (the Sahara). For instance, some regions in southeastern Algeria, such as Batna, el-Oued, Biskra, Khenchela and Tebessa, are no longer an integral part of the Eastern Zone, but have now become part of the Southern Zone. These districts are considered important because they border Tunisia and Libya, and therefore play a role in welcoming recruits coming to Algeria from either of these two countries in order to train at AQIM camps. The control of these districts also helps in coordinating the exit points used by recruits leaving Algeria in order to participate in missions outside the country, especially those used to volunteer for the fight in Iraq. Although Tunisia must have been used by many of those recruits leaving Algeria, the majority of them may have preferred the Libyan route instead. Libya, where visiting is normally easier for Algerians to make than for many other destinations, is known to have been used by many Algerian radicals traveling to Iraq via Syria. However, because of the American surge which resulted in greatly weakening al-Qaeda in Iraq, and because of the security crackdowns on cells organizing the travel of the volunteers, the importance of this Libyan route appears to be in decline; Algerians are not known to have been crossing recently in large numbers to Libya on

their way to Iraq, although Libyans and Tunisians have been reported crossing in the opposite direction towards Algeria in order to train with AQIM.

The way AQIM has been operating in the Eastern Zone has resulted thus in *de facto* making it two zones, not one. The first is the old Eastern Zone, and the second is the southeastern zone which has become part of the Southern Zone. It may be useful to note that this new division of the Eastern Zone is not without precedence, even during the days of the old GSPC. For example, the former head of the GSPC's Eastern Zone Amari Saifi (a.k.a. Abd al-Razzaq or "el-Para", due to his background as a parachutist in the Algerian military) used sometimes to operate outside his zone – extending the sphere of influence of his region as far south into the Sahara as possible. It is not unnatural to see certain leaders of the Eastern Zone working as part of, or in cooperation with, those in the Southern Zone, a region that covers a vast no-man's land area bordering Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Mali and Mauritania. Saifi was captured in Chad where he fled after the mass kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists, half of them German, in the Algerian Sahara's Illizi area in 2003.<sup>11</sup> He departed Algeria for Mali, and then on to Niger, before ultimately heading to Chad where a Tibesti region-based rebel group calling itself the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT-abbreviated from the French *Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad*) nabbed him in 2004 and handed him over to the Libyan authorities which in turn handed him over to their Algerian counterparts. He is yet to be tried, raising allegations that he may have been working for the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité*, or DRS, the Algerian security services. Although such allegations are hard to prove, there could be a simple reason for not allowing him to be presented before a court of law: he may use the opportunity of being in the media spotlight to speak about his alleged mistreatment (or even torture) while in Algerian custody. He may also ask to be extradited to Germany where he is being pursued in connection with the death of a tourist during her ordeal as a hostage in the Sahara in 2003.

## The Western Zone

Until now, the Western Zone has traditionally been the weakest link in AQIM's activities in Algeria. This vast region extending from the western edges of the Algerian capital and all the way west towards the Moroccan frontier was one of the strongest zones for the now defunct GIA. It was a preferred route for the smuggling of most of the early recruits coming to join the campaign against the Algerian government in the first half of the 1990s, and the route through which also came large amounts of weapons. It was also on the Moroccan side of the border where the GIA was holding meetings with its backers from outside Algeria, and where the Algerian intelligence tracked the *amir* of the GIA, Layada, and asked the Moroccans to hand him over, in 1993 – which they did.

In 1995, the Western districts of Algeria saw a bloody struggle for power between the leaders of the GIA – the local *amir*, Kada Benchiha, refusing to give the national *amir*, Djemal Zitouni, a share of the spoils from an attack against an army barracks. Zitouni launched a bloody war against Benchiha, who was later killed in an attack at the hands of the security forces. The infighting between Zitouni and Benchiha led into the splitting of the GIA in the western districts of Algeria. After the death of Benchiha, his supporters

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<sup>11</sup> Salima Mellah and Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, "El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Laden," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 2005, <http://mondediplo.com/2005/02/04algeria>.

split totally from the GIA and created a rival group called *Houmat al-Da'awa al-Salafia* (Defenders of Salafist Call), which was soon to become the strongest among the fragmented groups operating in the western zone. However, *Houmat al-Da'awa*, which was led by an Afghan Arab called 'Slim al-Afghani' (a.k.a. Mohammed Benslim or Slim al-Abbasi Abu Djaafar al-Afghani), chose a policy of not seeking a confrontation with the Algerian army. So, whenever his group sensed an army advance towards an area in which it was active, it chose to retreat into another area, avoiding any direct contact with the security forces. It even avoided laying ambushes when it could easily have done so. For years, the group continued this policy of not confronting the security forces. However, it also refused to follow the route of other groups who accepted to lay down their arms in return for an amnesty for its members (those not implicated in mass murder).

After the former GSPC became AQIM in early 2007, the leadership of *Houmat Al-Da'wa* was faced with intense pressure from two fronts, one external and the other internal. On the internal front, *Houmat Al-Da'wa* had to justify to its fighters why they were training to fight the government but constantly avoiding doing so, and at the same time refusing to join the peace initiatives launched by President Bouteflika. As for the external factor it concerned AQIM which was seeking to extend its sphere of influence towards the western regions of Algeria. In order to do so AQIM had either to incorporate *Houmat Al-Da'wa* within its ranks, or fight this group into submission. The first reaction from *Houmat Al-Da'wa* does not seem to have been encouraging. When AQIM launched its first wave of suicide attacks against government targets in April 2007, adopting the al-Qaeda's *modus operandi*, *Houmat Al-Da'wa* issued a religious study refuting any justification to such an attack in Algeria.<sup>12</sup> Algiers was pleased with this position, despite the latter group's refusal to join the peace process.

This impasse dragged on until the summer of 2009, when AQIM finally had its way in extending its sphere of influence towards the western regions of Algeria. On July 29, 2009, a group of militants belonging to a group that split from the GIA in the late 1990s ambushed an army convoy in the province of Tipaza, just south of the capital Algiers. The Algerian daily *El Khabar* reported that the death of 14 government troops, while a statement issued by AQIM claimed 15.<sup>13</sup> It transpired that this attack was carried out by a group led by Sawwan Mua'mar (a.k.a. Abu Tammam Abd Al-Hafiz), who was active with around 50 militants across three provinces west of Algiers: Blida, Ain Al-Defla, and Medea. Sawwan himself is not widely known in Algeria, but his relative, Sawwan Abd Al-Qader, is known from the time of his split from the GIA in the late 1990s and his establishment of a group calling itself *Al-Jama'a Al-Sunniya lil Da'wa wa Al-Tabligh* (the Sunni Group for Preaching and Tabligh). Sawwan Abd Al-Qader stayed neutral between the GSPC and *Houmat Al-Da'wa*, not siding with one against the other. But upon his death from natural causes in 2004, his successor Laslous Madani (a.k.a. Issam Abu Hayyan) joined forces with the GSPC and launched several attacks, chief amongst them the attacks against a bus carrying Russian and local technicians who were being ferried between Ain Al-Defla and Medea on March 3, 2007. However, Abu Hayyan was soon to die, having been suffering from diabetes, and his successor turned out to be Sawwan Mua'mar (a.k.a. Abu Tammam Abd Al-Hafiz), whose name appeared in the claim of responsibility issued by AQIM for the attack against the army of Tipaza in July. AQIM's statement described the attackers as "the lions of the west", making the first reference to

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<sup>12</sup> Dalayla B, *Ennaharonline*, May 10, 2009, <http://www.ennaharonline.com/ar/terrorisme/31339.html>

<sup>13</sup> Atef Kadadra, *El-Khabar*, issue 5718, August 3, 2009, [http://www.elkhabar.com/quotidien/?ida=167320&idc=67&date\\_insert=20090802](http://www.elkhabar.com/quotidien/?ida=167320&idc=67&date_insert=20090802)

the fact that it has started to operate in Algeria's western provinces. The Tipaza attacks's significance here stems from the fact that this area had been until then part of *Humat al-Da'wa's*, while Sawwan's men were active outside that area, further south in Blida, Ain Al-Defla and Medea. To this day, *Humat al-Da'wa* has not commented on AQIM's extension of its influence towards its western provinces, but there is speculation in Algeria that some members of the *Humat Al-Da'wa* may have split from their group and joined AQIM.<sup>14</sup>

## The Southern (Saharan) Zone

The Saharan Zone of AQIM has overshadowed its other zones by milestones for the simple fact that its attacks there targeted Westerners, who were usually kidnapped for ransom but rarely killed. AQIM's Sahara Zone operates across Mauritania, southern Algeria, northern Mali, Niger and Chad. Although this Zone covers this whole wide region that extends through many countries, it is fair to say that its HQ has until recently been based in northern Mali, with some indications as recently as late 2009 it may have moved eastward towards the Mali-Niger border, or even inside Niger itself. This reported move from Mali to Niger came after intensive efforts by the Malian security forces trying to crackdown on AQIM, although this does not seem to have diminished the group's capabilities, as demonstrated by the kidnapping of a French citizen in Mali in late November 2009, as well as three Spaniards kidnapped around the same time in Mauritania.

This AQIM Saharan Zone, which is headed now by Yahia Djaouadi, (a.k.a. Yahia Abu Ammar), and assisted by his second-in-command Hammadou Abid (a.k.a. Abdelhamid Abu Zeid), has been behind a series of kidnapping-for-ransom in the past several years. These kidnappings have not been adopted as a new policy by the Sahara leaders of the AQIM. In fact, this policy of holding hostages for money began with the former leader of the GSPC, Amari Saifi moved quickly to buy the GSPC weapons with the ransom he had received – reported to be around 5 million Euros. The Algerian army announced at that time that its forces managed to intercept part of these weapons Saifi was trying to smuggle back into Algeria.

After Amari Saifi's capture in Chad by the MDJT in 2004 and his eventual transfer to the DRS in Algiers, another AQIM *amir* Mokhtar Belmokhtar became the undisputed leader of jihad in the Sahara. Belmokhtar, who was already the *amir* of the GSPC's 9<sup>th</sup> zone (the Sahara), started a process of shifting its operations outside Algeria. That may have been related to the fact that the GSPC was beginning to find it more difficult to recruit people inside Algeria because the majority of the population was fed up with the continued bloodshed in their country and was supporting, therefore, the peace process and reconciliation policy applied by President Bouteflika. Sensing the futility of continuing the war inside Algeria, Belmokhtar was the first leader in the GSPC to shift his attention south, towards the sub-Saharan countries of the Sahel region. So, instead of focusing on Algeria, Belmokhtar made the vast un-ruled lands between Mauritania and Mali his personal fiefdom. He married a Tuareg woman and lived in northern Mali. With the changes taking place at the top of the GSPC in Algeria, after the death of the *amir* Nabil Sahraoui in 2004, Belmokhtar had to make a decision on whether or not he wanted to be

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<sup>14</sup> Atef Kadadra, *El-Khabar*, August 3, 2009.

the next national *amir*. This would have required him to leave his safe haven in Mali and cross thousands of miles to the Central Zone east of Algiers, so he could meet with the rest of the GSPC's leadership who were supposed to select the new *amir*. It is not clear if Belmokhtar really wanted to become the new *amir*; he seemed more at ease being in charge of his "emirate" in the Sahara. May be he was not even convinced of moving back to lead the fight inside Algeria. He wanted to concentrate on Sub-Saharan African regions instead. Whatever his reasons were, Belmokhtar was not going to be chosen as the new *amir* of the GSPC. As it turned out, Nabil Sahraoui made a request before his death. He told his leaders that his will is to have Abu Musab Abd Droukdel to be his replacement, in case something were to happen to him.<sup>15</sup>

Droukdel was quick to establish his authority. With Belmokhtar reluctant to leave his bases in the Sahara to travel to attend meetings in the Central Zone, the new GSPC *amir* started appointing his own loyalists in key positions. Toward the end of 2006 and the beginning of 2007, Droukdel led the GSPC into the merger with al-Qaeda to become its franchise in North Africa. Not long after that, Belmokhtar was replaced with a new *amir*, Yahia Djaouadi, who took over the operations of AQIM in the wider Sahara theater. Despite this, Belmokhtar stayed in the region, working in the same areas in which his replacement was operating.

Djaouadi, along with his lieutenant Hammadou Abid, considered an ally to Saifi with whom he collaborated in the hostage taking in 2003, started the then new practice of targeting Western tourists visiting the region, in order to free them in return for a ransom. Although the European nations whose nationals were kidnapped and released never admitted whether or not a ransom had been paid, it is widely believed that this has indeed been the case. In many cases it is believed these enormous sums are paid by interlocutors so as not to directly implicate the governments involved and provide plausible deniability. A pair of Austrian tourists were kidnapped from the Sahara desert in Tunisia in Feb 2008 and freed in Oct 2008. In Dec 2008, veteran Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler and his aide Louis Guay were kidnapped in Niger,<sup>16</sup> followed in January 2009 by the kidnapping of four European tourists travelling near the northern Malian town of Anderamboukane, near the border with Niger. The Canadian diplomats were freed in Mali in April 2009, as well as three of the kidnapped Europeans (two were freed on one go, and the third was freed at a later stage). Only one of these kidnappings ended disastrously; a British man, Edwin Dyer, was killed after London refused to budge to the kidnappers demands. The British government refused to follow suit of other EU countries. London took the position that large cash sums cannot be paid, because it will only encourage more kidnappings. Abu Qatada al-Filistini, the radical Palestinian preacher whose release from a British jail was a demand by the kidnappers, could not be freed, because doing so would have meant an interference in a judicial matter in Britain, and doing so have greatly incentivized further kidnapping in order to force the British government's hand toward releasing more imprisoned Islamists. The Algerian government loudly praised the British position; it had argued all along that paying ransom for the kidnappers will only drive them to kidnap more people, and with the money they get in return for freeing the hostages more weapons will be bought in the black market, which will affect the security situation inside Algeria itself, in terms of more attacks and bombings.

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<sup>15</sup> Camille Tawil, *Ennaharonline*, March 16, 2009, <http://ennaharonline.com/ar/terrorisme/gspc/28094.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "Canadian diplomats kidnapped by Niger rebels," *National Post*, December 16, 2008, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1081251>.

It was also reported during the May 2009 that the armies of Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania will soon launch a cooperative multi-national operation -- the first of its kind to include the four countries -- to tackle the al Qaeda militants, according to *El Watan* and *El Khabar* newspapers.<sup>17</sup> Though no such attack was ever recorded, Bamako announced in July that its forces killed scores of Islamic militants in clashes in around the northern settlements of Tessalit and Timbuktu. Malian military sources quoted by Reuters stated that the army also lost after the clashes “about 20 soldiers”, including a colonel, “missing in a remote desert region.”<sup>18</sup>

## Mauritania

Little is known about al-Qaeda’s presence in Mauritania before late 2001, when the United States launched its War on Terror. Apart from Mahfouz Ould al-Walid (a.k.a. Abu Hafs the Mauritanian), who was the head of al-Qaeda’s religious committee, bin Laden’s organization is not widely known to have previously operated in Mauritania. This lightly populated, vast country may not have been seen by al-Qaeda as a significant player in North Africa, and was not a semantic component of the war the jihadists were waging against regimes whom they accused of being apostates, such as the autocratic, secularist rulers of Algeria, Libya and Egypt.

Mauritania’s relative tranquility and isolation from international jihadism broke down in the years after 9/11. The first major incident in the country between the government and militant Islamists took place in June 2005; it was not an entirely Mauritanian affair. Fighters operating under the command of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the head of the Saharan Zone of the Algerian GSPC launched an attack on Lemghiti army base in the Mauritanian Sahara, killing 15 soldiers.<sup>19</sup> It was the first such confrontation between the two sides, and it heralded the beginning of the attacks by the GSPC against the Mauritanian regime. And when the GSPC merged with al-Qaeda and assumed its franchise in the Maghreb, it was not surprising to see that this newly launched group, AQIM, would continue the fight that the GSPC initially started.

AQIM has benefited from two important factors to increase its appeal and presence in Mauritania. Firstly, the American-led occupation of Iraq and the subsequent civil war appealed to many young Mauritians who wanted to go and join the fight against the Americans, and were therefore recruited to go and train at GSPC (now AQIM) camps. Most of these training camps are thought to be inside Algeria or northern Mali. The second factor was related directly to the political instability which was engulfing the country. In August 2004 the government of President Maaouiya Ould Taya arrested army officers who were allegedly implicated in a coup plot. That September, it announced that another alleged plot was foiled - the third of its kind in 15 months. One year later, on 3 August 2005, President Taya was finally overthrown in a military *coup d’etat* that formed a ruling military council to rule the country until new elections were organized. As promised, the army did organize elections in March 2007 - former minister, Sidi

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<sup>17</sup> Lamine Chikhi, “Sahara states to mount anti-Qaeda operation:reports,” *Reuters*, May 5, 2009, <http://af.reuters.com/article/nigerNews/idAFL564223420090505?sp=true>.

<sup>18</sup> Tiemoko Diallo, “Mali army says in deadly clashes with al Qaeda,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2009, <http://af.reuters.com/article/idAFJJOE5650DO20090706>.

<sup>19</sup> GSPC took responsibility of this attack in a statement issued in June 2005. Walid al-Telmesani, *Islamonline.net*, June 6, 2005, <http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/news/2005-06/06/article13.shtml>.



Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, became the first democratically-elected president of Mauritania since its independence in 1960. However, Abdallahi's rule was soon viewed by his opponents as being lenient towards the Islamist militants, several of whom were freed by the courts. Abdallahi's supporters, however, may argue that the freeing of these Islamists should be seen as adding to his credit, primarily because as he did not try to interfere in the work of the courts in order to please the army by keeping these Islamist opponents in prison without enough evidence to make that legal. Having clashed with the leaders of the army on this issue, as well as many other issues, Abdallahi's rule was doomed.<sup>20</sup> The generals overthrew him in a bloodless *coup d'état* in August 2008.

By the time Abdallahi was overthrown, AQIM had already made its presence in the country felt. In December 2007, a French family of four were killed in Aleg, about 160 miles east of the capital, Nouakchott. In January 2008, the famous Dakar Rally was cancelled, for fears of another AQIM attack. In February 2008, AQIM gunmen shot at the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott. And in June 2009, AQIM attacked and killed an American citizen living and working in Nouakchott. Six weeks later, in August 8, an alleged suicide bomber attacked the French embassy, injuring two guards. AQIM claimed responsibility for this attack in Aug 17. In November 2009, AQIM managed to kidnap three Spanish aid workers on their way between Nouadhibou, on the north coast and Nouakchott.

Although these activities of AQIM indicate that the group may have managed to build a wide network inside Mauritania, it is still unclear at present if the group has had any relationship with any members of the old school Salafists and jihadists who were at odds with the regime of the former president, Taya. This Islamic movement started appearing in the country in 1994, when the authorities announced the disbanding of a group of 34 members it accused of propagating an extremist ideology. In a press statement on September 25, 1994, the interior ministry was quoted as saying that "secret organizations foreign to our customs have sprung up recently in Mauritania", and described the activities of these organizations as "a pretext to damage order and security in this country and to attack Mauritanian sovereignty." Those arrested at the time included some who went on to become prominent leaders of the Islamic movement in the country. They included the following: Cheikh Ould Sidi Yahya, Imam of the Sebkha mosque, President of Umma, an unofficial Islamist political party; Aboubekrin Ould Ahmed, former Minister of Culture and Islamic Orientation; Hassan Ould Moulay Ely, municipal council member of the Union des Forces Démocratiques (UFD); Abdallah Ould Reggad, appeal court judge; El Hadj Abdelazziz Sy, Imam of El Mina mosque, Vice-President of Umma; Mohamed Mokhtar Ould Gaguih, former director of Islamic Orientation at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation; Jemil Ould Mansour, journalist; Mohamed Ould Ragel, municipal councillor, and UFD member; Vall Ould Wreg.<sup>21</sup>

Whereas many of the above turned out to be non-violent, representing various models of the Muslim Brothers movement, other leaders started appearing in the country

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<sup>20</sup> One of these disputed issues related to alleged corruption in the regime. But a major factor seems to have been related to the fact that Abdullahi was behaving as though he was an elected president who owes nothing to the voters who elected him. The army generals, on the other hand, may have thought he was ungrateful, because he would not have become president had it not been of the actions they took, starting with toppling the former regime, and then handing the rule back to the civilians.

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, "DOCUMENT - UA 360/94 - MAURITANIA: FEAR OF TORTURE", September 1994, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR38/003/1994/en/a9e27f87-ebec-11dd-9b3b-8bf635492364/afr380031994en.html>

promoting another school of Islamic thought, Salafiyya, to which al-Qaeda claims to belong. Two of those leaders became very prominent, due in part to their arrest by the authorities in connection with terrorism. They are Muhammad Sedy Ould Ejdoud (a.k.a. al-Nawawi) and Abdullahi Ould Eminou (known as Al-Majlisi). Al-Nawawi, who was born in 1959, lives in Bir el-Kheir to the west of the city of Boutilimit, east of Nouakchott. This town is known to be frequented by Salafists and jihadists, attracted no doubt by the presence of Sheikh al-Nawawi there. The latter is known to be knowledgeable in *sharia* law studies, and he teaches the *hadiths* of Prophet Mohammed at his Bedouin University (known as *Mahzura*). He is also an imam of a local mosque. Al-Nawawi was arrested in 2005 and tried but found innocent of all charges in June 5, 2007.<sup>22</sup>

Al-Majlisi seems to have an identical account of al-Nawawi. The former, born in 1966 in Boutilimit, is an Islamic teacher and preacher at the Ikhlas mosque in the poor neighborhood of Tensoulim in Nouakchott. This mosque is also known as the Abdullah Weld Amino mosque. He is considered an eloquent preacher, and also heads an Islamic charity. Like al-Nawawi, he was arrested on April 25, 2005, but was acquitted from all accusations on June 5, 2007. Both of these Salafi leaders were freed during the administration of President Sheikh Abdullah.

Contrary to the leaders of the Muslim Brothers and the Salfists who are prominent figures in Mauritania, the local leaders of AQIM are relatively obscure outside their immediate environment. Their real presence inside Mauritania seems to have started in early 2005 when a several jihadis were arrested after having trained at Algerian GSPC camps in the desert.

Abu Bakr al-Sibai Al-Khadim Ould al-Saman (thought to be in his thirties) is believed to be the *amir* of al-Qaeda in Mauritania, and credited with establishing Ansar Allah al-Murabitin in the Lands of Shanquit (the Al-Qaeda local branch in Mauritania).<sup>23</sup> Al-Saman was born in Touba in central Senegal. His brother was supposedly killed in front of him during racial related strife that occurred between Senegal and Mauritania during a brief border conflict in 1989. Al-Saman's father was working in Senegal during this period. After the murder of his sibling, the family returned to Mauritania and lived in the Luksur neighborhood in Nouakchott, near a branch of Mauritanian University. He studied the holy Quran and Islamic law in a Bedouin university, before moving to work in Mauritania's economic capital, Nouadhibou. In early 2006, he escaped from prison in Nouakchott and fled to neighboring Senegal. However, he went back to Mauritania where he was accused of leading the attack against the Israeli embassy and fought government troops in western Nouakchott before being arrested again during a sweep.<sup>24</sup>

If al-Saman was considered the local military leader of AQIM in Mauritania, the religious responsibility of this group is without a doubt given to Abu Anas Abd al-Rahman al-Shaniqiti (A reference to the ancient name of Mauritania. Mauratania means "land of the Moors" in Latin). Al-Shaniqiti (born in Nouakchott 1975) is said to have joined

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<sup>22</sup> Ibrahima Sylla, "Suspected Islamic militants on trial in Mauritania," *Reuters*, May 21, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL21663755>.

<sup>23</sup> ["The Industry of Death: Al-Qaeda in Mauritania"], *Alarabiya.net*, June 22, 2008, <http://www.alarabiya.net/programs/2008/06/22/51919.html> and *Agence France Presse*, <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5i-3OAZU7FBX4LDL3INLQWQsGi7MA>

<sup>24</sup> Mohammed Heydara, *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 1, 2008, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=469027&issueno=10747>

Belmokhtar's GSPC group in the Sahara in 2006, and rose up in the ranks after the GSPC became AQIM in 2007. AQIM made him a member of its *shura* Council (its highest decision making body), and is widely seen as holding the post of the *mufti*, or *qadi*, of the AQIM's branch in the Sahara.<sup>25</sup> He is thought to be active in the Saharan "Triangle of Death" straddling the borders of Mauritania, Algeria and Mali.

The Mauritanian government has begun (as of February 2010) a dialogue with imprisoned AQIM leaders in their midst. These debates were aired on the national TV, as requested by several prominent jailed AQIM heavies such as al-Saman. Both notable religious leaders attended representing the government's side, and well-known Salafist leaders. These negotiations led nowhere. AQIM leaders explained why they are fighting and defended their jihad against the Nouakchott and the region's other governments. They also defended Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda's multi-front war against the United States and its allies. More defections are expected with the hope that the government's side will be able to refute AQIM's justifications for the fight it is so brutally conducting.

## Libya

While Algeria, Mauritania and many Sahel countries saw attacks and kidnappings that displayed a rise in AQIM activities, Libya, to the contrary, saw none. In fact, Libya managed in the summer of 2009 to produce one of the biggest coups against al-Qaeda's ideology in recent years. The imprisoned leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) were allowed to issue their long-awaited *muraja'at* (Arabic for "revisions"), also termed the Corrective Studies, although it is still early to judge whether or not these studies will have any real impact on the young men who might be contemplating joining al-Qaeda or other violent groups in Libya particularly and the Arab world generally.

It was clear throughout 2009 that AQIM's Libya policy faced a two-pronged attack: one was led by the security forces which continued the dismantling of its cells and arresting many of its members and supporters, while the second was led by the leaders of the LIFG themselves. LIFG announced from their cells in Tripoli's Abu Slim prison a 417-page document titled *Corrective Studies on the Doctrine of Jihad, Hesba and Ruling*. This massive document laid out in specific terms the ways in which they rejected any use of violence against the Arab and Muslim regimes and distanced themselves from al-Qaeda and many of the actions commonly associated with bin Laden's organization.

The Corrective Studies were submitted to the authorities by the end of July, after months of debate amongst the LIFG leadership about their final content. These Studies were divided into nine chapters, and carried the names of the six authors who are all very prominent leaders of the group. They were: the *amir* Abdullah al-Sadeq (a.k.a. Abd al-Hakim Belhaj), his deputy Abu Hazem (a.k.a. Khalid al-Sharif), the religious leader Abu al-Mundhir (a.k.a. Sami al-Sa'di), the military commander Azzoubair (a.k.a. Mustapha Qounaifid), the first *amir*, Abdul Ghaffar al-Douadi, and Idris (a.k.a. Abd al-Wahab al-Qaid, the eldest brother of the Afghanistan-based Abu Yahya al-Libi).

Although nothing was said publicly, the Corrective Studies looks to have pleased the regime of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi; they made it clear from a religious point of view

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<sup>25</sup> Rabi' Weld Adoom, *Sahara Media*, July 10, 2007, <http://www.saharamedias.net/smedia/index.php/2009-07-12-13-28-10/4678-2009-07-10-22-49-05.html>

that it was wrong to launch a jihad against Arab regimes with the stated aim of overthrowing them and erecting Islamic governments in their place. The LIFG's leaders confessed to being mistaken in regard to their armed struggle against Qaddafi's decade's long rule during the 1990s. The Corrective Studies went on to make it clear that launching a jihad has many rules that should not be broken, listing many actions that contradict a genuine jihad. Although the leaders of the LIFG did not name al-Qaeda or any other group in these pages, it was clear that bin Laden's organization and other groups associated with it were what they had in mind. The LIFG leaders were discussing the excesses in applying the concept of jihad, such as the killing of innocents, targeting Western civilians who visit Muslim states, and stealing money in order to finance jihad. Parts of the Corrective Studies will assuredly sound alarm bells among many in the international community when they pronounce that jihad is an obligation on Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. The LIFG leaders argued that under any ideology, not necessarily Islam, these three lands are occupied by foreign military powers and therefore must be liberated through resistance or violent jihad. The Corrective Studies are meant to "correct" the path of true defensive jihad, not abolish it altogether.

The leaders of the LIFG went further in September 2009 when they sent Qaddafi an apology for their group's actions against his regime during the 1990s. They asked him to forgive them for their mistaken policy which included forming a clandestine organization, and indicated their willingness to disband it.<sup>26</sup> The short letter to Qaddafi may have indeed represented the opinion of the imprisoned leaders of the LIFG, but the apology does seem to have pleased everybody within the larger group. This author understands that some leaders of the LIFG outside Libya felt that the imprisoned leaders went too far in apologizing to Colonel Qaddafi, who was still seen by many in the group as simply a dictator, if no longer judged as an apostate ruler, a term that was applied to him during the 1990s.

The Corrective Studies were no doubt a boost to Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi's standing within the regime. It was Saif, Qaddafi's second eldest son, who initiated the talks with the LIFG in 2006. Saif did so against the advice of many regime insiders who strongly distrusted the LIFG, or simply viewed it as a defeated, spent force. Some in Qaddafi's inner circle thought that the LIFG's only usefulness to them would be to make an example out of the militants to other like-minded groups that may contemplate trying, to rise against the Colonel's iron rule.

Saif took considerable risk in trusting the leaders of the LIFG during these negotiations. He concluded that they are genuine in what they said about the error of their ways in fighting the regime and their desire to help Libya, and other countries as well, in fighting the ideologies of extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda. Saif had direct access to the imprisoned leaders, and his representatives were always present during the talks in the Abu Slim prison between the LIFG leadership and the security services. In fact, Saif's representatives were playing a mediating role between the LIFG leaders and the officials responsible for the prison, and the differences between the two sides often needed a direct intervention from Saif to help move things forward. Saif's mediation must have increased the differences that already existed between him and some elements in the regime that did not trust the Islamists at all. Some of those were high-ranking officials in Tripoli's security apparatus.

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<sup>26</sup> *Al-Hayat*, September 2, 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/52751>.

In the end, Saif's efforts were rewarded when the LIFG leaders were able to hand in their study in which they met one of the major demands of many regimes in the Arab world, including Libya. According to the Corrective Studies, it is not permissible to launch a jihad against any Arab-Muslim regimes, whatever the justification was.

Soon after the Corrective Studies were handed over and the apology presented, Saif was given, according to his father's wishes, an official responsibility within the regime, in order to implement the reforms he has been seeking. The post he was assigned, head of the "Popular Leadership," make him perhaps the second most important man in Libya after his father.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that al-Qaeda has yet to respond to the LIFG's Studies, despite being quick in the past to reply to the *muraja'at* issued by other jihadists. For instance, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri did not wait for long before replying to his former Egyptian Islamic Jihad colleague, Dr. Fadl's "Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World." Within two months of Dr. Fadl's critical treatise against al-Qaeda, in May 2007, al-Zawahiri replied in the form of a video message in which he criticized his former friend.

Al-Qaeda may be already preparing its rebuttal to LIFG's Corrective Studies, and it would be interesting if this reply would come from Abu Yahya al-Libi. If that was to be the case, it would be the younger brother refuting his elder brother's studies. The last time Abu Yahya spoke on Libya, in June 2009, he was commenting on the reported suicide of Ibn al-Sheikh al-Libi (a.k.a. Ali Mohammed al-Fakheri) in Abu Slim's prison in Tripoli.

Finally, the Corrective Studies and the apology to Qaddafi affirmed that the LIFG leadership did not subscribe to the notion that their organization should become a wing of al-Qaeda, contrary to what was understood from the joint announcement by Dr. al-Zawahiri and Abu Laith al-Libi in November 2008. It is clear now that al-Libi and only a segment of the LIFG fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan decided to join al-Qaeda, and his step did not lead to an official merger of the two groups. In fact, al-Libi did not have the authority to announce such a major decision on behalf of his group.<sup>28</sup>

## Tunisia

Tunisia continued to be a security-stable country in a troubled region. Since the reported kidnapping by AQIM of the two Austrian tourists in the Tunisian Sahara in February 2008, there has not been a single incident during 2009 in which Al-Qaeda was officially blamed.

The only security development during 2009 appeared on July 6, when the Tunisian police arrested nine men, including two officers, and charged them with plotting to kill US servicemen taking part in joint military exercises, according to Samir ben Amor, a

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<sup>27</sup> Khaled Mahmoud, *Asharq al-Awsat*, October 13, 2009, <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=539861&issueno=11277> and "Gaddafi's son appointed to key post: report," *Reuters*, October 16, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE59F35C20091016?sp=true>.

<sup>28</sup> Simon-Cameron Moore, "U.S. missile strike in Pakistan hit al Qaeda nest," *Reuters*, January 31, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSISL24645020080131>.

defense lawyer<sup>29</sup>. The lawyer said that two of the suspects are army officers from a Tunisian military base in the coastal town of Bizerte, 37 miles north of Tunis, and that they were charged with attempting to steal weapons and explosives from the base and use them to attack US servicemen. However, the Tunisian authorities denied that the cell was planning an attack on the American military, but confirmed the arrests which were revealed by the defense lawyer.

In addition to this incident, the Tunisian authorities continued throughout the whole of the past years prosecuting individuals who were mostly accused of trying to flee the country in order to join the insurgency in Iraq, or to get military training with AQIM in neighboring Algeria. It is reported that Tunis has clamped down on radical Islamists in recent years and jailed more than 1,000 of them.

Apart from this, President Zein al-Abidin bin Ali was re-elected for a fifth presidential term in sham elections that lacked any real significance – even the opposition candidates conceded before the elections that they had no chance of defeating bin Ali.

And in addition to this political impasse, the authorities seemed to be willing to open up to the moderate Islamists and tried to encourage more moderation amongst the Muslim population. The president's brother-in-law, Mohammed Al-Matiri, who was elected to the parliament in the October elections, is known for his work to promote moderate Islam, and his Quranic radio station is one of the most popular in Tunis, ahead of the national radio station.<sup>30</sup>

## Morocco

As with Tunisia, Morocco did not suffer a single terrorist incident during 2009. There were, however, arrests and trials for people suspected of links to AQIM. The biggest sweep took place in September 2009, when 24 people were caught in connection with an alleged network planning to recruit people to participate in suicide attacks in Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan.

The Moroccan Press Service (MAP) said the dismantled cell was coordinating its work with terrorists based in Sweden, Belgium and the Syria-Iraq zone, and it was recruiting volunteers for Iraq, as well as fighters to Afghanistan and Somalia.<sup>31</sup> What was noticeable in that official announcement was the fact that the statement said that those arrested planned terrorist attacks inside Morocco but in order to complete their plan they started receiving “experts from al-Qaeda (AQIM) in order so they can offer (the Moroccans) their knowledge on how to make explosives”.<sup>32</sup>

In June 2009, the Moroccan government announced that it arrested five suspects operating between its northern regions and Ceuta, a Spanish exclave that, along with

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<sup>29</sup> “Tunisia arrests 9 men over plot to kill US soldiers,” *Reuters*, July 6, 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKAMA639003>.

<sup>30</sup> October 30, 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/71153>

<sup>31</sup> “Morocco arrests 24 in ‘terrorist network’ crackdown,” *Agence France-Presse*, September 23, 2009 <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iyHUGdwuohJ6tVTzIOit1YwPCJ7Q>

<sup>32</sup> *Al Jazeera*, September 23, 2009, <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/69751507-3BC2-4C81-B869-81C37E9B08D4.htm>

Melilla, is claimed by Morocco.<sup>33</sup> Reuters quoted a security source as saying that the five men were residents of Ceuta, and were led by Abu Yasin who spent two years in jail in connection with another cell called Ansar al-Mahdi, led by Hassan al-Khattab who was sentenced to a 25-year term. *Al-Sabah*, a Moroccan daily, claimed that the cell was preparing to launch attacks using vehicles with explosives, and that its members trained in AQIM camps. Agence France Presse reported on September 23, 2009 that on the September 3, 38 people suspected of belonging to a network that recruited Moroccans for Iraq and Algeria appeared before an anti-terrorist court in Sale, the twin city of the capital Rabat. According to the Moroccan police, the members of that cell, dismantled in July 2008, intended to join terrorist groups in desert camps run by AQIM before proceeding to Iraq. Also in September 2009, the court in Sale postponed a hearing into another case involving 43 people charged under anti-terrorist legislation and suspected of links with AQIM.

Whereas these cells were being dismantled, it was noticeable, on the other hand, that a debate has started in Moroccan jails between the leaders of the Salafi-jihadi movement regarding the issue of using violence against Arab regimes and the West. Most of those leaders were arrested after the May 16, 2003 suicide attacks in Casablanca, and were accused by the authorities of influencing Moroccan youth to adopt an extremist ideology, a charge that Islamist leaders denied. However, after more than six years of being in jail, it now appears some of these arrested leaders are willing to concede that their views were indeed extreme. For instance, Sheikh Mohammad al-Fizzazi, who is serving a 30-year jail sentence in connection with the Casablanca bombings (which he condemned), penned a letter from jail to his daughter in Germany in which he confessed to having been wrong in some of the views he held in the past. In the letter, dated July 21, 2009, he says that his time behind bars had given him time to engage in “deep thinking” and he went on to say that “I confess that I went too far” in regard to his opinions demonstrated during his theological clashes with the country’s leftist leaders. He added that, “I’m not ashamed to say that I have retreated from some of what I believed” in the past.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, it also seems that there has been an attempt to apply in Moroccan jails some kind of *Muraja’at* similar to those issued by the LIFG in Libya.<sup>35</sup> For instance, it was reported in May 2009 that Moroccan officials met with Sheikh Mohammad Al-Fizzazi and with Sheikh Hassan al-Khattab who is imprisoned in Qunaitra prison accused of heading a terrorist group called *Ansar al-Mahdi*, in order to discuss an initiative known as *munasaba wa musalaha* (“exhortation and reconciliation”) in which the leaders of the Salafi-jihadi movement would promise not to “accuse the (Moroccan) society and the Muslims of being *kuffar* (unbelievers), without a proper religious justification to doing so”, and to issue an apology and a remorse plea by those who were engaged in violence or killings towards both Moroccan society and the kingdom.<sup>36</sup> It has also been reported

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<sup>33</sup> Ceuta lies on the Mediterranean coast of Morocco and has been claimed by the Spanish crown since the 15<sup>th</sup> century in what Madrid insists is sovereign Spanish territory. The Moroccan crown claims the exclaves are illegally occupied by Spain. Jihadist sources have also referred to Spanish North Africa in terms of being occupied Crusader land.

<sup>34</sup> Camille Tawil, *Dar al Hayat*, October 29, 2009, <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/70864>

<sup>35</sup> Ali Abd al-Aal, *Islamonline.net*, November 30, 2009, [http://islamyoon.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1256909791214&pagename=Islamyoun/TYALayout](http://islamyoon.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1256909791214&pagename=Islamyoun/TYALayout)

<sup>36</sup> Ali Abd al-Aal, *Islamonline.net*, April 7, 2009, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1237705945018&pagename=Islamyoun%2FIYALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1237705945018&pagename=Islamyoun%2FIYALayout)

that Khattab, with permission from his fellow Islamist prisoners, is writing a study explaining what Salafi–jihadi really means.<sup>37</sup>

In September of 2009, another prominent Moroccan Islamist went on the record saying that he welcomes the *muraja'at* issued by the LIFG in Libya. Sheikh Mohammed Abd-Alwahab Rafiqi (a.k.a. Abu Hafs), who has been imprisoned in Fas since 2003. Rafiqi said that he hopes to have the LIFG studies circulated in Moroccan prisons, adding that it was important the way the Libyan authorities dealt with the LIFG leaders despite the fact that they tried to kill Qaddafi, a sitting head of state.<sup>38</sup>

However, it was clear that those working to issue a similar *muraja'at* in Morocco do not have the support of all their colleagues in Moroccan prisons. On October 20, 2009, the al-Maqreze Islamic centre issued a letter it received from Islamists in Moroccan jails in which they rejected Rafiqi's opinion regarding the LIFG *muraja'at*, saying that they did not authorize him to encourage the authorities to have these Corrective Studies distributed in the Moroccan jails. They went on to criticize what they described as “retreat” (recanting) by some Islamists, saying that they have not indorsed in any way the Corrective Studies that they described as “serious deviations”.<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

It is clear that AQIM had mixed fortunes in 2009. It was sufficiently able to expand its activities in some Maghreb states and the wider Sahel region. AQIM has also been faced with serious internal challenges emanating from within its jihadi base by those questioning its ideological methods. These ideological questions of tactical and target legitimacy may do more damage than from regional government's measures to contain the group.

Algeria remained the core of AQIM's operations in 2009. Its leadership continued to operate there, specifically in the Central Zone, east of Algiers. However, AQIM seems to have suffered from having lost some of its prominent commanders in clashes with government forces over the past two years. This loss may have affected the way AQIM operates, as seen from the lack of any further martyrdom operations throughout the course of last year. The lack of such operations may be the result of success achieved by the security forces that were able to dismantle the cells that carried out the series of suicide attacks during 2007. But this could also have been the result of religious debate from within AQIM – the group's leadership may have been studying the religious criticism it faced by many scholars when it carried out its suicide attacks in 2007 and 2008. A resumption of such a method of attacks during the course of this next year will indicate whether AQIM accepted or rejected the arguments for or against carrying out suicide attacks. AQIM would also need to have its leader coming out to the light. His absence during the whole of 2009 may be justified on the bases of security needs. If Droukdel's absence continues for the rest of 2010, then questions will start to asked and

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<sup>37</sup> *Islamonline.net*, May 7, 2009

<sup>38</sup> Sanna Karim, *Islamonline.net*, September 30, 2009, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1252188372219&pagename=Islamyoun/IYALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1252188372219&pagename=Islamyoun/IYALayout)

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.tajdeed.org.uk/ar/posts/list/506.page> (This link no longer functions)



speculation would gather more momentum as to whether the AQIM leader has been toppled, ill, injured, or even killed.

Furthermore, AQIM may attempt to further its gains in the western regions of Algeria this year. Its attack in Tipaza, last July, was its first operation in the Western Zone. It will be interesting to see whether this would lead into a confrontation with the *Humat Al-Da'wa* group, or the latter will submit to the AQIM's advance and will merge with it.

But the big success for AQIM during 2009 must be considered the kidnapping work it did in Mauritania and across the Sahel region. The kidnappings surely seem to be a profitable business for AQIM, as it generates funds from the ransom paid to free the Western hostages. With the money AQIM receives, more weapons could be bought, and will definitely lead into more attacks across the Maghreb. However, there is a danger here that many young Muslims across the region, who may be attracted to the Jihadi ideology, may simply think of AQIM as a rogue organization involved in banditry that simply seeks to profit from activities such as kidnapping tourists that are not properly justified from an Islamic point of view.

Finally, it is clear that the Corrective Studies issued by the LIFG appear to be gaining momentum. These studies are important because they come from leaders who are widely respected by genuine jihadists. They are also important because they challenge the ideas and ideology of al-Qaeda and similar organizations, by making impermissible any kind of fighting against Arab regimes, whatever the justification may be. This conclusion will be a direct threat mainly to AQIM, which will be asked to justify, from a religious point of view, its fight against the regimes across the Maghreb region. Both the central core of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have yet to refute the LIFG *muraja'at*. Sooner or later they will have to. When al-Qaeda and AQIM eventually issue an ideological retort, a clearer understanding of the Corrective Studies' significance and its reverberating effects throughout the full spectrum of jihadist thought will be realized.

## **About the Author**

Born in Beirut in 1965, Camille Tawil is an investigative journalist who specializes in Islamist groups and movements. Camille has worked at *Al-Hayat* in London since 1991, covering the Middle East and writing about the activities of armed Islamic movements in the Arab world. He has authored two books, "The Story of the Arab Jihadists", and "The Armed Islamic Movement in Algeria - From the FIS to the GIA". Camille contributes regularly to the Jamestown Foundation's Global Terrorism Analysis Program, particularly its weekly publication, *Terrorism Monitor*.