

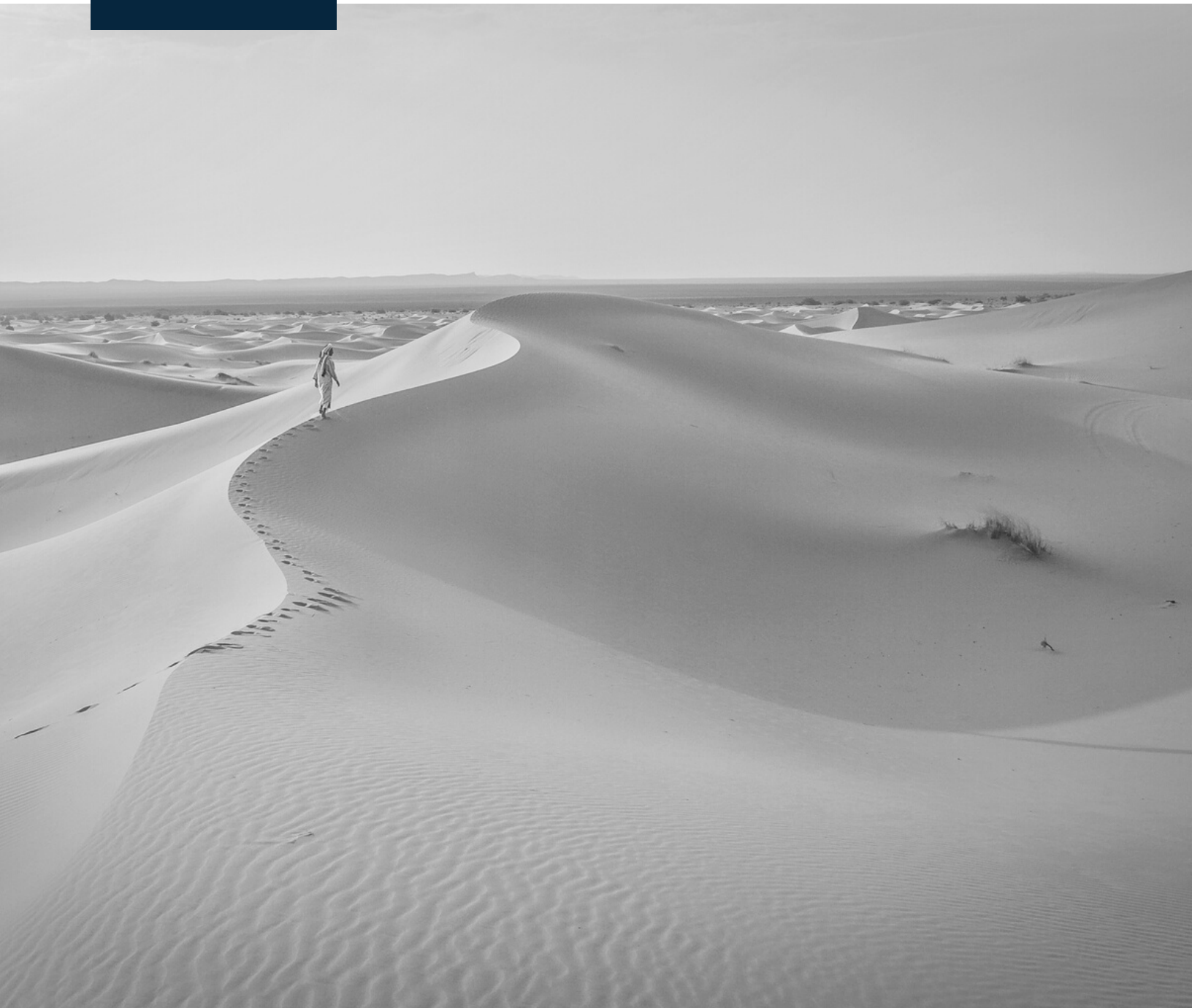
Jihadist Propaganda Media and  
Methods by Al-Qaeda in the  
Islamic Meghreb (AQIM)



THE  
COUNTERTERRORISM  
GROUP

# JIHADIST PROPOGANDA

By the Counter Threat Strategic  
Communications Team



# MEET THE TEAM

## **BECCA STEWART / TEAM LEAD**

Based in the United Kingdom

## **JANICE ZHONG / ASSISTANT TEAM LEAD**

Based in the United States

## **TIHOMIR HRISTOV / ASSISTANT TEAM LEAD**

Based in the United Kingdom

## **MCKENZIE HAMLIN**

Based in the United States

## **KRISTINA VARGANOVA**

Based in the United States

## FROM THE TEAM LEAD

The nature and ease of online communication in the current state of the world means that terrorist and extremist groups are provided with an enormous global platform upon which to share their propaganda. The CTSC team has analyzed the background and propaganda efforts of Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). By understanding how their background and history may impact their propaganda techniques as well as how their methods of producing and disseminating propaganda have changed over time, we can make intelligence-based suggestions about how to counter these tactics. With lone actor and “inspired” terrorism continually increasing, it is more important now than ever to prevent further individuals from being radicalized by propaganda online; be this through educating those regarding the inaccuracies of their calls to action, or through intercepting and removing propaganda from online forums. The CTSC team has put together this project not only to analyze the strategies used by AQIM, but to recommend a way forward to countering propaganda like this and how to work towards disrupting and defeating AQIM as a whole.

Sincerely,  
Becca Stewart, CTSC Team Lead

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, terrorism has occupied the forefront of national security strategy in many nation-states around the globe. While many counterterrorism efforts are concentrated towards the Middle East (where groups such as ISIS and the Taliban are regionally based), countries within Africa have also given rise to numerous radical organizations. Many of which seize opportunities of power given the unstable nature of government systems and authority. One such group that has demonstrated a significant threat in the West Africa region is Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Originally founded in Algeria, the group has become notorious for its anti-Western sentiment, radical

ideology, and aggressive tactics to establish control over targeted regional governments. The Counter Threat Strategic Communications Team (CTSC) has conducted a thorough analysis into the techniques and strategies utilized by AQIM to solidify their agenda and recruit into their ranks via methods including (but not limited to): digital propaganda, written documents, and audio recordings.<sup>1</sup> These attempts of extremism expansion through physical and digital channels pose a significant concern to counterterrorism efforts; implicating the evolution of novel tactics to maintain relevance. The activity of AQIM not only indicates future geopolitically driven operations but highlights the possible role of the United States as a leader against terrorism to support allies such as France in Africa.

---

1. “The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, Terrorism and Political Violence Journal, January 2011, [Source Link](#).

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## Background of AQIM

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) originated in 1998 as a group called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (also known as GSPC) in Kybalie, Algeria. The GSPC was founded by Hassan Hattab, a former member of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). At the time, the GIA had been fighting against the Algerian government in the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) and were the largest and most brutal party involved. Hattab, alongside many others, were disillusioned with the extreme violence towards civilians and thus formed a splinter group, the GSPC, to continue their military Jihad against the government whilst protecting and respecting civilians. The GSPC continued to operate from its stronghold in Kybalie before expanding further across Algeria and North Africa into the Maghreb and the Sahel. In 2003, Hattab was ousted as emir due to his desire to negotiate with the Algerian government. His successor, Nabil Sahroui, was also an original GIA follower before joining GSPC. However, his leadership was short-lived as he was killed in a shootout with the Algerian security forces a year later.<sup>2</sup> Following his death, Abdelmalek Droukdel, a former university science student and infamous bomb-maker, rose to power in 2004 and is still an emir at present.<sup>3</sup> Droukdel initiated a long period of communication within the Al-Qaeda core in

Pakistan, seeking an alliance. In September 2006, on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Droukdel pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, leading to the formal name change from GSPC to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in January 2007 to represent their new status as an Al-Qaeda affiliate.<sup>4</sup>

Structurally, AQIM has experienced many changes with factions splitting and others joining eventually leading to a hierarchical militant alliance with AQIM in the lead. AQIM and its associated groups cover a large area of North Africa including Algeria, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Tunisia, Cote D'Ivoire and Libya. In 2013 a faction of the Southern front split forming Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB). AMB then joined another Islamist group in the area, Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), forming Al Mourabitoun. In 2015 Al Mourabitoun rejoined AQIM as a semi-autonomous faction. The final merger took place in March 2017 where the Sahara branch of AQIM and Al Mourabitoun merged with two local Salafist groups, Ansar Dine and Macina Liberation Front (MLF) to form Jamaat Nusra al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), forming the hierarchical militant alliance that AQIM now leads.<sup>5</sup>

The original aim of the GSPC was to overthrow the Algerian government, given the latter's refusal to allow Islamist rule in the country. Historically, the Algerian parliament had been a largely authoritarian, one party system until 1991,

---

2. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Mapping Militants, 2018, [Source Link](#).

3. "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Council on Foreign Relations, March 2015, [Source Link](#).

4. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Mapping Militants, 2018, [Source Link](#).

5. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Counter-Extremism Project, 2019, [Source Link](#).

when an Islamist coalition was on the verge of winning control. However, the election was annulled when the Algerian military intervened and broke up the Islamist parties involved. Thus the GIA initiated their bloody insurgency, a fight which the GSPC continued but started to fade as the group developed into AQIM.<sup>6</sup> Following the allegiance to Al-Qaeda, AQIM's ideology became more aligned with theirs, wishing to implement Sharia law in all their areas of operation. They are under the belief that non-Islamist governments are fighting against Islam and thus they are acting to "save" these countries. In a rare interview with the New York Times, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel declared AQIM's goal was to relieve the Islamic Maghreb of Western influences by targeting countries, such as France, who had growing influences in the region.<sup>7</sup> They considered countries like France and Spain as their main enemies whilst undoubtedly adopting at least some of Al-Qaeda's animosity towards the U.S. following their allegiance. In 2012, France led an offensive against AQIM in Mali under the name of Operation Serval. The aim of the operation was to oust Islamic militants from the north of Mali who had begun to push their fighters towards the center of the country. The French offensive ended in July 2015 and was replaced by Operation Barkhane with its primary focus being the eradication of Islamist fighters from the greater region of the Sahel. In June 2020, French forces announced that they had killed Abdelmalek Droukdel and many others involved in AQIM's leadership.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the reduction and capture of some of AQIM's leaders, estimates of affiliated AQIM members range from 800 to upwards of 1,000 fighters throughout Algeria and Europe, as well as smaller numbers in the Sahel, to this day.<sup>9</sup>

### Types of Activity in the Past/Influence on Local Populations

Soon after announcing their affiliation with Al-Qaeda, AQIM planted several bombs in Algeria's eastern Kabylia region, killing six people. In April 2007, the terrorist group killed at least 30 people in bomb attacks on official buildings in Algiers. The death toll continued to mount well into 2008 and 2009.<sup>10</sup> In December of 2008, AQIM abducted the United Nations special envoy, Robert Fowler, and his assistant, Louis Guay, near Niger's capital, Niamey. The two men were released in April 2009. Arguably, the group's most infamous attack took place in January of 2015 in Burkina Faso. AQIM militants, working alongside Al-Mourabitoun gunmen, seized the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, firing on local businesses and taking over 200 hostages. The Burkinabé military, aided by French troops, freed 126 hostages in a counter-assault. However, 29 of the original 200 hostages were killed and 56 wounded. Days prior to the attack AQIM released a statement saying several countries, including Burkina Faso, needed to "wake up to jihad."<sup>11</sup> The attack on the hotel was the first Islamist terrorist attack in Burkina's capital, in a country that is religiously diverse and has a population that is around

---

6. "North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. policy response", RAND Corporation, 2013, [Source Link](#).

7. "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel", The New York Times, July 2008, [Source Link](#).

8. "French-Led Decapitation Strike on AQIM in Mali", Council on Foreign Relations, June 2020, [Source Link](#).

9. Ibid.

10. "Al-Qaeda in North Africa", BBC, January 2013, [Source Link](#).

11. "Al Qaeda Claims Responsibility for Attack on Burkina Faso Hotel", NBCNews.com, January 2016, [Source Link](#).

60 percent Muslim, according to government figures.<sup>12</sup> The impact of attacks like these in Burkina Faso has drawn the attention of Human Rights Watch; not only due to the direct impact of the attack but also due to the harsh counter terrorism measures taken by the government. In a diverse country with a historical religious tolerance, the tensions caused unrest and led to the creation of a five-nation counterterrorism unit, the G5 Sahel, to take on the militants. Not only are local forces now active but the formerly French nation now has around 4,500 French troops working to diffuse the violence.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, the group's most recent attack took place in Mali in June of 2018. AQIM claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb which killed two soldiers and one civilian at the Malian headquarters of the G5 Sahel, an international anti-terror taskforce.<sup>14</sup> Although AQIM has not been as active since 2018, the group announced a change in leadership in November 2020, replacing the former Abdelmalek Droukdel, who was killed in June 2020 by French forces; Abu Obaida Yusuf al-Annabi, head of AQIM's "Council of Dignitaries", has been named as Droukdel's successor.<sup>15</sup> This appointment continues the trend of AQIM solely having Algerian leaders and is likely to strengthen AQIM's position as a prominent Sahelian terrorist group. Having been a part of AQIM's original pledge of allegiance to Al-Qaeda and producing some of the groups key communiques since then, it is likely

that al-Annabi will have no trouble in taking on the new position of Emir and could potentially reignite the somewhat dying impact that AQIM have had since their last attack in June 2018. There is no doubt that this group under new leadership needs to be watched, particularly with the number of French troops still situated in the region, and the threat posed by AQIM to Western nations and their citizens abroad has every potential to increase in the years to come.<sup>16</sup> France's offensives in the region, as well as the decapitation strike which killed many involved with AQIM's leadership, is a major achievement of France and its partnering countries. The resulting confusion among the organization's higher echelons will likely hinder their operational capabilities, particularly regarding the conduct of terror attacks for the immediate future. To sustain the pressure on the group French forces continue to operate in the region in hopes of reducing domestic criticism towards Emmanuel Macron, the President of France.

### Historical Methods of Influence and Propaganda

Within any form of terrorism, but especially Jihadist terrorism, propaganda is a key tool used for recruitment and to send out an important message to followers, supporters and those opposing the group. Historically, Jihadist propaganda began as the dissemination of alternate interpretations of Islamic poetry and the Quran. In modern day, however, propaganda is now more often seen in the form of various types of

---

12. Ibid.

13. "Burkina Faso's war against militant Islamists", BBC, May 2019, [Source Link](#).

14. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Center for International Security and Cooperation, July 2018, [Source Link](#).

15. "Al-Qaeda in North Africa appoints new leader after killing", Aljazeera, November 2020, [Source Link](#).

16. "Who is al-Qaeda's new North Africa chief?", Al-Jazeera, November 2020, [Source Link](#).

video. These videos may include the preaching of Islamic messages, promotion of the terrorist group, highlighting the supposedly inhumane actions of enemy governments, or even demonstrating punishments against enemy governments by means of beheading individuals, in order to cause a public reaction favorable for the group. In the past, the main target audience of Jihadist propaganda was the Muslim population and little care was taken for producing material aimed at a non-Muslim audience. However, this method has changed. More recently Jihadist groups have begun producing and translating propaganda regarding their operations and preachings into English and other European languages. Consequently, a larger focus is put on invoking fear within non-Muslims, threatening the West with attacks and emphasizing the threat posed by the West upon Muslims. For example, one of Al-Qaeda's primary strategists, Abu 'Ubeid al-Qurashi, wrote in an article on a jihadist website referring to the 9/11 attacks:

**“They did not aspire to gain Western Sympathy; rather they sought to expose the American lie and deceit to the peoples of the world - and first and foremost to the Islamic peoples...”<sup>17</sup>**

They also aimed to entice those in the West to support their cause and inspire others to become martyrs.<sup>18</sup>

Taliban commander Mansur Dadullah said in a video of a Taliban 'graduation ceremony' for would-be Western suicide bombers from countries including the UK, the U.S., Canada, Germany and France:

**“Listen, all you Westerners and Americans. You came from thousands of kilometers away to fight us. Now we will get back to you in your countries and attack you.”<sup>19</sup>**

## **THE MAGHREB REGION**

### **Alliances and Current Activity**

AQIM maintains ties to Al-Qaeda (in the Middle East) as well as other extremist organizations within the West African region. In September 2011, AQIM announced an alliance with Al-Qaeda, leading to a larger scale of operations including bombings and high-profile kidnappings.<sup>20</sup> This alliance however, was borne out of convenience; with both groups aiming to utilize the other in order to expand their organizational notoriety.<sup>21</sup> The fundamental difference separating the two groups is that instead of the U.S. as the 'enemy', AQIM views France as the primary disturbance from the 'West'.<sup>22</sup> Unlike other Middle East based extremist groups, they are yet to conduct significant attacks against Europe or the U.S. The group generally confines their attacks to nations

---

17. "Jihadist propaganda and its audiences: A change of course?", Perspectives on Terrorism, 2007, [Source Link](#).

18. Ibid.

19. Taliban Graduation Ceremony demonstrates Change of Tactics, Terrorism Focus, July 2007, [Source Link](#).

20. "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Center for International Security and Cooperation, July 2018, [Source Link](#).

21. "North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response.", RAND Corporation, October 2015, [Source Link](#).

22. Ibid.

that have demonstrated instability, taking advantage of conflict in order to assert their presence. From 2011-2014, AQIM split several times, with former members creating 'splinter groups' possessing similar ideologies and missions. Presently, however, the organization is floundering in regions where they have had previous successes. The year 2010 marked a turning point in AQIM's operations in their home country, Algeria, as the Arab Spring unfolded across the region. Decreases to the group's activity within Algeria can also be attributed to the development of counterterrorism measures, a gradually developing stable government structure, and an increase of border surveillance.<sup>23</sup> That is not to say that AQIM has been entirely silent; smaller attacks to local villages and against law enforcement still occur but the organization has been decreasing in capacity and relevance as their affiliate, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, demonstrates declining influence. French counterterrorist efforts in the region played a significant role in dismantling AQIM's influence; other partners such as the U.S. and Algeria have contributed by providing intelligence and surveillance support to the French forces.

### **Geopolitical Analysis**

Geographically, the expanse of AQIM's operations cover parts of sub-Saharan Africa with its origins based in Algeria. Recently however, the group has demonstrated a notable decrease in activity; instead, choosing to invest their

attentions in neighboring countries that have demonstrated opportunities for organizational growth (ie. Northern Mali). In addition to the transnational nature of AQIM, the group has also made counterterrorism operations more difficult due to the selected placement of their stronghold(s). AQIM have retreated to places such as the Aures Mountains where forested terrain and steep slopes make it difficult for vehicles, helicopters, and other means of tracing individuals affiliated with the organization.<sup>24</sup>

Recent developments within several African countries regarding government corruption and suppression may lead to further developments of AQIM in the region. Historically, they have followed the path of instability, moving from country to country depending on where the group is able to gain a significant foothold in society. In places where there is significant government corruption or an underdeveloped local government structure, it is easier for an organization to establish itself in the local area. In 2016, AQIM member nationality was no longer primarily Algerian but Malian, speaking to the prominence of the organization in Mali.<sup>25</sup> Thus the expansion of AQIM into West Africa can be partly attributed to the lack of counterterrorism programs/funding as well as destabilized government systems.

In June 2020, a France-led operation removed the leader of AQIM with the aid of

---

23. "AQIM Pleads for Relevance in Algeria", Combating Terrorism Center - West Point, March 2019, [Source Link](#).

24. Ibid.

25. "The re-emergence of AQIM in Africa", Al Jazeera, March 2016, [Source Link](#).



intelligence via the U.S.<sup>26</sup> The removal of a key leader within the group may signal a reduction in operations but does not necessarily mean that AQIM is finished once and for all. While the removal of key leaders in terrorist organizations may reduce activity in the region for a period of time, it does not ensure the complete eradication of such groups. Leadership decapitation strategy is only successful when combined with other approaches. It should be noted that it is difficult to eradicate terrorism altogether due to the ideology which invokes such practices; violent jihadism will move from one group to another until their problems, which often have to deal with establishing Sharia law and removing Western influences from the given region, are completely resolved. For example, the killing of Osama bin Laden, the former leader of Al-Qaeda, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former leader of the Islamic State, did not lead to the end of their terrorist organizations, but rather to new leadership. It should be anticipated that AQIM may face a difficult internal struggle following the strikes on their leading figures, however, the organization will inevitably continue to evolve.

The hierarchical nature of many terrorist networks ensure that leaders can and are easily replaced should they be killed in the course of an attack. As a longstanding group with additional ties to the core of Al-Qaeda, AQIM has had time to develop strong bureaucratic features within their ranks, creating both stability and resiliency.

As an affiliate of the 'core' Al-Qaeda, AQIM not only retains the notoriety through branding (name) but also overarching public/global support spreading over several countries. Sympathizers of the extremist agenda have also contributed to the prevalence and strength of terrorist networks which arise out of unstable governing systems, regional conflicts, and corrupt institutions. Therefore, although it may create an initial shock within the organization's ranks, the pressure can only be sustained through a multi-pronged approach.

### **Media and Methods**

Before merging with Al-Qaeda, GSPC had lost the support of the Algerian people, making recruitment a challenge. GSPC did not have influential propaganda tactics, resulting in a lack of recruitment videos and propaganda to regain the support of the Algerian population. The jihadist group could barely find enough people to fill their ranks. Without a modern propaganda system, GSPC began to lose its power in the region. The propaganda tactics of GSPC are distinguished by "their irrelevance, negligible activities, and poor product quality".<sup>27</sup> When compared to other jihadist communication activities, the GSPC was the last to recognize the need for relevant communication and propaganda techniques. It was not until 2005 that AQIM began to show a significant level of activity within the space of social media. Following the alliance of Al-Qaeda and GSPC, AQIM was able to access Al-Qaeda's network of

---

26. "French-Led Decapitation Strike on AQIM in Mali", Council on Foreign Relations, August 2020, [Source Link](#).

27. "The Caliphate Is Not a Tweet Away: The Social Media Experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, March 2016, [Source Link](#).

financiers, intelligence assets, and media specialists.<sup>28</sup> With the merging of Al-Qaeda resources, it provided the necessary financial support for AQIM to improve their propaganda production. Additionally, the group fed off Al-Qaeda's reputation and support, and was able to create strong social media platforms to gain a follower base.

According to the U.S Department of Homeland Security, AQIM's most used social media platforms are Telegram and Twitter. Typically AQIM utilizes these platforms to "disperse audio and video statements that claim attacks and provide commentary on religious and social issues impacting Muslims in the region".<sup>29</sup> The first sign of AQIM on the internet was the 2004 website they created called jihad-algeria.net.<sup>30</sup> Keeping the site secure from outside forces and Western governments posed an issue. The site was quickly deactivated and a series of sister-sites were formed.<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, they were also rapidly deactivated. AQIM could not recover the follower base that was lost when the 2004 website was taken down. Due to the rapid response of Western governments in the removal of AQIM sites, the terror group remained weak in terms of propaganda production. They had no platform from which to disseminate propaganda, thus losing the support of many of their followers. It is also important to note that AQIM is based largely in Africa; they are

therefore likely to encounter language or cultural barriers when reaching out to Western audiences to garner support. If anything, AQIM may seek to radicalize Muslim believers located in Western countries due to the foundational basis of their ideology. AQIM needed to evolve with the advancing forms of social media (i.e Facebook and Twitter) in order to keep their online presence relevant.

In March 2013, AQIM officially joined the many other jihadist groups using social media platforms to spread their missions. AQIM created accounts using Twitter and Facebook, and also created a blog. Using the Twitter handle @Andalus\_Media and "Africa Muslima" for Facebook, AQIM was able to connect to sympathizers and provide propaganda to radicalize and recruit members.<sup>32</sup> Still recovering from the lost support resulting from their website being removed, AQIM turned to Western social media platforms to recruit members. The group had lost support from the local communities forcing them to look for new recruits internationally. The use of Western social media platforms allowed them to spread their propaganda beyond their local communities and to reach a whole new international community. Their presence on social media platforms broadened their international vision for the group.

Key to improving AQIM's media presence was the creation of the Al-Andalus Institute

---

28. "The GSPC:Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad",The Combating Terrorism Center-West Point, April 2007, [Source Link](#).

29. "Foreign Terrorist Organizations' Official Media Arms and Violent Extremist Web Forums", U.S Department of Homeland Security, April 2016, [Source Link](#).

30. "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb",Terrorism and Political Violence, January 2011, [Source Link](#).

31. Ibid.

32. "The Caliphate Is Not a Tweet Away: The Social Media Experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb",Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, March 2016, [Source Link](#).

for Media Production in 2009, which served as its official propaganda and media division. Before it there was an issue with supporters sharing communiques and making false attack claims on behalf of the group without prior approval from leadership. The subsequent issue surrounding ascertaining legitimacy of propaganda shared supposedly on behalf of the group would have provided a sense of disorganization and thus the Al-Andalus Institute helped to counter this.<sup>33</sup> They promoted their Twitter account within other jihadist web forums and created online events for sympathizers to participate. Information provided by The Combating Terrorism Center showed that an official Al-Qaeda user was advertising and promoting an “open interview” with Shaykh Ahmad Abu Abd al-Ilaha, the head of the Media Board for Al-Andalus on Twitter.<sup>34</sup> The “Africa Muslima” Facebook account was quickly taken down after creation, and the blog remains inactive.<sup>35</sup> The Twitter account had a follower base of 15,000 before the account was suspended in 2013.<sup>36</sup> AQIM attempted to relaunch their social media presence but was unsuccessful in their attempts.

The main targets of AQIM propaganda have been France and Spain. In an interview with Abdelmalek Droukdal, he stated that the group seeks to “liberate the Islamic Maghreb from the sons of France and Spain

and all symbols of treason and employment for the outsiders, and protect it from the foreign greed and the crusader’s hegemony”.<sup>37</sup> This is the message shared in AQIM’s propaganda, calling on all Muslims to join in arms to fight against the forces (France, Spain, and other Western partners) that are taking over their land and way of life. The goal is to convince Muslims in the Islamic Maghreb to form a shared political community with Al-Qaeda.<sup>38</sup> Due to relatively recent attacks on AQIM leaders, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization has remained fairly inactive in terms of large scale attacks and international campaigns. Western governments have also made significant progress in detecting and removing websites or material with jihadist propaganda.

## **U.S. & EUROPEAN NATIONAL SECURITY OPERATIONS**

### **Impact on U.S. & European National Security Operations**

Whilst AQIM have not directly conducted attacks on U.S. or European soil, they have long posed a great risk to Western interests

---

33. “The Caliphate Is Not a Tweet Away: The Social Media Experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, March 2016, [Source Link](#).

34. “Tweeting for the Caliphate: Twitter as the New Frontier for Jihadist Propaganda”, The Combating Terrorism Center-West Point, June 2013, [Source Link](#).

35. “The Caliphate Is Not a Tweet Away: The Social Media Experience of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb”, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, March 2016, [Source Link](#).

36. Ibid.

37. “An Interview With Abdelmalek Droukdal”, New York Times, July 2008, [Source Link](#).

38. “Analyzing AQIM Jihad Recruitment Propaganda”, Al-Wasat, July 2011, [Source Link](#).

in the Sahel. As is common in postcolonial Francophone Africa, there is a level of hostility that still exists in the Sahel towards French nationals and other Westerners. This poses great risk to Western interests considering the number of aid workers, industrial employees and lesser so diplomats and tourists that are currently present in the region.<sup>39</sup> There has been a history of kidnappings of Western interests in the Sahel, particularly in 2003 when GSPC (AQIM's former organization) took 32 Europeans hostage in Northern Mali, releasing all but one hostage (who died in the process) in return for a \$6 million dollar ransom payment. Since then over \$50 million dollars in ransom payments have been received by the group following the kidnappings of dozens of Western tourists, diplomats, aid workers and industry personnel. These kidnappings have contributed to the more than \$90 million miscellaneous profits obtained by AQIM between 2003 and 2013.<sup>40</sup> Not only does this highlight the danger imposed upon Western interests in the Sahel, but also the monetary impact their activities have had.

#### **Analyzing the Influence/Propaganda Effects on U.S. and European Citizens**

Despite exclusive regional activity limited to much of Sub-Saharan Africa, AQIM still nevertheless has been able to reach a broad audience through their recently improved propaganda methods. In 2003, following a formal established affiliation with Al-Qaeda in the Middle East, the group's media capabilities notably improved.<sup>41</sup> Despite

primarily focusing attacks in Africa, AQIM has still continued to promote a global jihadist agenda that advocates an aggressive anti-Western sentiment. In a vast digital age, the internet has become the main channel for Al-Qaeda operations including recruitment, dissemination of propaganda, and influence. Given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the remote nature of numerous day-to-day processes, many individuals have turned to social media and online platforms to express themselves and their conditions, creating an increased number of potential targets for Islamic radicalization.

#### **Examples of AQIM's Online Propaganda**

An example of former propaganda shared by AQIM leadership comes from Sheikh Abderrahman Abi Anas Al-Shanqiti in 2010. The focus of this communique was to persuade Sahel Muslims to form a shared political community with those supporting Al-Qaeda. Like many other AQIM communiques, this piece used poetry to portray the fight against Islam and highlight those 'slain warriors' who have been lost in the battle to spread their faith across the globe.<sup>42</sup> This poetry is used to honour those lost but twists these losses into a form of recruitment, highlighting the glory and renown in death that future fighters will gain. Al-Shanqiti talks of the alliance of 'Christian France' with Mauritanian forces posing an existential threat to their religion:

---

39. "AQIM's Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel", CTC Sentinel, April 2014, [Source Link](#).

40. "Millions in Ransoms Fuel Militants' Clout in West Africa", The New York Times, December 2012, [Source Link](#).

41. "The Road to Media Jihad: The Propaganda Actions of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb", Researchgate, January 2011, [Source Link](#).

42. "Analyzing AQIM Jihad Recruitment Propaganda", al-Wasat, July 2011, [Source Link](#).

**“The people of the cross... declared war on Muslims in your country. So take up your swords against them before they initiate against you.”<sup>43</sup>**

10 years ago and since then, the global jihadist movement has developed and allowed multiple groups to enhance their reach beyond simply the local region.

This claim is representative of the war on AQIM claimed by France in the weeks leading up to the publishing of this communique. Al-Shanqiti used this to present a narrative that the French posed a threat not solely to AQIM supporters, but to all local Muslims in the Sahel region. Describing the Mauritanian army as ‘apostates’ and the French as ‘infidels’ appeals to the potential pool of new recruits spread across Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger. This enhances the sense of ‘us vs. them’ and utilizes this to win over those local to the area and entice them to support their fight.<sup>44</sup>

The role of foreign powers, such as France, within the local Sahel military efforts simply provides groups like AQIM with ammunition for recruiting individuals in a battle against the West. By declaring a war on AQIM, France left themselves open to arguments, such as that by Al-Shanqiti, that France was instead waging a war on Islam. Not only does this leave French interests, and France itself, at risk of repercussion, but also allows these groups to spread their propaganda and call to action further into more Western countries. Despite this, AQIM’s recruitment tactics at the time were intrinsically limited to the Sahel region due to a lack of ability to unite their depiction of the local Jihad with that of the global Jihad. However, this communique was now

---

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.



# JIHADIST PROPAGANDA

COUNTERING PROPAGANDA BY AL-QAEDA IN  
THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB (AQIM)

COMPILED BY

The Counter Threat Strategic  
Communications Team

## CTSC EFFORTS

Originally founded in Algeria, the group has become notorious for its anti-Western sentiment, radical ideology, and aggressive tactics to establish control over targeted regional governments. The Counter Threat Strategic Communications Team (CTSC) has conducted a thorough analysis into the techniques and strategies utilized by AQIM to solidify their agenda and recruit into their ranks via methods including (but not limited to): digital propaganda, written documents, and audio recordings.

## CTSC RECOMMENDATIONS

There must be a realistic, multi-faceted approach to tackling AQIM. If only one of these recommendations is applied whilst ignoring the other approaches, it is highly unlikely to achieve success.

**Aid Program Developments** - Further develop aid programs by the U.S. in coordination with the EU to alleviate poverty in AQIM's area of operations. The programs must firstly address the worsened food insecurity following the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, they should provide alternative job opportunities for local populations. For many fighters, recruitment by AQIM is seen purely as employment due to the absence of no other employment prospects. Thus, creating self-sustaining local economies through aid programs will reduce the number of people interested in joining the terror organization.

**International Government Aid** - As seen by AQIM's relative decline in Algeria, the establishment of a strong counterterrorism program and stable government structure greatly diminishes active terrorist operations. As such, key international coalitions should look to secure portions of Africa that are most susceptible to terrorism by offering economic and political aid where necessary.



**Complex Information Campaign** - The allies should organize a complex information campaign that is contextualized to the local psychological and socio-political makeup. It should be based on credible evidence and presented in an interesting and attractive form. Allied forces must account for the literacy levels of the local populations and adapt henceforth. Therefore, the campaign should take shape in both a textual and visual form. It must not be identified as propaganda and it should not be purely rhetorical. That is why aid programs to alleviate poverty are needed. It needs to be remembered that propaganda is not merely a force in its own. It only mobilizes pre-existing conditions, which, in this case, is poverty.

**Communicating the Anti-Terror Campaign Effectively** - As part of the complex information campaign, particular attention should be given to portraying the anti-terror campaign as one that is initiated and led by local forces. As seen in the above sections, France is being antagonized for taking an almost colonial approach. This would require increased training of local forces, in addition to providing them with equipment suitable for desert warfare. Allied forces should provide Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), precision strikes and overall an almost invisible tactical presence. Aid should be targeted towards unstable governments and regions with extensive conflict with the ultimate aim of providing a resilient structure, making it difficult for terrorists to establish a foundation.

**Removal of Key AQIM Leadership** - Persistent leadership decapitation of AQIM will drive more insecurity within their ranks, disrupt training and limit recruitment as they will need to focus more on reorganization and moving. This will require increased operational capabilities, particularly in the form of drones. Such is the surveillance aircraft, Global Hawk, as well as the Reaper drone, which are capable of covering large swathes of land and have a prolonged flight time. Both are very suitable for the Maghreb and the Sahel.

**Disrupting Terrorist Financing** - Preventing the funneling of illicit finance towards AQIM from foreign backers will likely result in the slowing down of their operations. That will be most effective when combined with attacking the group's domestic income. One of the primary methods of bringing income is through the trafficking of weapons, drugs and people across the region. It is important to note that many locals depend on the same method of income, thus, in order to not antagonize them, a self-sustaining local economy independent of illicit trafficking must be put in place. To implement this, allied countries should work towards establishing foreign investment funds with suitable oversight. The aim of these funds should be towards the encouragement of regional development projects in agriculture and natural resources, and through the promotion of local entrepreneurship.

## CONTACT

To see the full report conducted by the Counter Threat Strategic Communications Team on AQIM Jihadist Propaganda tactics, please contact The Counterterrorism Group at:

[info@counterterrorismgroup.com](mailto:info@counterterrorismgroup.com)