

Al-Qa`ida in North Africa?

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Recent Islamist terrorist activities in Algeria and Tunisia have renewed the focus of international attention on North Africa. Islamist attacks and clashes with security forces have been linked to the newly reconfigured, Algerian-based "al-Qa`ida of the Islamic Maghreb" organization. Could the region, geographically situated on the fault lines between Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, evolve into a new theater of operations for al-Qa`ida and other global jihadist-oriented groups? While this threat is not entirely new, its resurgence raises questions over its immediate impact on the Maghreb and beyond.

The opening salvo came in January 2007, when Tunisian security forces clashed with militants who were apparently planning to attack Western embassies and foreign tourist sites. Throughout the 1990s, Tunisia had forcefully clamped down on its Islamist groups; still, the 2002 attack on the Djerba synagogue indicated the renewed capabilities of Islamist terrorist groups. Tunisian authorities initially denied that the averted attacks in January were linked to Islamists, preferring to brand them as "criminal actions." Eventually, though, the Tunisians admitted that Islamist extremists were indeed involved, but stressed that they were members of Algeria's former Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French acronym, GSPC), which in January had renamed itself as al-Qa`ida's North African franchise. Seeking to distance

themselves even further from the ramifications of Islamist activity, Tunisian officials portrayed the incident as part of the Algerian group's interest in attacking western targets, and not aimed directly against Tunisia.

The Tunisian clashes overlapped with rekindled Islamist terrorist attacks in Algeria, which put an end to the relative calm that had prevailed there over the past two years. The new attacks raised concerns that Algeria might be facing a situation resembling the early 1990s, when government forces and Islamist militants were locked in deadly strife in which the ruling regime ultimately prevailed, albeit at the cost of an estimated 150,000 dead. These concerns seem overblown. Still, close to thirty Algerians were killed in attacks over the last month. Clashes have occurred in various parts of the country, prompting Algerian authorities to retaliate in widespread operations against GSPC/al-Qa`ida operatives. For its part, the North African al-Qa`ida group has indicated that it would continue its operations, warning Algerians and other Maghrebis to keep their distance from "apostates and tyrants" (an allusion to local governments), in order to avoid being subjected to further attacks.

Indeed, the GSPC's long history of violence has recently taken a new turn, following its designation as al-Qa`ida's regional representative. Established in 1998, the GSPC has managed to survive in the face of the



Algerian government's harsh repression, and is now considered the most viable Algerian Islamist terrorist group. Its new title cements the growing ties between radical Algerian Islamists, and a globally oriented al-Qa`ida that is searching for new locations for its activities. North Africa's geographic location, as well as the existence of support for al-Qa`ida's worldview among segments of its population, provides an appealing setting for the organization. For the GSPC, teaming up with al-Qa`ida presents an opportunity to expand its operations beyond the local Algerian realm, and perhaps even beyond the Maghreb. The North African al-Qa`ida group seeks to transform the region into a new jihadi battle ground, and provide a base for Islamist operations in Europe and beyond. These goals are worrisome to North African leaders and western governments alike. The presence of many Maghrebi nationals in European Islamist terrorist activities reinforces the perception that Europe and North Africa alike face a serious threat from these groups.

Over the years, North African governments have repeatedly called attention to the dangerous nature of Islamist activity in their societies and beyond, seeking foreign support and international recognition of their pursuit of local Islamists. This attention was also intended to silence Western government and NGOs' criticism of human rights abuses and other practices of North African regimes. Morocco's crackdown on Islamist terrorist cells and political groups has increased since the Casablanca attacks in 2003. Algeria's president Bouteflika has emphasized his government's commitment to the U.S.-led War on Terror, and has subsequently improved his relations with Washington over the past few years. On various occasions, Tunisia's President Ben 'Ali has raised the specter of the Islamist threat, indicating that his authoritarian governing practices were the only effective remedy for eradicating it. Ben 'Ali has also implied that the mounting western criticism of his iron-fisted rule was counter-productive to the West's interest in thwarting Islamist activity in North Africa. Domestically,

the Tunisian president has been quick to warn against a spillover of Algeria's civil strife onto Tunisian soil, emphasizing the need to maintain stability at all costs, and contain any hint of Islamist militancy.

The U.S. and several European countries have responded favorably to the North African leaders' entreaties. Fearing that the region could emerge as a new haven for al-Qa`ida and other global Islamist operations, the U.S. sponsored the Trans-Saharan Counter-Terrorism Initiative in 2005. The initiative assists governments across the Maghreb and the sub-Saharan region (including Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, and Nigeria) in policing large desert areas. Special American forces have been involved in training their forces in counter-terrorist tactics. European governments continue to provide diplomatic and practical support to North African governments, enhancing their domestic capabilities and bolstering their international standing.

While the potential for increased Islamist activity beyond the region should not be minimized, the gravity of the threat at the present time should also be carefully measured. Despite the GSPC/al-Qa`ida's lofty aspirations, its actions are still limited to the region, and to specific local contexts. There have been very few reports of widespread global-oriented al-Qa`ida activity across the Maghreb. Indeed, Algerian officials, who might have been expected to magnify the scope of recent attacks in order to appeal for further Western support, have instead depicted them as "residual terrorism". They have also estimated that the attacks are related to the upcoming May 17 parliamentary elections. Tunisia's leaders have also acknowledged the need to address internal discontent, which increases the appeal of Islamist extremists. For their part, western security agencies are likely to make every effort to ensure that the North African al-Qa`ida's broader aspirations remain unrealized.