

Suicide Attacks in Algeria: Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM)

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Theme: Algeria has been confronted by 17 suicide attacks over a period of 16 months. Despite the devastation of these attacks, it is also clear that the Salafist Group of Combat and Preaching (GSPC)/Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM) grows in its sophistication, possibly to increasingly market itself as al-Qaeda's representative in the region.

Summary: On 19 August 2008 Algeria experienced the most devastating suicide attack till date, when a suicide bomber targeted new police recruits. Despite the fact that Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM) continued with the Salafist Group of Combat and Preaching (GSPC) target selection in predominately focusing its attacks on the state and its representatives, this attack also mirror an important change: the targeting of police recruits (as well as civilians), that takes one back to the devastating attacks against police recruits in Iraq. In addition to this development, the international community also bears witness to an increase in attacks against foreign representatives from France, but also from the US and its allies in their campaign in the War against Terrorism in Afghanistan. Considering the fact that suicide attack itself is a foreign concept to a country that experienced the devastating consequences of terrorism the last two decades, what other trends and developments are evident?

Analysis: The official alignment of the Salafist Group of Combat and Preaching (GSPC) with al-Qaeda in January 2007 attracted tremendous interest from analysts. As mentioned in an earlier analysis¹ issued on 2 February 2007, this development did not come as an absolute surprise considering that the GSPC had gradually warmed up towards al-Qaeda since 2004, in addition to the fact that al-Qaeda influenced its split from the GIA in 1998. At that stage, mention was made that in aligning itself with al-Qaeda the following were self-evident:

- The commitment to al-Qaeda's cause in current hotspots (Iraq and Afghanistan), including recruitment.
- The utilisation of the GSPC's network in Europe, particularly France.
- The growing possibility of suicide operations, clearly evident in the latest rhetoric on the part of the GSPC, since the latter adheres to the strategy and philosophical principles of al-Qaeda.

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¹ See http://www.issafrika.org/index.php?link_id=5&slink_id=4046&link_type=12&slink_type=12&tmpl_id=3.

- The growing influence of the GSPC in the Maghreb region despite the decline in the number of attacks in Algeria. The GSPC incorporates Algerian, Moroccan, Libyan, Tunisian and Mauritanian jihadists and is therefore no longer an Algerian organisation, but rather a transnational terror organisation.

Overview of Suicide Operations

Of particular importance is that this alignment with al-Qaeda would *inter alia* imply the 'growing possibility of suicide operations'. Events in Algeria since then support this unfortunate analysis, in view of the fact that Algeria experienced the following suicide bombings:

- 11 April 2007 – Three suicide bombers targeted the Prime Minister's office and a police station in Bab Ezzouar in Algiers.
- 11 July 2007 – 10 soldiers were killed and 35 people injured when a suicide bomber drove a truck of explosives into their barracks near Lakhdaria, approximately 80 kilometres from Algiers.
- 6 September 2007 – A suicide bomber on foot detonated his explosive device in the midst of a crowd waiting to see President Boutiflika in Batna.
- 8 September 2007 – A suicide truck bomb targeted a Coast Guard barracks in Dellys, approximately 100 kilometres east of Algiers.
- 21 September 2007 – A suicide bomber targeted a convoy of foreign workers employed by a French company near Lakhdaria.
- 11 December 2007 – Twin suicide truck bombs targeted the Algerian Constitutional Council and the United Nations building, housing the UNDP in Algiers.
- 2 January 2008 – A suicide bomber in a truck targeted the Naciria police station, 50 kilometres from Algiers.
- 29 January 2008 – The Thenia police station was targeted by a suicide attack (truck) east of Algiers.
- 4 June 2008 – A suicide bomber detonated his device near the gate of the military barracks. Although military personnel fired at the attacker, he still managed to detonate his explosive device. In a second attack, an attacker left an explosive device near a café in Bordj El Kiffan, possibly in an attempt to attract the attention of military personnel (although AQLIM claimed that two suicide bombers were responsible for the attacks, only the attack on the barracks was executed by a suicide bomber). Two days later on 6 June, six soldiers were killed in an attack near Cap Djinet in a roadside bombing. This attack was followed by two bombings on 8 June in which a train station was targeted in Beni Amrane, while the second device targeted first responders. In the first attack a French engineer working for Razel (a French company) and soldiers that accompanied him were targeted.
- 24 July 2008 – A suicide bomber on a motorcycle targeted a military vehicle near Lakhdaria.
- 3 August 2008 – A suicide car bomb near a police station in Tizi Ouzou left 25 people injured, including 21 civilians and four police officers.
- 9 August 2008 – A suicide bomber rammed a van with between 200 to 300 kilogrammes of explosives into a police post in Zemmouri el-Bahri, in eastern Algeria, killing eight people and injuring 19 others. The attack, however, took place at night, contrary to most of the other attacks. Documents recovered at the scene identified the Tizi Ouzou suicide bomber, which proves that it was the same group that perpetrated the Tizi Ouzou attack.

- 19 August 2008 – A suicide car bomber detonated targeting a line of applicants queuing up to register at a police academy in the Issers district of the Boumerdes region, 56 kilometres east of Algiers, killing at least 43 people and injuring a further 45. Forty-two of the dead and 32 of the people injured in the attack were civilians, while one police officer was killed and 13 were wounded. Most of the civilians killed were would-be police recruits, but witnesses said several motorists passing by were also killed. This attack resulted in the most casualties in a single incident to date.
- 20 August 2008 – Two car bomb attacks in eastern Algeria killed at least 12 people: one bomb detonated near the military headquarters in Bouira, while the primary attack was directed at employees of SNC-Lavalin, a Canadian engineering firm. The suicide bomber, later identified as Abdul Rahman Abu Zeinab al-Mauritani, targeted a bus transporting SNC-Lavalin employees near the Sophie hotel. Although AQLIM, when claiming responsibility for the attack, refers to SNC-Lavalin employees as Canadian, they were identified as Algerian nationals working for the Canadian firm. Another important element in this attack was the use of a Mauritanian national, while all 17 previous suicide bombers in Algeria were Algerian nationals. In other words, involving other nationalities in attacks in Algeria, versus using Algeria as a recruitment and training ground for foreign fighters to Iraq and to a lesser extent Afghanistan, might reflect important elements that could have disastrous consequences to stability not only in Algeria but also in the region at large:
 - (1) AQLIM was successful in marketing itself as a regional organisation and as the representative of al-Qaeda;
 - (2) Instead of using Algeria or the broader region to train potential foreign fighters, while Iraq witnesses the decreasing success and influence of al-Qaeda (leading to the establishment of the structure in Pakistan and Afghanistan), AQLIM might argue that instead of fighting the same enemy (to be discussed in the next paragraph) in a foreign country, operations should rather be directed within Algeria.

Trends and Possible Changes in Suicide Operations

Although suicide bombing is a new tactic in Algeria –that has already experienced 17 years of terrorism–, these attacks still predominately target the security forces (police and military), considered to be representatives of the Algerian government. The novelty in target selection is that attacks are now also directed at foreign companies and foreign representatives:

- French workers are considered a historically justified target due to Algeria's violent war of liberation against France in order to gain its independence.
- Attacks directed against US representatives (an earlier attack on the Brown and Root-Condor company on 9 December 2006 can be considered an example) are predominantly motivated by the recognition of the US as the primary enemy for waging its War against Terrorism.
- Attacks on the allies of the US in its war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq include the recent attempt against Canadian interests. A possible explanation can be traced to the increase in calls to attack Canadian representatives in Afghanistan, particularly after the warning the Taliban issued to Canada on 17 August that if it failed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, insurgents would continue to target Canadians in the country. On the same day of the attack in Algeria, a roadside bomb in southern Afghanistan killed three Canadian soldiers (two days later a Taliban ambush killed 10 French troops). While this is plausible, AQLIM nevertheless claimed that the attack took three months to plan and

execute. However, Canada's status as an ally of the US in Afghanistan, particularly in the south of the country –the centre of operations against the Taliban in Pakistan's tribal areas– suggests the possibility that AQLIM in Algeria is mimicking Taliban and al-Qaeda operations in Afghanistan –and, to a lesser extent, Iraq– to further 'sell' its alliance with al-Qaeda.

The focus on foreign, particularly French, interests can almost be described as a return to the initial focus of the GIA. The first attack on foreigners was recorded on 21 September 1993 when two French surveyors were found with their throats cut near Sidi Bel Abbes. The attack against the United Nations came as a surprise, although it could have been foreseeable if only for what the UN represents for the Islamists: 'an enemy of Islam under the control of the United States'.

In addition to the targets selected, there is a further element that deserves some attention: the method of delivery. Most suicide attacks have so far been carried out using vehicles (mainly stolen trucks and cars and lately, for the first time, a motorcycle). In a worrying development, the Batna attack on 6 September and again the attack on 4 June were carried out by bombers using 'suicide vests' and the latter have also been seized in counter-terrorist operations. As the difficulty in reaching targets increases, given the use of barriers and the cordoning-off of security areas, terrorists began to approach their intended targets on foot, with the advantage that they can get as close as possible to their intended targets. When countering this trend, most countries profiled potential suicide bombers as male, leading terrorists to start recruiting female suicide bombers. Although this has not yet occurred in Algeria, it deserves consideration given the lax –or even, in some strategic areas, non-existent– security checks on women. The following two examples show how women are already being encouraged to increase their involvement:

- On 23 January 2008 the Algerian security forces arrested a potential suicide bomber in Nedroma. Searching his residence, a computer was discovered which had been hidden by the suspect's sister. Its owner had deliberately damaged the keyboard and the operating system of the microcomputer in question, as well as the electronic components of the main desktop computer in order to erase the contents. Despite these efforts and with the assistance of data recovery software, the security forces were successful in recovering the data. Of importance to this discussion was the fact that numerous documents called on women to take part in the war in Iraq and in terrorism in Algeria. Also among the recovered files were training manuals on the handling of weapons and explosives as well as documents in which new recruits were taught methods enabling them to resist the interrogations of the Algerian security agencies.²
- On 13 February 2008 one man and two women were arrested by the police in Lakhdaria after the man –identified by his initials B.T., aged 31– threatened to carry out a suicide attack on one of the security agency's police stations. Two young women living in Lakhdaria, among them a 21-year-old woman named Sabrina, were arrested. B.T., known to the police, was arrested in 1996, having spent 15 years in jail before being released on 25 July 2004 as part of an amnesty initiative. As a member of the GIA, he was considered to be an expert in explosives and specialised in manufacturing home-made bombs.³

² 'Algerian would-be suicide bomber arrested in Nedroma', *BBC Middle East*, 25/1/2008.

³ 'Algerian security forces foil suicide bombing attempt in Lakhdaria', *BBC Middle East*, 13/II/2008.

A possible reason for the change in tactics might relate to their propaganda value and to the organisation's actual strength. It is to be expected that an organisation that keeps losing experienced fighters will opt for a less confrontational strategy. This explains the growing use of explosives rather than firearms, since in the latter case the attacker might be killed in the shoot-out. The use of explosives also allows a small experienced core group of extremists to build the devices, with delivery being left to less experienced fighters or suicide bombers, who can be replaced more easily. Equally, the impact of the death of one suicide bomber in a highly populated area is greater than that of the killing of a few members of the security forces in remote areas. Following the loss of experienced GSPC members as a result of surrenders, arrests or their elimination by the security forces, GSPC/AQLIM is further trying to attract both foreign fighters and younger volunteers –between the ages of 16 and 25–, who are often inexperienced but who are idealistic. Essentially, the strength of the organisation, measured in the number of fighters, no longer serves as an indication of the threat level. In other words, the ability to recruit potential suicide bombers levels out the importance of the number of fighters willing to engage the security forces in insurgency or guerrilla warfare tactics.

New recruitment techniques have also presented a new challenge to the security forces, in that it is more difficult to implement proactive measures against individuals with no previous criminal records or who have not raised suspicions and are therefore unknown to the security forces. New recruits are particularly targeted at mosques although the Internet is also an extremely effective tool to reach and radicalise young people both in Algeria and elsewhere. Many young people, even from poor socio-economic backgrounds, frequent Internet cafés where they have access to video material, training manuals and terrorist messages. In addition to targeting younger people, the profiles of the suicide bombers responsible for the 11 April 2007 attacks reflected another concern: the recruitment of former criminals, particularly those involved in narcotics and alcohol. For instance, Benchihab Mouloud Hossine –alias Abu Dujanah– had previously served prison sentences in the Serkaji, Berouaghia and Ouargla correctional institutions for multiple crimes, including the 'promotion and consumption of drugs', while Marwan Boudina –alias Nabil or Muadz bin Jabal–, who targeted the Palais du Gouvernement, was also involved in crime until in January 2007 he became a devout Muslim.⁴ It is well known that the use of both narcotics and alcohol is forbidden by Islam. Algeria and Morocco are both experiencing increases in drug abuse, providing a valuable source of potential suicide bombers who are exploited by extremists to their own advantage.

Training of suicide bombers take place after a short period of radicalisation, relatively close to the area where they are recruited, in contrast to the mobile training camps that are mainly used for individuals –both local and foreign– on their way to Iraq. In this regard, Algeria serves as a base for foreign fighters bound for Iraq, especially from Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Nigeria, Niger, Mali and Senegal. However, given the example of the Mauritanian national involved in the attack on 20 August, this tactic might change in the future.

It is equally important to note that suicide attacks have occurred in conjunction with roadside bombings –that are not a new tactic– mainly directed at members of the security forces. Another cause for concern is that although most attacks occur in smaller towns to the east of Algiers, AQLIM operatives have shown an ability to successfully execute attacks in big cities like Algiers. While western Algeria is often considered to be 'quiet',

⁴ *Echourouk El Youmi*, 16-17/IV/2007.

despite the use of the region bordering Morocco to smuggle firearms and explosives into eastern Algeria –on 24 August 2008 Algerian security forces eliminated 10 militants in a gun battle near Tarek Ibn Ziad, 250 kilometres west of Algiers⁵, it might start to be targeted in the future, particularly after the adoption of harsher new security measures in eastern and central Algeria. According to Echourouk El Youmi,⁶ the Army has increased and reinforced checkpoints in and around the eastern towns and cities. Furthermore, combined counter-terrorist security units have been issued with mobile scanners to check the contents of bags, suitcases and the boots of vehicles in the eastern region. In other words, while suicide attacks can be expected in Algiers, Boumerdes and Tizi Ouzou, actions in highly populated areas west of Algiers should not be ruled out.

Despite the devastating impact of suicide attacks, there are two ‘positive’ consequences of this new modus operandi: public outrage and dissension within the organisation itself, the latter from individuals who refuse to engage in the indiscriminate killing of innocent civilians. Although a target might be considered ‘legitimate’, an explosive device detonated in a public area does not only kill or injure those it is aimed at. In other words, there will always be ‘unintended casualties’. In reaction, in its last statement after the attacks on 20 August, AQLIM stated that the attackers ‘made sure that the passengers on the protected bus were Canadian citizens. Therefore, they targeted the bus, and it is not, as the apostates claim, that we are targeting our brothers, Muslim workers... we are choosing our targets carefully and we are always careful with your blood. We do not target the innocent’.⁷

Conclusion: The Algerian experience can unfortunately not be summarised in just a few words, but if there is one lesson to be learnt it is that terrorists will always adapt their focus and strategy to achieve their objectives or even to remain relevant. The lesson for the security forces is to always think and prepare for the unthinkable, since terrorists need to remain a step ahead to be able to achieve their objectives.

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⁵ A. de Montesquiou, ‘10 suspected militants killed in Algeria’, *Associated Press*, 24/VIII/2008.

⁶ See <http://www.echoroukonline.com/fra/selection/1872.html>.

⁷ ‘Months of planning to kill Canadians brought only Algerian deaths in blast’, *Edmonton Journal*, 23/VIII/2008.