Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources

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Although originating in Algeria, AQIM and its allies had by 2012 become so entrenched in the Sahel that they were in de-facto control of vast swathes of territory in Northern Mali. This article explains how and why GSPC/AQIM established itself in the Sahel, and why the group eventually decided to take the fight to the Sahelian countries, where they had previously found sanctuary. Relying on hitherto unused primary sources, this article is the first to show that the leadership of AQIM and al-Qaida Central did not want to engage in direct conflicts with the Sahelian states. The eventual shift of strategy in the region was brought about by the increasing numbers of Sahelians in AQIM's southern brigades.

Keywords: AQIM, jihadism, al-Qaida, Sahel, Sahara, transnational

Introduction

The conglomerate of jihadist groups that operate in the Sahel today can all trace their origins to the jihadist movement that emerged in Algeria during the civil war of the 1990s. As the GSPC *(Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat)* gave way to AQIM *(al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib)*, the movement adopted a more transnationalist outlook, but the focus of the Algerian jihadist movement remained fixed on the regime in the country in which it had emerged. In 2012, however, AQIM and its partner groups had become so entrenched in the Sahel that they found themselves in de-facto control of vast swathes of territory in neighboring Mali. How and why did this change occur?

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The purpose of this article is to explain how and why GSPC/AQIM established itself in the Sahara initially, and why the group eventually decided to fight the governments in the Sahel.[1] In order to answer these questions, I will examine previously unused and underused primary sources, especially internal documents, which have recently become available and which provide new insights into the history and strategic considerations of AQIM. The article will trace the history of GSPC/AQIM from its establishment in the Sahara until the eve of the Malian rebellion in 2012 and use the new primary sources to reassess common notions and hypotheses about the group's strategies in the wider Sahel region.

I will argue that GSPC/AQIM regarded the Sahara as being of high strategic importance as a rear base[2] to support its fight in northern Algeria, and not as a new or alternative front that would rival its jihad against the regime in Algeria. Second, I find that there was eventually a shift in how GSPC/AQIM looked upon its presence in the Sahelian states and that the group came to view these states as prioritized enemies and fronts for jihad, rather than rear bases. However, it took some time for this change in priorities to occur. GSPC/AQIM had maintained a presence in the region from the time it was founded, but it was not until 2011-12 that it began to scale up its efforts to combat the Sahelian states. The analyses presented here suggest that this shift happened against the strategic considerations of both AQIM's leadership and that of its mother group, al-Qaida. Rather, it reflected the will of the increasing numbers of Sahelian cadres in AQIM's southern brigades, for whom an uphill struggle in Algeria seemed considerably less attractive than fighting the weak regimes in the countries from which they hailed.

Conventional wisdom holds that terrorist and insurgent groups are unlikely to attack states that provide them with sanctuary, as noted e.g. by Stephen Tankel, who writes:

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> We can expect that geographically dislocated revolutionary organizations will be less likely to have a belligerent relationship with their country of domicile than their country of origin even if both countries fail to govern according to these revolutionary groups' interpretation of sharia.[3]

This description applies well to AQIM's relationship with Mali and Algeria respectively. Consequently, AQIM's eventual decision to attack Mali represents something of an anomaly. Brynjar Lia and Åshild Kjøk, writing on the analogous situation of GIA launching a terrorist campaign against France in the 1990s, argue that hostility can arise between a group and a sanctuary state if the utility of the sanctuary declines due to increased repression, or when a critical situation occurs, to either the advantage or disadvantage of the group.[4] While the outbreak of the Malian rebellion in 2012 might be understood as an example of a critical situation, the internal calls for attacking the Sahelian states in fact antedate this crisis by several years, and the utility of the Malian sanctuary had seen no decline in the same period.

However, the case of AQIM shows that another process was occurring, namely that the increasing heterogeneity of the group's membership, i.e. the influx of Sahelian recruits into the southern brigades, made its enemy hierarchy more heterogeneous. Thomas Hegghammer has shown that increased heterogeneity of enemy hierarchies is a feature of "ideological hybridization" of jihadist groups. The hybridization implies that so-called "near" and "far enemy" approaches are blended, and Hegghammer notes in his 2009-article that AQIM displays signs of being such a hybridized group.[5]

I will suggest that AQIM also moved towards a hybridized "near enemy" focus, in which the original fight against the Algerian regime became intertwined with fighting the Sahelian states. From an organizational point of view, it is interesting to note this move came about as a bottom-up initiative from AQIM's Sahelian cadres, despite being fiercely opposed by the

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top-down directives from AQC (al-Qaida's Central leadership), which continued to exert significant influence on the strategic decisions of AQIM's leadership.

The article will proceed as follows. First, I will review the available literature and primary sources to establish what we know and do not know about AQIM's activities in the Sahara-Sahel. Second, I will give brief overview of GSPC/AQIM's origins in the Algerian civil war and the beginning of GSPC's activities in the Sahara, including the rivalries that subsequently emerged between GSPC/AQIM commanders in the south and the leadership of the group. Next, I will turn to the "transnationalization"[6] of GSPC that culminated in the merger with al-Qaida in 2006-2007, and the ramifications this process had for the southern brigades and AQIM as whole. Thereafter, I will examine the internal strategic debates within AQIM in the years leading up to the rebellion in Mali in 2012. Finally, I will conclude by highlighting what the case of AQIM can tell us about how the transnationalization and indigenization of a jihadist group can affect its strategy.

Literature and Sources

GSPC/AQIM has received considerable attention in the academic literature, with a number of studies focusing on AQIM in general and its activities in the Sahara-Sahel in specific. A central topic in the aftermath of GSPC's transformation into al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been the relationship between the group's local, regional, and global ambitions. Jean-Luc Marret argued in 2008 for regarding AQIM as a "glocal" group that focuses on all these three levels, drawing strength from the al-Qaida brand while remaining deeply embedded in its local context.[7] Jean-Pierre Filiu similarly addresses the tension between AQIM's "near" and "far enemy"-approach, noting in 2009 that the organization had failed to

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become a transnational, or even a pan-Maghribian organization, which continued to focus most of its efforts on the Algerian regime without securing sufficient public support.[8] Stephen Harmon has also written extensively on the origins of AQIM and the reasons for its expansion in the Sahara-Sahel region.[9]

However, as has been identified as a common problem in studies of terrorist groups,[10] the academic literature on AQIM also suffers from a paucity of primary sources. Notable exceptions include Jean-Pierre Filiu and Manuel Torres Soriano,[11] who rely on GSPC/AQIM propaganda and statements in their studies. Lemine Ould Salem's book on Mokhtar Belmokhtar[12] similarly exploits primary source documents, as well as interviews with local experts and jihadists in the Sahel. Overall, however, most of the literature on AQIM relies on secondary sources.

Like the above studies, this article also makes use of GSPC/AQIM statements and propaganda. The official statements have been found on now-defunct GSPC/AQIM websites,[13] while the propaganda sources come from GSPC's official magazines, *Ṣadā al-Qitāl* (2000-2003) and *al-Jamāʿa* (2004-2006).[14] In addition to these older materials, the article will engage with new primary sources that have become available more recently, as discussed below.

In the past few years, the primary source material on AQIM has been greatly augmented by the discovery of the group's internal documents, but these new sources remain underused in the literature. The first such discovery was made by *Associated Press*-journalist Rukmini Callimachi after AQIM left Timbuktu in 2013.[15] Perhaps the most interesting among these documents with regards to AQIM's pre-2012 history is an exchange between AQIM's Shura Council and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and Mathieu Guidère's study of this letter has been much

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cited in the literature.[16] His analysis focuses almost exclusively on Belmokhtar's rivalry with the other commanders in the group and therefore does not pick up on some of the other insights it provides into AQIM's history. Unfortunately, other authors have generally referred only to his study rather than to the original documents and likewise missed the rest of the information therein.

However, even less attention has been afforded to the documents retrieved in Bin Ladin's hideout in Abbottabad. Despite the wealth of information that the Abbottabad documents provide about AQIM's internal organization, its strategic thinking, and its relationship with AQC, they have more or less been overlooked in the literature. This is even more surprising given that the material was released in its entirety in November 2017 and is freely available for download on CIA's website.[17]

There are several possible reasons for the lack of studies based on the Abbottabad Compound Material. First, the materials were released in one huge batch, without any categorization of topics or identifying information about each document. Moreover, the individual files were released under their original names, which only rarely give a good indication of their contents. Therefore, since the documents alone[18] amount to 16 gigabytes of data, finding relevant materials can be extremely time-consuming. Second, while the batches of documents that were declassified and released to the public prior to November 2017[19] included some documents with relevance to AQIM, these were relatively few in number, and they did not provide significant new insights. A third possible reason could be that considerable public interest in jihadism, especially after the rise of IS, has incentivized the research community to devote more attention to current events and developments than to historical studies.

This study will re-examine the history of GSPC/AQIM in the Sahara from its establishment until 2011, drawing upon these primary sources. Unless otherwise specified, these are all in

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Arabic, and the English translations quoted in the text are the author's own. The primary sources have been complemented and triangulated with the secondary literature and media sources. In cases where there have been discrepancies between the three types of sources, I have given preference to the primary ones, which should closest to the events they describe. If for example information in internal documents contradicts information in media sources, I rely on the former.

With its unique source material, the article presents an analysis that provides several new insights and challenges previous understandings of GSPC/AQIM in the Sahara. This article is the first to show that AQIM's leadership as late as 2011 was opposed to opening a new front in the Sahel, because it wanted the region to stay a rear base for AQIM's fight in Algeria, as it had been since GIA and GSPC established themselves in the region in the 1990s. Furthermore, it shows that the eventual decision to engage in direct conflict with the Sahelian states was a bottom-up process, driven not by AQIM's leadership, but by the pressure exerted by the large number of non-Algerians in AQIM's southern brigades. Finally, while previous studies have argued that AQIM's relationship with AQC was tenuous at best,[20] this article shows that the relationship was much closer than previously thought, and that AQC in fact exerted significant influence over AQIM's strategy.

GIA and GSPC in the Sahara

The jihadist presence in the Sahara and Sahel was established during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. From the outset, the jihadist groups did not regard the Sahara first and foremost as a military front, but as a rear base for the struggle in Algeria, which it remained until the outbreak of the rebellion in Northern Mali in 2012. This section will begin by giving an

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overview of the origins of AQIM's predecessors GIA and GSPC, and then explain how and why the groups established a rear base in the Sahara in the 1990s. Next, it will show that the region first came to be regarded as an area of major strategic importance and attracted significant international attention after the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in 2003.

The Algerian civil war was sparked in January 1992, when the authorities cancelled the second round of the parliamentary elections to prevent the Islamist party FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*), from gaining power. The cancellation of the election process sparked a violent response from a variety of Islamist groups, among which was the military arm of FIS, *Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS), and the *Groupe Islamique Armée* (GIA), a salafi-jihadist group that counted both domestic Islamist militants and returned veterans from the war in Afghanistan among its founding members.[21] In contrast to AIS, which advocated for a restoration of the electoral process, GIA rejected the legitimacy of the electoral system and saw armed struggle framed as "jihad" as the only means to realize their goal of creating an Islamic State in Algeria.[22] GIA enjoyed considerable popular support in Algeria during the first years of its struggle. However, as the movement was racked by infighting and adopted steadily more extremist views under the emirships of Jamal Zaytuni and his successor Antar Zouabri, the group lost support both at home and in the international jihadist milieu.[23] With violence having reached a high pitch already in 1994-1995, Zouabri's infamous 1997 declaration of *takfir* on the Algerian population at large paved the way for large-scale massacres of civilians.[24]

GIA's general *takfir* and its excessive violence eroded popular support for the jihad. The AIS declared a unilateral ceasefire with the Algerian government in 1997,[25] while units within GIA that denounced Zouabri's excesses sought to distance themselves from the group and continue fighting under other names. In September 1998, a number of GIA dissidents under Hassan

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Hattab split off to form GSPC (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*). GSPC, like its predecessor, was an avowedly salafi-jihadist group, which rejected the democratic process and manmade laws. However, GSPC repudiated GIA's *takfir* and attacks on civilians, and vowed to target security forces only.[26]

While the main thrust of GIA's activities centered on the northern parts of Algeria, the group maintained a presence in the country's Saharan regions.[27] This Saharan front was from the beginning intended as a rear base for the fight in Algeria, as explained by AQIM's Hisham Abu Akram in a 2017 interview with the al-Qaida publication *al-Risalah*.[28] According to Abu Akram, the emir of the Sahara in 1994 and presumably the first emir of the Saharan zone, was a certain Abd al-Baqi al-Aghwati. Little is known about al-Aghwati, except that he escorted an envoy from Usama bin Ladin to Djamel Zaytouni in 1994.[29] Aiding him in this mission, however, was Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who would go on to play a key role in the establishment of a jihadist presence in the Algerian Sahara and its subsequent spread to the countries of the Sahel.

In an interview published in *al-Jamāʿa*, Belmokhtar claims he spent a year and a half fighting with the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan, before returning to his hometown of Ghardaïa in Algeria in mid-1993. There, he set up a brigade known as *Katibat al-Shahada*, affiliated with GIA.[30] Belmokhtar rose quickly in the ranks, and after Abd al-Baqi al-Aghwati was killed in 1995, Belmokhtar was appointed emir in his place.[31] Already in 1994, Belmokhtar reportedly travelled from as far afield as Guinea in the west to Chad and possibly Sudan in the east, where he bought weapons from local military officers with money extracted from smuggling and banditry.[32] Security sources cited by Lemine Ould Salem report that Belmokhtar recruited the first jihadists from the Sahelian countries during this time, around 1995.[33] Accordingly,

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GIA's and later GSPC's southern zone has always been, to a certain extent, a Sahelian sub-branch.

As the GIA started fracturing after the death of Zitouni in 1996, Belmokhtar publicly disavowed Antar Zouabri and GIA for its deviations in November 1997.[34] In the aftermath, the Saharan brigade functioned independently for some time, before joining the other GIA dissidents that had founded GSPC in September 1998. Belmokhtar's ninth zone joined the fray in 1999,[35] and in the first years of GSPC's existence, Belmokhtar held the position as the organization's sole commander in the Sahara. Importantly for the future viability of the southern front, Belmokhtar spent time solidifying his presence across the border in northern Mali, where he cemented alliances with the local Tuareg notables[36] and with the Bérabiche Arabs, through marrying the daughter of an influential family.[37] These alliances would prove valuable in both the short and the long term. In the long term, the alliances provided some of the groundwork for the future establishment of a Malian jihadist movement. In the short term, they provided a safe haven where Belmokhtar could retreat and stay out of the reach of Algerian security forces. Eventually, other GSPC commanders recognized the strategic benefit of the Sahelian rear base that Belmokhtar had established, and made good use of it.

Amari Saïfi,[38] the emir of GSPC's fifth zone in northeastern Algeria, helped bring GSPC's activities in the Saharan region into the international limelight. In 2001-2002, Belmokhtar and Saïfi crisscrossed the Sahara together while acting as hosts to an emissary from al-Qaida, Abu Muhammad al-Yamani,[39] who had been dispatched to the region to establish official relations between al-Qaida and GSPC with the aim of merging the two organizations.[40] At the time, al-Yamani and the two GSPC commanders made extended trips in the countries south of Algeria in order to establish contacts with local notables and smuggling networks. According to a defector and former close collaborator of Saïfi, the travelling in the region, which was

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formally part of Belmokhtar's domain, made him realize its enormous potential and strategic importance. It is worth noting that according to the source, Saïfi's appreciation of the region's importance lay mainly in its opportunities for smuggling and for stealing transport and communications equipment from foreign companies operating there.[41]

However, Saïfi's lasting contribution to the region would be the introduction of a new modus operandi for GSPC/AQIM, namely large-scale kidnappings of Western citizens. In 2003, Saïfi returned to the Sahara with his men from the fifth zone, and over the course of four weeks from 22 February to 23 March, they roamed the desert of the Illizi region in GSPC's ninth zone, kidnapping 32 European tourists of various nationalities.[42] The above-mentioned defector from the group purports that the original plan was only to steal the tourists' cars and communications equipment, and that the actual hostage taking was an ad-hoc decision.[43] The amateurish execution of the operation, which saw the hostage takers run out of fuel and gas, and without having a clear idea of how and where to keep the hostages, appears to confirm this account.[44]

According to Lemine Ould Salem, Saïfi's original plan was to escort the hostages to his stronghold in the Aures Mountains within the territory of the fifth zone, but he realized that the distance was too great to traverse if he were to avoid capture. As it transpired, 17 of the hostages were kept in southern Algeria, and the Algerian army liberated this group following intense clashes with the GSPC on 13 May. Realizing the precarious situation they were in, Saïfi transported the second group across the border to Belmokhtar's turf in northern Mali. The release of the second group of hostages was eventually secured through the payment of a €5 million ransom, brokered by Belmokhtar's local contacts. Among the facilitators was the future leader of Ansar Dine and JNIM, Iyad Ag Ghali, who received a significant cut of the deal.[45] Saïfi used the cash extracted from the ransom to buy arms in Mali and Niger, which he

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commissioned some of his sub-commanders to smuggle back into Algeria. Saïfi himself went to Niger and thence to Chad to buy more weapons and equipment, where he was eventually captured by a rebel group in 2004 and extradited to Algeria.[46]

While Saïfi's mission ultimately failed, it imparted important strategic insights to GSPC that would have wide ramifications. First, it showed that Western governments were willing to pay huge sums for the release of hostages. Thus, the incident marked the first in a long series of profitable kidnap-for-ransom incidents for GSPC/AQIM, which would become a major source of revenue. Second, Saïfi's forays in the Sahara displayed the strategic importance of that region to the GSPC, which explains GSPC's heightened interest in the Sahara in the time that followed.

Infighting in GSPC/AQIM's Southern Brigades

In the aftermath of the kidnapping incident in 2003, the GSPC leadership took steps to expand its activity in the region. This strategy would lead to serious internal disputes between Belmokhtar on the one hand, and GSPC/AQIM's leadership, as well as the other commanders in the south, on the other.

In the so-called Timbuktu Letters,[47] Belmokhtar mentioned the incursion of Saïfi and his group into his territory in 2003 as the beginning of tense relations between the commanders in the Sahara.[48] At the time, Saïfi was already on bad terms with the leader of GSPC, Hassan Hattab, whom Belmokhtar on his side allegedly regarded as a close associate. Saïfi had by this point refused to obey Hattab's orders on numerous occasions, as for example his 2001 refusal to deliver the agreed portion of a weapons procurement to the leadership.[49] In the same year, he conspired to prevent the previously mentioned al-Qaida envoy, al-Yamani, from

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meeting with Hattab, insisting that he himself had the sufficient authority to reach an agreement on behalf of GSPC.[50] Belmokhtar states in the Timbuktu letters that Saïfi's incursion into the Sahara also happened without the consent of Hattab. The issue was eventually resolved, Belmokhtar claims, after he and Abd al-Haqq Abu al-Khabab, Saïfi's second-in-command,[51] reached an agreement where the latter would withdraw his men from the area.[52]

Shortly afterwards, however, leadership changes occurred both in GSPC central and in the fifth zone. After Saïfi left to traverse the Sahel region to procure arms with the ransom money he had acquired from the kidnapping of the European tourists, ending in his 2004 capture in Chad, al-Khabab took over as commander of the fifth zone.[53] Around the same time, in August 2003, Hassan Hattab was deposed by GSPC's *Council of Notables*,[54] whereupon Nabil Sahrawi was elected new emir. The ouster of Hattab, Harmon suggests, represented a victory for the "transnationalist" faction within GSPC, which wanted to bring the group closer to al-Qaida.[55] Considering his previous attempts to reach out to al-Qaida, Belmokhtar was in all likelihood in favor of the change of leadership, and this is also evident in his being among the signatories of the declaration confirming Sahrawi as the new emir.[56] However, less than a year later, in June 2004, Sahrawi was killed by Algerian security forces, and Sahrawi's deputy Abd al-Malik Droukdel[57] replaced him as emir. The relationship between Droukdel and Belmokhtar appears to have been strained from the onset. According to a defector from the group, Belmokhtar had expected to become the new emir of GSPC after Sahrawi's death, while Droukdel was meant to be a temporary placeholder until the *Council of Notables* could convene and elect a new emir, but Droukdel remained in place.[58] Indeed, the GSPC statement announcing Droukdel taking over as emir shows that no such meeting was convened.[59]

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In addition to, or perhaps because of the dispute over the leadership of the group, Droukdel took several steps that Belmokhtar regarded as undue infringements of the operational autonomy he had enjoyed under previous emirs. First, Droukdel overturned the previous agreement between Belmokhtar and al-Khabab, and approved the aforementioned elements of the fifth zone to work in the Sahara.[60] Second, Droukdel appointed a new emir of the Sahara that would oversee operations in the region, effectively demoting Belmokhtar to a lower position, answerable to Droukdel's handpicked emir. Scholars have correctly identified that Droukdel attempted to sideline Belmokhtar by promoting a regional emir and allowing other *katibas* (brigades) to operate in the region, but commonly date this to 2007 with the promotion of Yahya Jawadi[61] to the post.[62] However, Droukdel only appointed Yahya Jawadi after the defection of the previous emir, Abd al-Qadir Bin Masud, known as Musab Abu Dawud.[63] Evidently, the relations between Belmokhtar and the rest of the organization were strained before 2007, as the "Timbuktu Letters" show that Abu Dawud was dispatched to the Sahara to mediate in conflicts between Belmokhtar and others in the region.[64] Furthermore, the letters indicate that Belmokhtar refused to acknowledge him as emir, and refused to meet him. Abu Dawud's delegation reportedly spent "three years waiting to get to [Belmokhtar], until the members dispersed because of the long time. Some of them were killed, some were imprisoned and some turned".[65] Abu Dawud "turned" in 2007: the three-year period thus points to him being appointed emir of the Sahara in 2004, right after Droukdel became emir of GSPC.

Mathieu Guidère's otherwise excellent article on the Timbuktu Letters also overlooks the early appointment of an emir of the Sahara[66] and mistakenly traces the disagreement between AQIM and Belmokhtar to the latter's rivalry with Abu Zayd[67] and his Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade. He states:

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> "the main disagreement [between the AQIM leadership and Belmokhtar] seems to lie in the Advisory Board's 2008 decision to authorize the establishment of new jihadist groups from the north (in Algeria) in the Sahel region (mainly in northern Mali). Due to this, Belmokhtar never accepted the establishment of the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade, led by the charismatic Abu Zayd until his death".[68]

However, the actual establishment of northern brigades in the Sahara did not happen in 2008, but already in 2003-2004, and while the origins of the Tariq ibn Ziyad brigade are somewhat obscure, it existed long before Abu Zayd came into the international limelight from 2008 onwards. The first attack attributed to the brigade in GSPC propaganda occurred on 23 November 2002 on the borders between Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou in northern Algeria, as reported in *Ṣadā Al-Qitāl*.[69] While the brigade therefore appears to have been created in the north, its areas of operation soon shifted to the Sahara. Already in 2003, BBC Monitoring, quoting *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, referred to the brigade that kidnapped the 32 tourists as the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade, claiming Saïfi created the brigade.[70] It therefore appears that the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade was there right from the beginning of Saïfi and the fifth zone's entry into the Sahara, and that its activities in the region long predates any decision made by AQIM's Advisory Board in 2008.

As for Abu Zayd himself, at what point exactly he was made the commander of the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade is unclear, but he was present in the region at an early stage as part of Saïfi's entourage.[71] After the capture of Saïfi in Chad in 2004, al-Khabab became the new emir of the fifth zone, as indicated in the Timbuktu letters.[72] Algerian news media report that Abu Zayd subsequently went on to lead the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade, as al-Khabab operated primarily in the fifth zone's areas in the north-east, while also serving as a liaison between the GSPC/AQIM brigades in the Sahara and the leadership in northern Algeria.[73] The earliest

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mention of Abu Zayd in GSPC's own publications in *al-Jamāʿa's* January 2006 edition, in which he is reported to have led a *sariyya*[74] in the Sahara during an attack in mid-October 2005,[75] which in all likelihood refers to Tariq ibn Ziyad.

While one might dismiss this focus on the exact timeline of events as nit picking, it is in fact crucial to understanding key points in the development of GSPC/AQIM's presence in the area. The above treatment shows that the tension between AQIM's leadership and local commanders on the one hand, and Belmokhtar on the other hand, originated not in Droukdel's promotion of Abu Zayd to counterbalance Belmokhtar as commonly suggested.[76] On the contrary, it emerged following Droukdel's approval of Saïfi and Abu al-Khabab's incursions into the Sahara, as well as in his appointment of Abu Dawud as emir of the Sahara, both of which happened in 2004. Thus, it is evident that Droukdel took a keen interest in the Sahara and wished to ramp up the group's presence there right from the beginning of his tenure.

Although Droukdel's early conduct with regards to the Saharan region appears partly to have derived from a wish to sideline his potential rival Belmokhtar and ensure his leadership over the group, he clearly saw long-time strategic benefits in the region. In the Timbuktu Letters, Droukdel claims the decision to ratify the fifth zone's presence in the Sahara was not his own, but that it was made on the behalf of the group in response to what al-Khabab had described as a great, untapped potential in the region. This "untapped potential" appears to have been understood primarily in terms of opportunities for procuring arms and equipment, in addition to kidnapping-for-ransom.[77] These opportunities for economic gain were exploited with significant success soon afterwards. However, as will be discussed in subsequent sections, the potential the Sahelian states offered as a new front for jihad remained a low priority on Droukdel's agenda, right up to the outbreak of the rebellion in northern Mali in 2012.

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The Transnationalization of the Algerian Jihadist Movement

On 11 September 2006, GSPC publicly claimed allegiance to Usama bin Ladin,[78] and a mere half year later in January 2007, the group was formally incorporated into al-Qaida under the name of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM).[79] The rebranding of the GSPC as an al-Qaida franchise had been in the works at least since Droukdel's ascent to the position of emir in 2004, but the numerous previous failures of Algerian jihadists to live up to the standards of al-Qaida in the past likely necessitated a prolonged vetting process before Bin Ladin let GSPC into the fold.[80] While the merger undoubtedly represented a victory for the transnationalist faction of GSPC,[81] AQIM's attacks would continue to be overwhelmingly concentrated on Algeria.

As Stephen Harmon points out, the rebranding of GSPC into an al-Qaida franchise was, in addition to the ideological affinity that might have existed between its leaders and Bin Ladin, a move intended to ensure the group's survival.[82] By the time of the GSPC-AQ merger, the jihadist movement in Algeria had lost much of its previous popular support. The movement was weakened by the Algerian government's successive amnesty programs that had enticed numerous militants to lay down their arms, including GSPC's former emir Hassan Hattab,[83] and the aforementioned emir of the ninth zone, Abd al-Qadir Bin Masud, aka Abu Dawud. The precarious position of GSPC is spelled out in a report penned by Yunis al-Mauritani to AQC in 2007, describing how the movement was decimated by mass defections and more or less ran out of weapons and ammunitions in the early 2000s.[84] Facing increased pressure from Algerian security forces and lacking popular support, GSPC's merger with al-Qaida renewed its relevancy as an actor in a global jihad, while downplaying the focus on the national jihad that was essentially lost.[85]

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The adoption of a more international outlook in order to win local support was not at all a new phenomenon in GSPC's history. The movement had adopted increasingly "transnationalist" rhetoric, aligning themselves with the goals of al-Qaida since Sahrawi's election as emir in 2003.[86] The US invasion of Iraq and the call for jihad in that country in particular had sparked a significant jihadist recruitment among the younger generation in Algeria, who were trained in GSPC camps in the Sahara and directed to the battlefield with Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). While exact numbers are unclear, the Algerians constituted a significant percentage of the foreign fighters in Iraq, perhaps as many as 20%.[87] It seems, however, that this recruitment had little positive effect on AQIM's fortunes in Algeria. According to al-Mauritani's report, almost all the Algerian recruits travelled on to Iraq.[88] However, as AQI's fortunes were waning after the Sunni *sahwa* in 2007-2008, AQIM's key foreign partner was lost just as the organization adopted a new global posture. Moreover, as Filiu states, the fact that al-Qaida's attention was devoted to the Iraqi branch that appeared to be falling apart, might explain why al-Qaida did not devote more resources to AQIM.[89]

Apart from rhetorical broadsides against France, the US and the West in general, the most striking manifestation of the realignment with al-Qaida lay in the adoption of suicide attacks and in attacks on foreign interests on Algerian soil. The new al-Qaida franchise carried out its first attack against foreigners in March 2007, targeting employees of a Russian gas firm. One month later, AQIM conducted coordinated suicide bombings in Algiers, and in December, 41 people were killed in suicide bombings against a UN office and the Constitutional Court.[90] Despite propaganda claims that these attacks targeted foreigners, most of the victims were actually Algerians,[91] which was also the case in some of AQIM's later attacks against supposedly foreign targets.[92]

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The new transnational focus of AQIM yielded meagre results on most fronts. Its transformation into an al-Qaida franchise had stoked fears that it might carry out terrorist attacks in the European mainland. The geographic proximity to the European mainland, as well as the support networks established by GIA and GSPC in various European countries,[93] made AQIM one of the better-situated al-Qaida groups to do so. However, until this day, AQIM has not claimed responsibility for a single attack in Europe. Moreover, AQIM's grand ambition of becoming the focal point for all jihadist groups in North Africa, as indicated by its choice of name, also did not come to fruition, as Tunisian, Moroccan and Libyan jihadist factions opted to remain independent or merge directly with al-Qaida.[94]

As noted by Filiu and Harmon,[95] the southern brigades were the only part of AQIM that actually brought credence to its new international posture by carrying out attacks outside of Algeria. The first such attack was in fact carried out years before GSPC became AQIM, as jihadists under Belmokhtar's command killed 17 Mauritanian soldiers at a military base in Lemgheity in 2005, ostensibly to punish Mauritania for its military cooperation with the US.[96] GSPC's propaganda apparatus celebrated the attack and likened it to *Ghazwat Badr*, in reference to Muhammad's first victory against the Meccans.[97] The strike against Mauritania clearly upped GSPC's credentials in the international jihadist milieu and occasioned praise from al-Qaida through its Iraqi wing.[98] From 2007-2011, Mauritania saw a string of jihadist attacks that targeted both domestic security forces and foreign interests, including the 2007 killing of four French tourists, the 2008 attack on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, and the failed suicide attack against the French embassy in 2009.[99]

However, even when taking Mauritania into account, it is remarkable how *few* attacks occurred in the Sahel from 2005-2011. GTD's database of terrorist attacks attributes 262

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attacks in Algeria to GSPC/AQIM in the period, compared to only 26 in Mali, Mauritania and Niger combined.[100]

According to the same database, the only incidents AQIM actually claimed responsibility for in Mali and Niger were abductions of Western citizens. However, since the hostage takings were motivated primarily by economic gain, AQIM's operations in these countries continued to function first and foremost as a support for the Algerian front. While the kidnappings orchestrated by Belmokhtar and Abu Zayd garnered considerable attention and were undoubtedly an asset in AQIM's global posture, the hostages were for the most part released after ransoms were paid, earning AQIM much-needed funds.[101] Rukmini Callimachi asserts that Western countries paid as much as $91.5 million in ransoms to AQIM from 2008-2013,[102] which allowed AQIM to buy not only weapons, but also influence in local communities in the Sahel.[103]

The importance of the hostage-taking business is emphasized in internal AQ-correspondence. The kidnapping of five French hostages in Niger on 16 September 2010 prompted Usama bin Ladin to intervene, asking that AQIM set a French military withdrawal from Afghanistan as the condition for releasing the hostages.[104] The response from AQIM representative Abu Muhammad Salah to al-Qaida's Central leadership (AQC) is deferential to Bin Ladin, promising to do as he bids, while simultaneously explaining that releasing Western hostages in return for monetary ransoms and releasing incarcerated jihadists play an integral part in their local strategy. The financial aspect in particular is at the forefront.

> "[hostage taking] is of the utmost importance to the financial side of the continuation of jihadist activity in the Sahara, because it is our only, *our only* source of funding […] other sources of funding are completely and utterly non-existent".[105]

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Although it is possible that AQIM's representative exaggerates somewhat in order to get what he wants, it is interesting to see how much they reportedly relied on this source of income. This statement contrasts sharply with oft-made assertions that AQIM was intimately involved in, and made great profits from smuggling narcotics, cigarettes and other contraband.[106] It also favors the standpoint of Sergei Boeke, who argues against Harmon and others that have put forward the notion that AQIM in the Sahara could be better understood as a criminal gang than an ideologically motivated group.[107]

While the countries of the Sahel remained an important for AQIM in this period, the region was still regarded first and foremost as a rear base for AQIM's operations in Algeria, not as a new front in itself. Northern Mali in particular served this function of being a physical sanctuary and hub for economic activity, while the Malian government's efforts to drive the jihadists out were lackluster at best.[108] Stephen Tankel fittingly described Mali's handling of the AQIM presence as an example of "benign neglect", as the government, either out of weakness or out of fear that it might become a target of violence, avoided taking aggressive action against the group.[109] As long as Mali left them alone, AQIM's leadership likely saw little benefit in antagonizing the government and thereby jeopardizing its sanctuary in the north. Moreover, as noted by Wolfram Lacher, there are strong indications that officials within the Malian state apparatus colluded with AQIM, making huge profits though aiding the group in its illegal economic activities, as well as in the procurement of arms.[110] While hard evidence for such collusion has hitherto been hard to come by, Droukdel's letter to Bin Ladin in 2010 appears to confirm these suspicions. Droukdel states that AQIM primarily relies on the Malian tribes to buy weapons and ammunition, noting that "these people that we cooperate with, work in turn with the cadres of the Malian army, and in some cases we may have to cooperate directly with these cadres".[111]

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In addition to these strategic considerations, the Abbottabad papers further reveal that the AQ leadership specifically wanted the Sahel region to stay a rear base. This strategy, refraining from overtly antagonizing the Sahelian governments in order to focus efforts on Algeria and Western interests, is spelled out in the previously-mentioned report penned by Yunis al-Mauritani in 2007, where the southern brigades apparently refrained from carrying out many operations, fearing that the response against them would prevent them from aiding their "brothers" in the north.[112] Similarly, the plan for a truce with Mauritania in late 2010 was made with the expressed purpose of having a safe base from which to operate against the same targets, as will be discussed in the next section.

In short, the supposed transnationalization of the Algerian jihad, which began with Nabil Sahrawi taking over the reins of GSPC and announcing support for global jihad in 2003, and was formalized with the group's merger with al-Qaida, had little effect on the group's priorities in practice. The focus continued to lie on the fight against the Algerian regime, though with an increase in attacks on foreign targets in the country. Meanwhile, the southern brigades extended AQIM's areas of operation to the neighboring countries, but continued to operate primarily as a support for the Algerian theatre.

Indigenization of the Saharan Jihad

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the transnationalization, however, was the diminishing number of Algerians in the southern brigades. As noted previously, the Saharan contingent of GIA under Belmokhtar began traversing the Sahelian countries as early as 1994. The first Sahelian members of Belmokhtar's Saharan brigade were likely recruited already at this early point, according to Salem.[113] By 2004, it appears that a significant proportion of GSPC

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members in the southern brigades, both in the ninth and fifth zones, were non-Algerians. Algerian news media reported that among the 43 GSPC militants belonging to al-Para's group killed in the battle of Tibesti in Chad in 2004, only nine were Algerians, the remainder being of Nigerian, Nigerien and Malian nationalities.[114] Many of the militants known to have participated in the 2005 attack in Lemgheity, Mauritania, were similarly of non-Algerian nationality, including the Nigerien Abderrahman al-Nigri,[115] Mauritanian El-Hassen Ould Khalil,[116] and the future leader of the Boko Haram splinter group Ansaru, Khalid al-Barnawi.[117] By 2007 at the latest, the majority of the militants in the southern brigades appear to have been non-Algerian. In the report penned to AQC that year, Yunis al-Mauritani purports that as many as 95% of the *mujahideen* in the Greater Sahara were from the region, "most of them Mauritanians, Malians, Nigerians and Nigeriens".[118] While the number may be exaggerated, there is no reason to doubt the huge influx of Sahelians into the brigades, which was also reported by media sources at the time.[119]

Although GSPC/AQIM recruited from all the Sahelian countries, by far the largest contingent to join the organization until 2011 was the Mauritanians. Yunis al-Mauritani reports that around 50 Mauritanians and probably more had joined the group by 2007.[120] Three years later, this number had grown to around 100, which also at that time constituted the biggest foreign contingent in the group, according to AQIM's report to AQC in 2010.[121]

The higher rates of attacks in Mauritania in this period in comparison with the other Sahelian countries in which AQIM also maintained a presence, as well as the high recruitment of Mauritanians, marks the country as an early hotspot for jihadism in the region. According to local media sources, a jihadist group known as al-Murabitun[122] was formed in the country in 2000, which maintained contacts with GSPC and sent members to train in GSPC camps in the Sahara. The group later changed its name to the "Mauritanian Group for Preaching and

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Combat", in recognition of the close ties between the two groups.[123] This group was reportedly dismantled in March 2005,[124] three months before the attack on Lemgheity, but GSPC continued its efforts to build up a jihadist presence in Mauritania. AQIM's 2010 report to AQC states that the Mauritanian recruits maintain good connections with jihadist networks operating inside Mauritania,[125] suggesting that the domestic jihadist cells retained its importance in the recruitment of Mauritanian militants to AQIM in the Sahara.

The recruitment of jihadists in Mali, on the other hand, appears to have been less successful than efforts in Mauritania, even though northern Mali had served as a safe haven for GSPC/AQIM since at least the late-1990s and early 2000. As mentioned, there were Malians among al-Para's group in Chad in 2004, and Malian nationals may have joined Belmokhtar as early as the 1990s. Yunis al-Mauritani similarly mentions the presence of Malian AQIM cadres in 2007.[126] However, in 2010, AQIM's internal correspondence emphasizes that the biggest contingent is Mauritanian, making no specific mention of Malians, other than noting that people were joining them from different countries across the Maghreb, Sahel and West Africa.[127] Similarly, Malian military commanders in the field noted in 2009 that the majority of AQIM members in the country were Mauritanian, in addition to a few West Africans, making no specific mention of compatriots among the members of the group.[128]

AQIM did, however, invest considerable efforts into building relations with local communities and tribal notables in northern Mali. As Morten Bøås shows, AQIM had worked for years to furnish their reputation as pious Muslims and reliable business partners in the cities of northern Mali, while simultaneously lavishing money and sough-after equipment to buy goodwill.[129] Moreover, AQIM leaders made alliances through marrying themselves into local tribes, both Tuareg and Arab. Belmokhtar's marriage alliances have already been mentioned; Nabil Makhlufi, AQIM's emir of the Sahara from 2011-2012 married into the

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Arab *Kounta* tribe in the Timbuktu region.[130] The goodwill gestures appear to have paid off. GSPC/AQIM's relations with the Malian tribes had long oscillated between the business-like or indifferent and the outright hostile, as for example in the multiple clashes reported between GSPC and Tuareg tribesmen in 2006-2007.[131] In 2009, however, Western observers began worrying about the increasing collusion between Tuareg tribes and AQIM in the smuggling business, noting that the feuding between them had ended.[132] AQIM itself notes in its correspondence with AQC in 2010 that the southern brigade had forged "brotherly relationships" with many of the tribes in the Sahel, which it held as one of the main factors contributing to its success.[133]

In parallel with these efforts, there appears to have been an increase in Malian AQIM members from 2009 onwards. The establishment of a Tuareg AQIM brigade in 2010, known as *Katibat al-Ansar*, testifies to this development. Hamada Ag Hama,[134] a Tuareg of the Ifoghas tribe and the cousin of future Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghali, was selected to lead the new brigade, which aimed incorporate Tuareg recruits from both northern Mali and Niger, who were reportedly reluctant to be placed under the command of Algerians.[135] Curiously, a similar request for a separate brigade for Sahelian, in particular Mauritanian and Malian Arabs, was not granted.[136] This decision appears to stem from the divergence between the strategies of the AQIM leadership and the Sahelian cadres, as will be discussed shortly.

At first glance this increase in non-Algerian recruits, AQIM's first non-Algerian brigade commander, as well as the incorporation of an ethnic Tuareg division, would seem to suggest that AQIM was considering extending combat operations to include the Sahelian governments. However, al-Qaida's internal correspondence reveals that while AQIM's leadership initially contemplated this idea, it eventually decided against refocusing its efforts

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towards the south under pressure from AQC. These strategic considerations and their ramifications will be the topic of the next section.

Divergent Strategies in the Sahel

The question of whether AQIM should commit itself to fighting the Sahelian governments sparked fierce internal debates. From the correspondence retrieved in Abbottabad, it is evident that the preferences of the Sahelian cadres, AQIM's leadership and AQC diverged considerably over AQIM's strategy in the Sahel.

Before delving into this issue, the decision to include the perspective of AQC merits some comment. As will be shown, the link between AQIM and AQC was significantly closer than previously assumed. Geoff D. Porter for one argued in the aftermath of Bin Ladin's death in 2011 that the relationship was "tenuous", asserting that "from 2008-2010, the ties between Bin Ladin and AQIM appeared to weaken".[137] However, AQIM's leaders not only deferred to Bin Ladin's requests, for example in his demand that the negotiations over the fate of the French hostages be contingent on a French withdrawal from Afghanistan, but as will be shown, they also actively sought his guidance on issues of major strategic importance. This fact gives nuance to Nelly Lahoud et al.'s analysis of AQC, which challenged the whole notion of there being a central organization giving strategic guidance to regional affiliates. While acknowledging that Bin Ladin sought to maintain influence, they argue that "on the operational front […], the affiliates either did not consult with Bin Ladin or were not prepared to follow his directives".[138] Although this argument may be valid for other affiliates, AQIM's leaders did in fact consult with Bin Ladin and were prepared to follow his advice, and this provide a counter-example to the supposed "side-lining" of Bin Ladin within al-Qaida.

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Despite AQIM's long-standing presence in the Sahel and the precipitous spread of jihadism therein during and after the 2012-2013 occupation of northern Mali, AQC and AQIM's leadership alike were slow to realize the long-term potential of the region. As demonstrated in the previous sections, AQIM appeared to regard the Sahel mainly as a rear base for its fight against Algeria, with the additional benefit of serving as a launching point for operations, especially kidnappings, targeting Western interests. That said, AQIM-leader Droukdel clearly saw the strategic benefits in the region, remarking to AQC that AQIM's southern brigades fared much better than those in the north did. Furthermore, he suggested that the Saharan area should be given more focus in the planning of AQC. The plan, he states, was for them to: "bait them [the Algerians and their Western partners] into the rough terrain [of the Saharan front], in order to soak up as much as possible of their military strength and exhaust it there."[139] However, AQIM's leadership saw this policy mainly as a step in the fight against the Algerian regime. Embarking on a jihad against the local government, akin to its campaign against the Algerian regime, did not feature high in the AQIM leadership's priorities, nor in those of AQC.

Cadres on the ground in the Sahel, however, realized the potential for jihadist expansion in the region at an early point and advocated for al-Qaida to exploit it. Yunis al-Mauritani had written, as previously mentioned, a detailed survey on the potential for jihadist expansion in the Sahel in 2007. Based partly on his own knowledge and that of one of his "brothers" in the Mauritanian al-Murabitun group, Yunis offered a fairly detailed study of the countries of the Sahel, their ethnic composition, religious groups, economic and geographical specificities, and the potential for jihadist expansion in them. Among his conclusions, was that "the brothers cannot imagine how weak the countries neighboring Algeria, like Mauritania, Mali and Niger, actually are",[140] noting that the states would in all likelihood yield to any jihadist demands if they decide to strike them. This strategy, he reckons, would allow them to build

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bases and remain unmolested in the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara desert, as well as in the forests further to the south, presumably in central and southern Mali.[141] While suggesting that these bases would be used primarily to bring down the regimes in Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Nigeria, the recognition that the whole Sahel region is ripe for exploitation is evident throughout the report. However, despite al-Mauritani's exhortations to expand in the Sahel, the report was seemingly shelved at the time, and not given serious consideration until years later.

Letters retrieved in the Abbottabad complex show that al-Mauritani's report was taken up again and circulated among al-Qaida's leadership only in 2010,[142] after AQIM-leader Droukdel had written to the central organization to ask for advice on the future strategy of his group in the Sahel. The main issue Droukdel brought up was the question of whether or not AQIM should enter into a non-aggression pact with the Mauritanian government. That AQIM was considering such a pact has been known since one of the letters written in response to Droukdel, also retrieved in the Abbottabad compound, was declassified and released in translation in 2016.[143] The Mauritanian government has denied any knowledge of such a deal.[144] However, Droukdel's letter to al-Qaida plainly states that it was in fact the Mauritanians that had initially reached out to AQIM with the offer of a truce.[145] It seems highly unlikely that Droukdel would misrepresent this fact in internal letters to his superiors in al-Qaida. Considering that the al-Qaida leadership supported the idea, and that jihadist attacks suddenly stopped in Mauritania after 2011, there are strong indications that some kind of deal was struck.[146]

However, Droukdel did not ask for advice on the Mauritanian issue only, but also on the general strategy of the organization in the Sahel going forward. He noted that the powerful countries in North Africa (Tunisia, Algeria and Libya) were putting pressure on the weak

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Sahelian countries to fight the *mujahideen*. Even though Mauritania, Mali, and Niger posed no serious threat to them, Droukdel stated, involvement in low-level conflict with these countries nevertheless sapped the *mujahideen's* limited strengths and resources,[147] which explains why a truce with these countries could prove useful. At the same time, however, Droukdel noted that he was under pressure from the rank-and-file in the southern brigades to exploit the weakness of these states and engage them in open conflict. While deeming it a course of action that would distract AQIM from targeting Algeria, he nevertheless recognized the potential benefit of widening the battlefield in order to disperse enemy forces and weaken them. In other words, while Droukdel seemed inclined towards not fighting the Sahelian governments, he could also see the benefits of doing so. Unsure of how to proceed, Droukdel asked for directions from al-Qaida Central's leadership (AQC).[148]

The responses from AQC, penned in letters by Bin Ladin and Atiya Abd al-Rahman, came out strongly in favor of entering into a non-aggression pact. They encouraged AQIM to strike truces, not only with Mauritania, but also with the other "apostate" regimes in the region,[149] including "Mali, Burkina Faso, [Mauritania] and others".[150] Bin Ladin further exhorted Droukdel not to fight the local governments, except in situations of direct self-defense,[151] and to direct all efforts against striking the "far enemy" that is the US.[152] To dispel any ambiguity, Bin Ladin stated that "the goal of the noble mujahideen in the mountains and deserts of the Islamic Maghrib is not to topple the apostate regimes".[153] The threefold goal he laid out was instead to 1) spread the jihadist ideology among the people, 2) build popular support and 3) kidnap citizens of countries that have troops stationed in Afghanistan in order to put pressure on their governments to withdraw.[154]

This response, while coming down firmly on the side of a truce with Mauritania as Droukdel had initially suggested, put AQIM's leader in a double bind. Rather than helping decide

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whether AQIM should focus its efforts on North Africa or the Sahel, AQC called on Droukdel to abandon fighting either of the "near enemies" and to focus all attention on the "far enemy", thereby adding just another divergent strategy on top of the two others. For while AQIM adhered to al-Qaida's global brand of jihad, the preferences of its leadership had consistently veered towards continued war against the Algerian regime, the enemy they had fought since the days of the GIA in the 1990s. The attack record against "far enemy"-targets on the other hand was minuscule. Moreover, it was the southern brigades that had carried out most of the successful operations against international targets. Voices within these brigades were advocating for a "near enemy"-approach, but one that targeted the weak Sahelian governments rather than the Algerian government that AQIM had been battling unsuccessfully for more than a decade.

Interestingly, AQC's strategy appeared to change somewhat towards a "near enemy"-focus after the Arab Spring, which the group evidently had not foreseen when laying out its strategy just a few months earlier. In a letter dated 17 March 2011, Atiya exhorted AQIM to transfer some of its Libyan fighters back to Libya, where he "expect[ed] there to be an opportunity for jihad".[155] The Sahel, however, was still not regarded as a fighting ground. In the same letter, he again referred to the issue of entering into truces with the Sahelian countries and stated that "all of us agreed on this issue and encouraged it".[156]

Despite the thumbs-up from AQC, Droukdel recognized that entering into non-aggression pacts with the local governments could lead to serious opposition within AQIM's southern brigades. The primary opposition to planned truces, he states, came from jihadists hailing from the Sahel, "most of whom are new recruits without any experiences to speak of, nor any knowledge of war, and they consider it a duty to fight all these countries indiscriminately".[157] Attributing this sentiment to an abundance of fighting enthusiasm prevailing over strategic

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thinking, Droukdel notes that the Mauritanians especially, who constitute no small part of the group, clamor for fighting the local regimes.

The fight against the Algerian regime obviously did not carry the same emotional weight for AQIM's non-Algerian members, but the reason for the latter's eagerness to fight the Sahelian governments also reflected a generational and ideological rupture within the group. While drawn into al-Qaida's orbit in the 2000s, the generation that held the reins of the organization had nevertheless been reared in GIA/GSPC's framework of "national" jihad against the Algerian regime. In contrast, Zarqawi and the experiences of al-Qaida in Iraq animated the younger generations that entered into the organization in the mid-2000s. Al-Mauritani spells it out in 2007, describing the non-Algerian recruits as being highly ideological and "disciples of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi".[158] While the moniker leaves room for interpretation as to what exactly al-Mauritani meant by it, I contend it points to a more *takfirist* line than the rest of the organization. This also appears to be the case in Atiya's letter to AQIM in 2011, where he expresses unease about the presence of Mauritanian scholars within their ranks, most of them unknown to AQC, who espouse hardline views on a variety of issues.[159] These same scholars, Atiya notes, favor military action against Mauritania, in defiance of the strategy of AQC.[160] Entering into a truce, Droukdel reckons, would likely cause problems, or even a split within their ranks,[161] but Bin Ladin nevertheless wanted him to overrule the Mauritanians and convince them to fall into line.[162]

Evidently, many of the Mauritanian and other Sahelian jihadists did not fall into line, and a split *did* occur within the ranks of AQIM. In December 2011, the prominent Mauritanian AQIM member Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou announced the formation of a new jihadist group with its eyes set on the Sahel and West Africa, known as the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO).[163] Although the new group claimed a West

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African identity and eventually appeared to have some success in attracting black recruits,[164] MUJAO's founders and most of its commanders were Arabs from Mauritania, Mali and West-Sahara.[165] Interestingly, the supposed *takfirist* tendencies of the Mauritanians appear to have had a long-term impact, as MUJAO was described as the most hardline of the jihadist groups in Mali during the 2012-2013 occupation, and the group would also form the basis of what became the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[166]

The creation of MUJAO, it seems, was the culmination of the AQIM leadership's inability to take advantage of the opportunities offered in the Sahel. AQIM did eventually become heavily involved in fighting the Malian government with the outbreak of the 2012 rebellion in Mali. Although this was not AQIM's original strategy, a further reluctance to act upon the opportunities that presented themselves to the brigades on the ground in Mali, would probably have been impossible. In the end, the transnationalization of the southern brigades forced AQIM to shift its focus towards the region where new recruits were coming in, and where possibilities for jihadist expansion were opening up.

Conclusion

As I have shown in this article, GSPC/AQIM established a presence in the Sahara-Sahel to aid its fight in Algeria, and not for the purpose of extending the front to include the Sahelian governments. As the pressure on AQIM in its core territories in northeastern Algeria increased, the southern brigades became gradually more important to the group's strategic calculus. AQIM's eventual decision to launch itself into a war against the Malian government in 2012 was not the product of a long-term strategy devised by AQIM's leadership or AQC in response to the group's failure in Algeria. On the contrary, the internal correspondence shows

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that the leaders of AQIM and AQC wanted to continue using the Sahel as a rear base for attacks against Algerian and Western interests and refrain from unnecessarily antagonizing the local governments. However, as the majority non-Algerian members of the southern *katibas* clamored for fighting the local governments and new opportunities opened up with the rebellion in Northern Mali in 2012, AQIM was forced to adapt to the changing circumstances.

Even though jihadist ideology is "borderless" in theory and rejects the modern state system, it appears that AQIM's leadership was reluctant to abandon the fight in their home country, despite their transnational pretensions. As it turned out, the most striking consequence of the transnationalization of GSPC/AQIM was not an increase in its attacks on the "far enemy", but its eventual engagement in open conflict with new "near enemies". The influx of Sahelian recruits and their growing importance within AQIM made it difficult for the group to stick to the original, Algerian-centric aims. What had emerged in the southern brigades was the beginning of a Sahelian jihadist movement, whose unprecedented spread over the following years testified to the viability of this indigenous front.

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Notes

[1] By the "Sahara", I mean the southern deserts in Algeria, as well as the desert regions of Algeria's neighbours to the south, Mauritania, Mali and Chad. When referring to the Algerian parts of the Sahara exclusively, I use "Algerian Sahara". The Sahel region and Sahelian states, unless otherwise specified, refer to the countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad.

[2] The term "rear base" is employed in this article to refer to AQIM's use of the under-policed deserts of the Sahel as a *sanctuary* where could move around, recruit new members, establish training camps, raise funds through various criminal activities, and procure weapons, in order to support their activities, while remaining relatively unmolested by the authorities.

[3] Stephen Tankel, "Universal Soldiers or Parochial Actors: Understanding Jihadists as Products of Their Environments," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 2 (March 4, 2019): 312.

[4] Brynjar Lia and Åshild Kjøk, "Islamist Insurgencies, Diasporic Support Networks, and Their Host States: The Case of the Algerian GIA in Europe 1993-2000" (FFI, 2001), 43.

[5] Hegghammer, "The Ideological Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 9, 2009, 33.

[6] "Transnational" and its derivatives are used here to distinguish jihadist focusing their fight and rhetoric primarily, while not necessarily exclusively, against the "near enemy", i.e. Muslim governments deemed apostate, from "transnational" jihadists, who adhere to Usama bin Ladin's vision of global jihad that targets Western powers. For an in-depth discussion of typologies of jihadism, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*, Cambridge Middle East Studies 33 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 1–15.

[7] Jean-Luc Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (June 13, 2008): 541–52.

[8] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 2 (2009): 213–26.

[9] See e.g. Stephen A. Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region: Corruption, Contraband, Jihad and the Mali War of 2012-2013* (Routledge, 2016); Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qa'ida Affiliate and Its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," in *US Militarization of the Sahara-Sahel: Security, Space & Imperialism*, ed. Jacob Mundy, 85 (ACAS (Association of Concerned African Scholars), 2010), 12–29.

[10] Alex Schmid, "The Literature on Terrorism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2011), 461–62.

[11] Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals," *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (July 2011): 279–98.

[12] Lemine Ould M. Salem, *Le Ben Laden du Sahara sur les traces du jihadiste Mokhtar Belmokhtar* (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière, 2014).

[13] The website in question is the now-defunct www.qmagreb.org. The author has access to a copy of this site, which was downloaded by colleagues at FFI in June 2007.

[14] These magazines can be accessed through the Jihadi Document Repository at FFI/UiO, https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/jihadi-document-repository/.

[15] See Rukmini Callimachi, "In Timbuktu, al-Qaida Left behind a Manifesto," *Associated Press (AP)*, February 14, 2013. The discovery engendered a number of articles, among them Morten Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 4 (April 2014); Pascale Combelles Siegel, "AQIM's Playbook in Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013); Jami Forbes, "Revisiting the Mali Al-Qa'ida Playbook: How the Group Is Advancing on Its Goals in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 9 (October 2018): 18–21.

[16] Mathieu Guidère, "The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM," *Res Militaris*, 2014.

[17] "November 2017 Release of Abbottabad Compound Material," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/index.html.

[18] In addition to the documents, the Abbottabad Compound Material also includes lots of audio, video and image files.

[19] See "Bin Laden's Bookshelf," Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.dni.gov/index.php/features/bin-laden-s-bookshelf.

[20] As argued e.g. by Geoff D. Porter, "The Impact of Bin Ladin's Death on AQIM in North Africa," *CTC Sentinel*, no. Special Issue (May 2011): 10–12; While not discussing AQIM specifically, Nelly Lahoud et al., argued that Bin Ladin and AQC had little influence over the affiliates, and that they did not defer to him on the operational front. See: Nelly Lahoud et al., "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?:" West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, May 3, 2012. 12.

[21] Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, 4th ed (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 254.
[22] Ibid., 260–62.
[23] Ibid., 271–73.
[24] Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists*, trans. Robin Bray (London: Saqi, 2010), 131.
[25] Kepel, 273.
[26] Filiu, 220.
[27] In GIA's division of the Algeria into nine different zones (ar: minṭaqa, pl. manātiq) of activity, the area encompassing the Algerian Sahara was subdivided into the eighth and ninth zone. These zones corresponded to the south-western and south-eastern parts of Algeria respectively. Under Antar Zouabri's tenure as emir, the eighth and ninth zones were merged under Belmokhtar's command. This new zone was known interchangeably as the zone of the south, the Saharan zone or simply as the ninth zone, and encompassed the Algerian administrative regions of Béchar, Tindouf, Adrar, Tamanghasset, Naâma, El Oued, Ouargla, Ghardaïa, Djelfa and Illizi. See Liess Boukra, *Al-Jazaʾir: al-ruʿb al-muqaddas*, trans. Khalil Ahmad Khalil (Algeria: Beirut: Al-muʾassasa al-waṭaniyya lil-ittiṣāl wal-nashr wal-ishhār (ANEP): Dar al-Farābi, 2003), 313–14.
[28] "Exclusive Interview with Shaykh Hisham Abu Akram,"(in English) in *Al-Risalah*, 2017, https://emaad.net/exclusive-interview-with-shaykh-hisham-abu-akram/.
[29] Hisham Abu Akram, "Messages from a Mujahid's Notebook: Sheikh Osama and the Story of His Support for the Algerian Jihad." Translated into English by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 2018. http://www.aymennjawad.org/21654/osama-bin-laden-and-the-algerian-jihad.
[30] "Ḥiwār maʿa Khālid Abī ʿAbbās," in *Al-Jamāʿa no. 7* (Oslo: Jihadi Document Repository at FFI/UiO, 2006), 28.
[31] Ibid., 30; Salem, 45.
[32] Salem, 40–42.
[33] Ibid., 45.
[34] Mokhtar Belmokhtar, "Bayān wa tabriʾa," November 16, 1997, www.qmagreb.org/pages/sahara.html.
[35] Al-jamāʿa al-salafiyya lil-daʿwa wal-qitāl (GSPC), "Al-Jamāʿa Raḥma," April 24, 1999, www.qmagreb.org/pages/wihda.html. This is the first time the ninth zone appears as a constituent group in one of GSPC's statements
[36] Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalization of Domestic Terrorism*, ISS Monograph Series 144, 2008, 50.
[37] Salem, 56–58.
[38] Also known as Abderrazzak al-Para, due to his background as a paratrooper in the Algerian army, alternatively by the *kunya* Abu Haydara.
[39] This is a *kunya.* Some sources report that his name is Mohamed Alwan Abdelwahid, others refer to him as Imad Abdelwahid Ahmad Alwan. See e.g "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste," *El Watan*, April 10, 2006, and Salem, 52.
[40] Salem, 52–54.
[41] "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste."
[42] Salima Mellah & Jean-Baptiste Rivoire, "El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Laden," Le Monde diplomatique, February 1, 2005..
[43] "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste."
[44] Rukmini Callimachi, "Anatomy of an Abduction," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014.
[45] Salem, 58–62; "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste."
[46] Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 17–18.
[47] The "Timbuktu Letters" refer to a number of internal AQIM correspondences retrieved and published by *Associated Press* journalist Rukmini Callimachi.
[48] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar" (in English), Rukmini Callimachi/Associated Press, 16–17.
[49] "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste."
[50] Salem, 53.
[51] Ḥasām al-Ḥadād, "Abū Al-Khabāb Muʾassis al-Jamāʿa al-Salafiyya Lil-Daʿwa Wal-Qitāl Bil-Jazāʾir," Bawābat al-ḥarakāt al-islāmiyya, December 4, 2019, http://www.islamist-movements.com/32433.
[52] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 17.
[53] Salim Darid, "Al-wishāya qatalat Abū al-Khabāb," *Al-Nahār Online*, December 12, 2011.

[54] ar: Majlis al-Aʿyān
[55] Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 15.
[56] Al-jamāʿa al-salafiyya lil-daʿwa wal-qitāl (GSPC). "Bayān Tanṣīb," August 17, 2003. www.qmagreb.org/pages/tanseeb.html.
[57] Known by the *kunya* Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud
[58] "Révélations Sur Une Organisation En Déroute," *El Watan*, August 1, 2007.
[59] Al-jamāʿa al-salafiyya lil-daʿwa wal-qitāl (GSPC). "Bayān Tanṣīb Al-Akh Abī Musʿab ʿAbd al-Wadūd Amīran ʿalā al-Jamāʿa," August 6, 2004. www.qmagreb.org/pages/tanseeb2.html.
[60] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 17.
[61] Known by the *kunya* Abu Ammar
[62] See e.g. Adib Bencherif, "From Resilience to Fragmentation: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jihadist Group Modularity," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, August 10, 2017, 7.
[63] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar" (Rukmini Callimachi/Associated Press, n.d.), 7, 17; "Lourdes Pertes Au GSPC," *El Watan*, August 5, 2007.
[64] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 7.
[65] Ibid., 17.
[66] Guidère, "The Timbuktu Letters : New Insights about AQIM," 11.
[67] Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd, whose real name is Muhammad Ghadir, was one of the most notorious AQIM field commanders in the south until he was killed by French forces in Mali on 24 February 2013. "AQMI confirme la mort d'Abou Zeid," *Le Monde*, June 16, 2013.
[68] Guidère, 8.
[69] *Ṣadā Al-Qitāl, No. 7* (Oslo: Jihadi Document Repository at FFI/UiO), accessed March 24, 2020.
[70] "Algeria: GSPC Leader Hattab Replaced by Man 'Close' to Al-Qa'idah," *BBC Monitoring*, October 10, 2003.
[71] "Révélations Sur Le Parcours d'un Chef Terroriste."
[72] Al-Khabab is also identified as the "emir of the east" in Salāḥ Abū Muḥammad, "Maʿrakat al-Ḥajīra... shumūkh fī zaman al-hazīma," in *Al-Jamāʿa No. 6* (Oslo: Jihadi Document Repository at FFI/UiO, 2006), 24.
[73] Darid, "Al-wishāya qatalat Abū al-Khabāb"; Djilali Benyoub, "Un sérieux revers pour Aqmi," *Liberté Algérie*, December 12, 2011.
[74] A unit of fighters smaller than that of the *katiba*, but the two terms are often used interchangeably.
[75] "Maʿrakat al-Ḥajīra... shumūkh fī zaman al-hazīma," 28–29.
[76] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 5–6.
[77] "Al-Qaida Papers: Internal Correspondence between the Shura Council of AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 17.
[78] Al-jamāʿa al-salafiyya lil-daʿwa wal-qitāl (GSPC), "Bayān Wa Bushrā Bi-Inḍimām Wa Mubāyʿat al-Jamāʿa al-Salafiyya Lil-Daʿwa Wa al-Qitāl Lil-Shaykh Abī ʿAbd Allāh Usāma Bin Lādn Ḥafaẓuhu Allāh," September 13, 2006, www.qmagreb.org/pages/join_qaeda.html.
[79] Arabic: Tanẓīm al-Qāʿida bi-bilād al-Maghrib al-Islāmī. See Al-jamāʿa al-salafiyya lil-daʿwa wal-qitāl (GSPC), "Ishʿār Bi-Taghayyur al-Tasmiyya," January 24, 2007, www.qmagreb.org/pages/tasmiya.html.
[80] Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, 61.
[81] Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 20.
[82] Ibid., 17.
[83] Ibid., 21.
[84] al-Mauritani, "Mulḥaq Bi-Taqrīr al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," August 20, 2007, 2–5, Abbottabad Compound Material; This report and "Taqrīr ʾan al-Maghrib al-Islāmī" are actually signed in the name of Salah al-Mauritani, but Yunis al-Mauritani identifies himself as the author of both reports in "Letter to Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin) from Yunis al-Mauritani," March 25, 2010, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[85] Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 20.
[86] Tawil, *Brothers in Arms*, 194.
[87] Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 221–22.
[88] al-Mauritani, "Mulḥaq Bi-Taqrīr al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 5.
[89] Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 225.

[90] Ibid., 222–24.
[91] Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 21.
[92] Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 222–24.
[93] An excellent treatment of how and why these networks were established can be found in Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe: A History* (London: Hurst & Company, 2015), chapter 2, 67-86
[94] Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?," 2009, 6.
[95] Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," 224; Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM," 21.
[96] Salem, 67–70.
[97] Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb," 547.
[98] Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, "Bayān Min Tanẓīm Al-Qāʿida Yubārik ʿamaliyyat al-Mujāhidīn Fī al-Jazāʾir ʿalā Aʿdāʾ Allah Taʿālā Fī Mauritānia" (Al-qism al-iʿlāmī li-tanẓīm al-qāʿida fī bilād al-rāfidayn, August 2005), www.qmagreb.org/pages/iraq.html, accessed 10 June 2007.
[99] Geoff D. Porter, "The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 11, no. 7 (August 2018).
[100] GTD notes that AQIM's involvement in many of these incidents is suspected rather than confirmed. However, even when "suspected" cases are removed, the pattern is more or less the same: 168 attacks in Algeria versus 14 in Mali, Niger and Mauritania combined. See "The Global Terrorism Database", National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland. (2019), https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?start_yearonly=2005&end_yearonly=2011&start_year=&start_month=&start_day=&end_year=&end_month=&end_day=&country=6&country=123&country=128&country=146&asmSelect1=&perpetrator=20033&perpetrator=20403&dtp2=all&success=yes&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=, accessed 2 July 2020
[101] For an overview of these incidents, see Carlos Echevarría Jesús, "Kidnappings as a Terrorist Instrument of AQIM and the MUJAO," *Paix et Sécurité Internationales*, 2013.
[102] Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2014.
[103] Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali."
[104] "Letter to Abu Abd Al-Rahman from Abu Muhammad Salah," December 21, 2010, 2, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[105] Ibid., 3.
[106] Harmon, *Terror and Insurgency in the Sahara-Sahel Region*, 68.
[107] Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, Insurgency, or Organized Crime?," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (September 2, 2016): 914–36.
[108] See e.g. "New Algerian Ambassador to Meets with Ambassador," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Mali Bamako, February 19, 2010).
[109] Tankel, 308.
[110] Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012), 11–14.
[111] "Letter to Usama Bin Ladin from Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud," March 16, 2010, 2–3, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[112] al-Mauritani, "Mulḥaq Bi-Taqrīr al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 11.
[113] Salem, 45.
[114] Rédha Lizig, "43 Terroristes Abattus Dont Huit Algériens," *L'Expression*, March 13, 2004.
[115] Salem, 162–63.
[116] Known also by the *kunya* Jouleybib. Ibid., 111.
[117] Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Conquest for the Caliphate: How Al Qaeda Helped Islamic State Acquire Territory," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, February 20, 2018, 3.
[118] al-Mauritani, "Taqrīr ʾan Al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," August 15, 2007, 25, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[119] Gérard Davet and Piotr Smolar, "Les maquis algériens inquiètent la France," *Le Monde*, November 2006.
[120] al-Mauritani, "Mulḥaq Bi-Taqrīr al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 7–8.
[121] "Taqrīr ʿan Ḥāl Al-Tanẓīm Fī al-Mudda al-Akhīra," January 3, 2010, 4, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[122] Not to be confused with Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun group that was established in 2013.
[123] "Tanẓīm Al-Qāʿida Fī Mauritāniā Min al-Taʾsīs Ilā Muḥāwalātihi al-Damawiyya Lil-Wuṣūl Ilā al-Sulṭa," *Akhbār Al-Sāḥil*, November 2, 2013
[124] Ibid.

[125] "Taqrīr ʿan Ḥāl Al-Tanẓīm Fī al-Mudda al-Akhīra," 4.
[126] al-Mauritani, "Taqrīr ʾan Al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 25.
[127] "Taqrīr ʿan Ḥāl Al-Tanẓīm Fī al-Mudda al-Akhīra," 4.
[128] "Dasd Huddleston Meets Att: The Way Forward Against Aqim," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Mali Bamako, July 1, 2009).
[129] Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali."
[130] Salem, 59.
[131] Botha, *Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalization of Domestic Terrorism*, 195.
[132] "Mauritania: A New Drug-Trafficking Hub in the Making?," Wikileaks Public Library of US Diplomacy (Mauritania Nouakchott, June 11, 2009).
[133] "Taqrīr ʿan Ḥāl Al-Tanẓīm Fī al-Mudda al-Akhīra," 3.
[134] Known by the *kunya* Abd al-Karim al-Tariqi
[135] Sarah Diffalah, "Al-Targui s'est Distingué Par Des Actions Sanguinaires," *L'Obs*, November 2013.
[136] Bencherif, 9.
[137] Porter, "The Impact of Bin Ladin's Death on AQIM in North Africa," 11.
[138] Nelly Lahoud et al., "Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?", 12.
[139] "Taqrīr ʿan Ḥāl Al-Tanẓīm Fī al-Mudda al-Akhīra," 3.
[140] al-Mauritani, "Taqrīr ʾan Al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 23.
[141] Ibid., 23–24.
[142] Al-Mauritani refers to the report he himself wrote years earlier in "Letter to Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin) from Yunis al-Mauritani"; Usama bin Ladin refers to the report in "Letter to Shaykh Mahmud from Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin)," September 26, 2010, Abbottabad Compound Material; AQ Central asks AQIM to expand upon the report in "Letter to Abu Muhammad Salah from Abu Abd Al-Rahman," March 17, 2011, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[143] Thomas Joscelyn, "Osama Bin Laden's Files: Al Qaeda Considered a Truce with Mauritania," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 1, 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/osama-bin-ladens-files-aqim-considered-truce-mauritania.php.
[144] Mark Hosenball, "Al Qaeda Leaders Made Plans for Peace Deal with Mauritania: Documents," *Reuters*, March 3, 2016.
[145] "Letter to Usama Bin Ladin from Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud," 1.
[146] As argued by Porter, "The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania."
[147] "Letter to Usama Bin Ladin from Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud," 1–2.
[148] Ibid., 2.
[149] "Letter to Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud from Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin)," October 21, 2010, 1, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[150] "Letter to Abu Muhammad Salah from Abu Abd Al-Rahman," 4.
[151] "Letter to Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud from Zamray (Usama Bin Ladin)," October 17, 2010, 2–3, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[152] Ibid., 1–2.
[153] Ibid., 15.
[154] Ibid., 15–16.
[155] "Letter to Abu Muhammad Salah from Abu Abd Al-Rahman," 2.
[156] Ibid., 4.
[157] "Letter to Usama Bin Ladin from Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud," 2.
[158] al-Mauritani, "Mulḥaq Bi-Taqrīr al-Maghrib al-Islāmī," 7–8.
[159] "Letter to Abu Muhammad Salah from Abu Abd Al-Rahman," 6–7.
[160] Ibid.
[161] "Letter to Usama Bin Ladin from Abu Musab Abd Al-Wadud," 2.
[162] "About the Matter of the Islamic Maghrib," Undated, probably early 2011 or late 2010, Abbottabad Compound Material.
[163] Jessica M. Huckabey, "Al Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections," *Orbis* 57, no. 3 (June 2013): 469.
[164] Ibid. 471–72.
[165] In addition to Kheirou, MUJAO's founding members include Ahmad al-Tilmesi and Sultan Ould Bady, both of them Malians of Arab (or in Bady's case Arab-Tuareg) ethnicity. See Raby Ould Idoumou, "Al-Qaeda Splinter Group Reveals Internal Erosion," *Magharebia*, December 30, 2011; Sahrawis also held important positions in MUJAO; Abu Walid al-Sahrawi held the position as MUJAO's spokesman, and he was perhaps also among the founders of the group. His compatriot Abd al-Hakim was one of the most

prominent MUJAO figures in Gao during the 2012-2013 occupation. See Benjamin Roger, "Tracking Abu Walid Al-Sahraoui, West Africa's Most Wanted Jihadist," *The Africa Report*, February 12, 2020.

[166] Bencherif, 10.