



# **Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations**

**Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani**

## **Abstract**

Rebranded in 2007, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is the latest incarnation of Algerian radical Islamism. Initially focused on attacks with great political resonance against Algerian governmental and military targets, the group has progressively shifted its priorities, alongside its geographical and operational features. In the past few years, the countries of the Sahel region (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad) have been increasingly affected by AQIM's actions. This geographical shift was the result both of a weakening of AQIM within Algeria, due to the tough counter-terrorist measures adopted by the regime, and of the "business opportunities" and the wider operational freedom offered by the Sahelian environment. The aim of this paper is to briefly address a series of questions concerning AQIM's "Sahelization" and its consequences for Algerian foreign policy.

**Keywords:** *Algeria / Radical Islamism / Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) / Terrorism / Sahel region / Mali / Mauritania / Niger / Chad / Algerian foreign policy*

## Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations

by Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani\*

### 1. Introduction

Emerged in 2007, after the re-branding of the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC), *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM) is the latest incarnation of Algerian radical Islamism. Initially focused on attacks with great political resonance against Algerian governmental and military targets, the group has progressively shifted its priorities, alongside its geographical and operational features. In the past few years, the countries of the Sahel region have been increasingly affected by AQIM's actions. Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad. This geographical shift was the result both of a weakening of AQIM within Algeria, due to the tough counter-terrorist measures adopted by the regime, and of the "business opportunities" and the wider operational freedom offered by the Sahelian environment. The states of this area are structurally weak, their borders are porous and their control over territory is largely ineffective. Kidnappings of foreigners, smuggling of narcotics and weapons, and contraband have represented the major activities carried out by the Sahelian factions of the organization, which enjoy an increasing degree of autonomy from AQIM's central leadership based in the Kabylia region in northern Algeria. The aim of this paper is to briefly address a series of questions concerning AQIM's "Sahelization" and its consequences for Algerian foreign policy: What are the main operational and geographical features of AQIM's evolution? What is the internal power configuration of the group? What is the impact of AQIM's "Sahelization" on Algeria's regional and international stance? Can Algeria use its successes at home in countering AQIM to bolster its regional and international status?

### 2. The evolution and internationalization of AQIM

The actors, leaders, tactics, goals and geographical focus of what is known today as AQIM have changed several times over the past two decades, as the organization reacted to existential threats and external inputs in often unpredictable ways. As a result, tracing the origins of the region's main terrorist group is a complex but essential task in order to understand its latest evolutions.

The roots of AQIM are found in the Algerian civil war that broke out in 1992, following the army's decision to step in and prevent the Islamist party *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) from winning the first democratic elections in the history of the country. With the

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Paper prepared for the Istituto affari internazionali (IAI), April 2011.

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suspension of the electoral process and the banning of the FIS, the country became the theatre of an all-out conflict pitting the military against various armed Islamist groups. Amongst the latter, the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) soon emerged as the most effective, particularly in the wake of spectacular operations such as the hijacking of an Air France flight from Algiers to Paris in 1994 (Evans and Phillips 2007). Throughout the 1990s, the GIA made no distinctions between Algerian security forces and the civilian population, and even carried out a series of operations in France, in one of the bloodiest conflicts ever witnessed in the region.

However, by the late 1990s, a series of factors had weakened the GIA, leading to the gradual demise of its popular support: the army's successful "eradication" policy against terrorists; the GIA's increasingly erratic and extremist leadership; its violent tactics; and, in particular, its role in the killing of civilians (Le Sueur 2010). In this context, in 1998, former GIA member Hassan Hattab broke away from the organization, founding the new GSPC, with the explicit goal of avoiding the unnecessary targeting of civilians. The rise of the GSPC coincided with a dramatic strategic shift: between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the civil war had slowly turned from an all-out conflict into a low-intensity insurgency, as the Algerian authorities carried out a series of high-profile arrests and successful military operations while offering an amnesty to the remaining jihadi fighters.

Against this background, in the 2000s, the GSPC de facto retreated to two strongholds, from where it continued to carry out several attacks against the Algerian state: the Berber-inhabited Kabylia in the East; and the Saharan region in the south (Ruedy 2005). This concealed a growing dualism within the organization, as the Saharan branch of the GSPC, led initially by Amari Saifi "El Para" and subsequently by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, focussed almost exclusively on smuggling and kidnapping mostly for fundraising purposes, whereas the GSPC in the Kabylia continued to target the symbols of the Algerian state in a more conventional fashion. In addition, the organization was plagued with internal strife, as various personalities clashed over leadership and tactics. In 2003, Hassan Hattab was ousted and replaced first by Nabil Sahraoui and then in 2004, after Sahraoui's death, by Abdelmalek Droukdel.

Under Droukdel, the GSPC underwent a radical reorganization, as the group went back to targeting civilians, a practice earlier denounced by Hattab. However, despite Droukdel's efforts, the dualism within the organization persisted. Moreover, Droukdel decided to establish an increasingly closer relationship with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, in what marked a significant departure from the traditional "xenophobia" of Algeria's Islamist terrorism, i.e., a rejection of any form of external support. This rapprochement culminated in 2007, when the GSPC officially re-branded itself as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), thus marking its affiliation with the global jihad's strategy and tactics. In the wake of this event, AQIM executed some of its most devastating attacks in April and again in December 2007, striking at the heart of Algiers and causing dozens of casualties. These attacks also underlined AQIM's new tactics, as the group used suicide bombings in a similar fashion to insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq (Renard 2008).

Despite AQIM's spectacular ability to carry out such attacks, the organization is still plagued with several long-standing problems. First of all, although estimates vary, the

group probably continues to rely on just a few hundred members, thus highlighting its inability to develop from a terrorist group into a more structured threat involving a mass movement or a full-blown insurgency. Second, the organization's operations remain confined to two main areas, the mountainous Kabylia and the inhospitable Sahara, as the security forces are in control of the situation everywhere else in Algeria. Third, although one of AQIM's goals is the regionalization of its presence to the whole North African region, so far it has failed almost completely to expand its operations to neighbouring Morocco, Tunisia and Libya.

Nevertheless, AQIM has been able to exploit the security vacuum in the Algerian Sahara and the Sahel region, from where it has managed to establish a significant presence in Mali, Mauritania and Niger. This process of "Sahelization" has highlighted an internal shift, as the southern branch of AQIM has gained an increasingly central role within the group. In particular, AQIM has been able to carry out high-profile operations, such as kidnappings of European and North American tourists and workers in the area, while profiting from its thriving smuggling business (Porter 2011). AQIM's security threat in the region is still very much alive and has expanded to other countries, underlining once more the group's remarkable resilience to military pressure and ability to survive.

The shift in the geographical centre of AQIM's activity did not translate in an "ethnic pluralization" of its leadership. Its core and chain of command has remained Algerian. Recruitment of new members has occurred in the Sahelian countries, above all in Mauritania, but it did not lead to major changes in the command structure of the organization. The Sahelization of the movement has taken place only amongst the lower ranks, but it has not affected the leadership, which is still controlled by Algerians. AQIM's Sahelization has had instead an important effect on the unity of the movement. Since its creation, the split between the different leaders of the organization became increasingly evident. The formal head of the organization is Abdelmalek Droukdel, based in the Kabylia. His power over the Sahelian factions of AQIM is not very consistent and effective, weakened by Algeria's successful counter-terrorist operations. His most recent efforts have been mainly focused on restoring a proper Jihadist imagine for the organization. His attempts to involve Osama Bin Laden in the negotiations over the French workers of AREVA kidnapped in Niger in September 2010 were a clear example of that.<sup>1</sup>

The historical player in AQIM in the Sahel is Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He is the leader of a southern brigade of about 150 elements defined "el Moulathamoune", literally the "masked ones". Man of many nicknames, the most famous is "Mr Marlboro", given his experience in illegal trafficking and contraband. Mainly based in Mauritania, he has great operational autonomy, fuelling doubts on the effective control of the central leadership on his actions. For a while, he had close ties to Droukdel, above all in the final years of the GSCP and during the early al-Qaedaist incarnation of the movement, when he endorsed Droukdel's leadership. However, the relationship between the two quickly worsened, when Droukdel started to fear Belmokhtar's increasing power and

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<sup>1</sup> In November 2010 Droukdel declared that France should negotiate directly with Osama bin Laden in order to secure the release of the five French workers. AQIM also requested the withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan according to a specific timetable.

greater local autonomy. Droukdal thus tried to “diversify” the power structure within the Sahelian AQIM, promoting new actors operating there. This led to the emergence of another major Sahelian AQIM faction: the Tareq ibn Ziyad, led by Yahia Abu Amar Abid Hammadou, widely known as Abdelhamid Abu Zeid (Filiu 2010). This group was born in AQIM's fifth zone of operations – northeastern Algeria – in 2003, but subsequently moved to the Sahel area.<sup>2</sup> Abu Zeid's rise was then linked to Droukdal's policy of counterbalancing Belmokhtar's influence and independence in the south. Again, however, after a few years, the situation changed. Recently some sources have reported an increasing split between Zeid and Droukdal.<sup>3</sup> Given the history of AQIM, leadership rivalries and internal fragmentation have been constant elements of its configuration.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, lack of cohesion has reduced AQIM's ability to represent a consistent political threat to Algeria and the region. On the other hand, however, the presence of small factions, competing among each other for money, prestige and influence, has represented an increasing security concern, insofar as actors seeking growing influence within the movement have had an inbuilt incentive to carry out spectacular and large attacks in order to bolster their status.

### 3. The determinants of AQIM's tactical and strategic evolution

As mentioned above, what is known today as AQIM has gone through several radical transformations, usually in response to external pressures, existential threats and growth opportunities. In recent years, two notable changes have taken place: the re-branding of the GSPC into AQIM; and a creeping process of “Sahelization”, i.e., a strategic shift from Algeria as AQIM's main operational hub to the Sahel region, an area comprising Southern Algeria, Northern Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

In this context, it is important to understand the drivers of this double evolution and of the group's survival, despite its weakening by the Algerian state. This induced AQIM to transform itself from a full-blown insurgency into an al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group. Since the 1990s, Algerian authorities have led several counteroffensives aimed at wiping out terrorist presence from its territory; this policy has been accompanied by several amnesties, whose goal was to coax the remaining terrorists out of their hidings. In the Algerian political jargon, these two approaches have been supported by different factions: the *éradicateurs* (eradicators) and *dialoguistes* (dialoguers), representing the two side of an endless political debate that has influenced decision-making in Algeria over the last two decades.<sup>5</sup> This polarization of the political spectrum has meant that a policy mix between the two approaches has been adopted, whose relative success has effectively led to a significant weakening of the Algerian Islamist insurgency and to the

<sup>2</sup> AQIM has divided North Africa in military regions, of which the Sahel is the 9<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> O. Guitta “Turmoil and Dissent in North Africa's Al Qaeda,” *The National* (Abu Dhabi), 27 December, 2010, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/news-comment/turmoil-and-dissent-in-north-africas-al-qaeda>.

<sup>4</sup> Some views contest this idea, linking internal differences more to AQIM's tribal allegiance system rather than to simple and basic power disputes within the group. (Guidere, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> J.-P. Tuquoi, “L'échec politique et économique de celui qui aurait pu être le ‘Gorbatchev algérien’”, *Le Monde.fr*, 17 February 2011 (originally published 16 June 2001), [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/17/l-echec-politique-et-economique-de-celui-qui-aurait-pu-etre-le-gorbatchev-algerien\\_1481437\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/02/17/l-echec-politique-et-economique-de-celui-qui-aurait-pu-etre-le-gorbatchev-algerien_1481437_3212.html).

stabilization of the country since the late 1990s. Indeed, reported terrorist incidents fell from 324 in 2001 to 203 in 2008 and the number of civilian casualties dropped from around 180 in 2001 to 40 in 2007. Similarly, in the same period, the geographical distribution of attacks narrowed from a relatively balanced distribution along the more densely populated northern coast, to a concentration in the northeast (Rogan 2008).

Algerian terrorism has reacted to this policy mix in several ways. For example, Hattab's breakaway from the GIA and creation of the GSPC was an attempt at reorganizing the Islamist fighters and rekindling the organization's support within society. Likewise, since Droukdel became the leader of the GSPC in 2004, the group has been restructured to respond more effectively to its seemingly unstoppable operational decline; in particular, Droukdel marked a return to more violent and spectacular attacks, by lifting the ban on attacks on civilians. As a result, the GSPC's affiliation to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda and its re-branding as AQIM should be seen more as a survival tactic than a sign of strength. The association with Al-Qaeda is exclusively rhetorical, tactical and strategic,<sup>6</sup> as AQIM has adopted the jargon, techniques and long-term goals of bin Laden's organization without, however, there being evidence of a logistical or financial relationship between the two, consistently with Al-Qaeda's *modus operandi* (Burke 2004).

Following its re-branding, AQIM carried out some devastating attacks in Algiers, using suicide bombers in what amounted to a major innovation in the group's tactics and a departure from Hattab's approach. Moreover, AQIM started to target foreigners in Algeria more frequently, issuing threats against France, the US and several other countries. However, this re-organization was not accompanied by a significant expansion in the size of the group; rather, the adoption of the new name, AQIM, marked the evolution of the group from an outright insurgency to a more opaque and flexible network, capable of inflicting significant damage despite its relatively limited resources.

In this context, AQIM's process of "Sahelization" represents the other side of the same coin. As mentioned above, the GSPC and then AQIM have been characterized by a growing dualism that sometimes has even pitted the Kabylia branch against the Saharan command. Indeed, the Sahelian group has often acted independently, pursuing different goals and using different tactics from the Kabylia command. This activism came under intense international scrutiny already in 2003, when El Para kidnapped a group of 32 European tourists in Algeria, in one of the GSPC's most important and hitherto unusual operations.<sup>7</sup>

The accelerated development of the Saharan branch and its increasing activism have been a reaction to military repression in Algeria and the growing opportunities that the Sahel region offered to AQIM. Sahelian states are traditionally plagued with: long and porous borders, extremely difficult to patrol; complex and unstable ethno-religious make-up; political instability; economic underdevelopment; and high levels of

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<sup>6</sup> The strategic link to al-Qaeda refers to the long-term goals of removing infidel governments and restoring the Caliphate, whereas the tactical link refers to the shared use of terrorist methods to pursue these ends.

<sup>7</sup> S. Mellah and J.-B. Rivoire, "El Para, the Maghreb's Bin Laden", *Le Monde Diplomatique. English edition*, February 2005, <http://mondediplo.com/2005/02/04algeria>.

corruption. The weakness of the Sahelian state means that these countries constitute an ideal terrain for non-state actors. In particular, organizations such as AQIM can exploit long-standing conflicts and traditional smuggling routes to North Africa and Europe to broaden their room for manoeuvre.

In smuggling fuel, cigarettes and narcotics, AQIM's activities are linked to the Algerian tradition of *trabendo*, a word that comes from the French *contrabande* (smuggling) and illustrates the central role played by the black economy in this area. Moreover, smuggling has always been a major source of income for Algerian terrorism, from the GIA onwards (Marret 2008). AQIM offers its protection and geographical know-how in exchange for money, de facto imposing taxes on this "industry". Likewise, AQIM is also involved in kidnapping foreign tourists and workers in the Sahel, in what resembles a very efficient "supply chain", whereby local criminals extract profits by kidnapping foreigners and selling them to the terrorists. Indeed, AQIM's activities in the Sahel are best described as a loose network of Islamist terrorists and local criminals, who profit from the smuggling and kidnapping trade.

In this peculiar political economy of terrorism, Tuaregs play a very important role. In recent years Tuaregs have often clashed with the authorities, particularly in Niger and Mali. As a result of the inherent weakness of the Sahelian states, local governments have been forced to enter unstable agreements with these populations; AQIM has been able to exploit these tensions by establishing strong connections with the Tuaregs. Belmokhtar is also rumoured to have married several women from local Tuareg tribes, thus establishing an alliance of sorts (Black 2009). That said, the role of the Tuaregs is at best unclear, particularly as certain clans appear to have fought against AQIM, in an ever-changing political and tribal environment.

As a result, despite the Algerian government's successful strategy to weaken AQIM, the group has managed to survive and strike back by morphing into a fluid organization affiliated to Al-Qaeda and at the same time committed to kidnapping and smuggling. This hybrid between a terrorist group and a criminal business organization has therefore become a far more complex threat to stability in the area than its predecessors.

#### **4. AQIM's regional and international impacts: a new role for Algeria?**

Beyond its immediate repercussions, the Sahelization of AQIM can have a direct impact also on regional geopolitics. Primarily, it clearly has an immediate impact on the Sahel region, since it represents a direct, immediate and major security threat to the state actors of the region. Nevertheless, it could also affect the balance of power on a larger scale in the Maghreb and it could even impact, in the mid-term, key balances within the wider Mediterranean region. As stated already, Sahelian states are characterized by structural weaknesses, which have made them an appealing operative theatre for AQIM. This weakness translates in the structural need to rely on external support for tackling these multi-level regional challenges.

In the Maghreb, AQIM's direct and operational presence is now weak and largely inconsistent, and other small radical groups operate autonomously.<sup>8</sup> Excluding Algeria, which remains the core of "AQIM's soul" but in which its activities are now far less effective than in the past, in the rest of the Maghreb area of AQIM's presence is marginal. However, it can still play a role in affecting Maghrebi geopolitics, through a peculiar connection between the dynamics at the Sahelian and Maghreb levels, discussed below. In this context, gaining a position of primacy in the Sahel and in the fight against terrorism in the region could be used by Algeria as a tool of influence in the wider area of the Maghreb.

The main features defining Maghrebi geopolitics are: a low degree of regional cooperation; a lack of effective multilateral arrangements; the presence of a rhetoric myth of regional unity, never translated into a coherent and consistent reality<sup>9</sup> and a strong predominance of national interests and bilateral relations, often based on a "zero-sum game" logic. (de Larramendi 2008, Dris 2008). Terrorism and security are then two major issues characterizing the area and its significance for global politics. Actually, this region has gained an increased specific value on the global chessboard only in the aftermath of 9/11.

Broadening out our analysis, historically, European countries have been the most involved external actors in the area, with France playing a major role given its colonial past. During the Cold War era, the U.S. did not perceive this region as strategic in the context of its containment strategy of the USSR, leaving France to play the hegemon in guaranteeing a sustainable order in an area close to the southern flank of NATO. Only in the past 30 years, since the emergence of Libya as major concern for Washington, the American involvement in the area has increased, driven by energy interests, and, more recently, by the growth of terrorist activities in the region (Zoubir 2009). Recently, a further "pluralization" of external powers operating in the area has emerged, with a heightened role of China and Russia. In the wider context of China's involvement in Africa, Chinese interest in the region has increased due to Beijing's energy thirst. The Maghreb is now a key target of this strategy, with China sharing good commercial relations with Algeria and Morocco, going beyond the simple energy dossier (Meidan 2008). Russia has also returned in the area after the end of the Soviet era, when it was a major supporter of Algeria. Moscow's primary interest is to increase cooperation in the field of energy, having again Algeria as the centre of this strategy (Makarychev 2009, Darbouche 2007).

In this context, the complicated relationship between Morocco and Algeria, characterized by a latent struggle for regional primacy in the Maghreb, the struggle to impose their "benign hegemony" on the weaker states of the Sahel, as well as by the thorny issue of the Western Sahara, is the centre of gravity of regional geopolitics. In this context, Algeria plays a crucial and peculiar role. Its counterterrorism efforts have

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<sup>8</sup> These groups are: the Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group, a dissident branch of the now legalized Tunisian Islamic group Ennahda of Rachid Ghannouchi; the Islamic group of Libyan fighters and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group.

<sup>9</sup> This supposed regional unity was the ideological foundation of the Arab Maghreb Union. Established on the 17<sup>th</sup> February 1989 between the five Maghrebi countries, it was aimed at deepening political and economic regional integration, but it has largely failed in its aim, given the persistent climate of political distrust among its members.

been successful in countering and weakening AQIM. The renewed focus of the group on the Sahel and the Sahara can be explained also by the increasing weakness and the major setbacks which the group has suffered within the confines of Algeria. In the past few months, Algeria has tried to “seize the momentum”, boosting its regional status by playing the card of leadership in tackling the terrorist threat. The final aim of this strategy is to gain prestige and power in order to better serve its wider foreign policy agenda.

In April 2010, a military summit was held in Tamanrasset, an oasis town in southern Algeria. The countries present in this meeting were Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania. Officials coming from Libya, Chad and Burkina Faso also joined the summit. The result was the agreement to create a Joint Operational Military Committee, based in the same town (McGregor 2010). In September 2010, the intelligence chiefs of the these four countries agreed to create a *Centre de Renseignement sur le Sahel* (CRS), based in Algiers. The main aim of this initiative is to increase the level of intelligence cooperation among the four countries, making more consistent and effective their actions against AQIM. This shows how Algeria wants to play concretely its leadership role, acquired through its fight against AQIM, and that it has the resources to do so. The absence of Morocco from this regional arrangement is a clear signal of the importance that Algeria assigns to regional cooperation in the Sahel, which goes beyond the boundaries of local Sahelian states, acquiring a wider “Maghrebi significance” at the expense of Moroccan ambitions of regional hegemony. Moreover, this regional cooperation arrangement is important because it aims to avoid any foreign intervention (primarily the U.S.) in Sahelian questions. This concern is felt strongly in Algeria and Mali, not least because accusations of foreign (i.e., Western) intervention have been used as a major propaganda “weapon” by AQIM itself.<sup>10</sup> These latest developments clearly show the potential that AQIM's increased Sahelian activism can have for Algeria's regional ambitions, in the context of the international fight against terrorism. This could be crucial for Algeria to deepen its relationship with the U.S, increasing its strategic value in the eyes of Washington.

In fact, relations between Algeria and the United States have been complex and ambivalent for decades. In the late 1990s, a visible improvement emerged but it was only after the events of 9/11 that American perceptions of Algeria changed. What was considered a normal domestic issue for the Algerian government – the fight against terrorism – suddenly became an prime American and global concern. However, despite this changing context, the United States did not change its historical approach toward the region. In the Maghreb, the pillar of US policy remains Morocco. The globalization of the war on terror and the neo-conservative slant in this “war” made Rabat's political weight even heavier, since Morocco was considered a shining example of democratization in the region. Broadening to the whole Mediterranean, the other pillars of US policy remain Egypt and Israel<sup>11</sup>. These three actors are, for different reasons, major rivals of Algeria, both in the narrower regional context of the Maghreb-Sahel and

<sup>10</sup> C. Ouazani, “Mobilisation générale... ou presque”, *Jeune Afrique*, 8 October 2010, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2595p014-015.xml0/>.

<sup>11</sup> When it comes to American strategies in the Mediterranean, also Turkey and Jordan, to not mention some European and Balkan countries, are other important pillars of Washington's interests in the area. However, we do not cite them here since they are not immediately and directly connected to the topic of this work.

in the broader Mediterranean arena. America's close relationship with Morocco and Israel has prevented, for example, Algeria to obtain large amounts of military aid, since Washington was concerned that changing military balances could have major harmful effects on the stability of the Mediterranean.

It is unlikely that major changes in U.S. policies in the area will occur in the short term. However, Algeria's regional role in tackling AQIM's Sahelization could be used by Algiers as a platform to gain greater international standing in the mid-term. In spite of its greater international "interventionism", America is often reluctant to get involved in remote regions. This reluctance is stronger in times of economic crises. Therefore, Washington welcomes reliable regional powers, which can robustly support its interests, avoiding direct intervention. Strengthening its role as a major security provider in the Sahel region could be used by Algeria to exploit this peculiar feature of American foreign policy. The recent creation of a bilateral contact point between Algiers and Washington on terrorism is an example of this dynamic. Algeria's ultimate aim would be to reduce Morocco's regional role, which has been the primary focus of any Algerian strategy in the Maghreb. In this context, also the end of Libya's "normalization" in the international community due to the recent domestic crisis, removed a possible rival to Algeria when it comes to American attention, since Muammar Gheddafi also positioned himself as a bastion against Islamic extremism in the area. Broadening the analytical horizon, the outcomes of the Egyptian crisis are still unclear. Egypt (and Israel) represent the true pivots of American strategies in the south-western Mediterranean, given its geographical position, its historical and, cultural weight, and its fundamental role in Arab-Israeli dynamics. Increasing its strategic value in the eyes of Washington could help Algeria position itself better, if any major change should occur in American-Egyptian relationship in the post-Mubarak era.

A strengthened Algerian profile as a "counter-terrorism power" in the Maghreb/Sahel could have an impact also on EU-Algerian relations too. Euro-Algerian ties have been complex and tumultuous in the past. With the exception of energy, bilateral cooperation has been poor and limited. Algeria showed greater interest for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in the 1990s, viewed as instrumental to guarantee its reintegration in the international community. Yet a far lower degree of interest has been manifested for the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean in recent years (Darbouche 2010).

Today, any discussion of the relationship between the EU and Algeria cannot be detached from political developments in North Africa. Once again, the EU has been simply reactive to events in the region. Popular revolts – even though with a substantial and fundamental support from the militaries – have overthrown long-standing dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt. Also the Algerian government has had to face popular protests, but so far these have not resulted in a destabilization of the regime. These revolts have challenged EU policies in the region. After 9/11, the EU had changed its priorities towards its southern neighborhood, "securitizing" its policies and promoting short-term stability over and above political liberalization (Joffè 2008). However, the wave of uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East may well increase pressure on the EU to operationalize its rhetorical commitment to supporting democratic forces in the region (Tocci and Cassarino 2011). Balancing democracy

promotion with immediate security needs will be a major challenge for the EU. In this context, Algeria's role will be fundamental.

A stronger Algerian regional leadership in the field of counter-terrorism will exacerbate this EU dilemma. Geographical proximity makes the EU more directly vulnerable than the US to threats, such as terrorism, emanating from the region. The recent revolts have highlighted the peculiarities of AQIM as one such threat. Politically, AQIM has lacked any influence on the protesters. Apart from a few statements released after the eruption of violence in Tunisia, Algeria and Libya, AQIM has not played a role in the protests. AQIM, like other Islamist groups, seems to be losing the "Gramscian capability" of hegemonizing the discourse on resistance and dissent in the Muslim world (Roy 2011). Yet from a strictly security perspective, AQIM continues to pose a threat to European citizens. European citizens are AQIM's preferred targets in the Sahel, insofar as European governments are willing to pay handsome ransoms to save their citizens' lives. Given the EU and its member states' difficulties in acting on the ground to curb such threats, regional actors' efforts in this regard are warmly welcomed by the EU.

Once again, the EU will have to face the dilemma between short-term stability and support for long-term democratization. A stronger Algeria, able to take on the role of regional leadership in countering terrorism, will represent a formidable asset for the EU. A stronger Algerian regional role, however, also means bolstering the current regime in the country. Even though President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has now promised political reforms, these are unlikely to lead to a veritable political transformation in the country. This will entail an inherent tension in EU policies towards Algeria in the period ahead, inevitably spilling into EU policies towards the wider region.

## 5. Conclusions

AQIM is no longer a political threat to Algeria. It remains an important security concern, but its potential has diminished over the past few years. The movement is internally divided and fragmented and the Algeria-based central leadership does not hold as much power as in the past. The Sahelian factions are the most important in the current "internal geography" of power of the group. Thus today AQIM above all represents a major security threat for the countries of the Sahel, since this area now represents its major theatre of operation. The countries in this region are far less capable and experienced than Algeria in addressing this threat. This opens the scope for Algeria to exploit this development to increase its regional and international clout. Bolstering its role as a "security provider" in the Sahel is instrumental for Algeria's overall foreign policy ambitions. Algeria's first and major aim is to increase its prestige and status in the Maghreb. Confrontation with Morocco still represents the central concern of Algerian foreign policy and most of Algerian regional and international activism must be viewed through this prism. Affirming its role as leader in counter-terrorism in the Sahel can also impact Algerian ties with Washington and Brussels. With the former, Algeria can increase its strategic value in American eyes. With the latter, Algeria can use the counterterrorism card to fend off European pressure for political liberalization and democratization. The recent revolts sweeping across North Africa and the wider Middle East are likely to induce the EU to revamp its democracy promotion policies. In this

context, the Algerian government may well try to exploit its importance on counter-terrorism matters in the wider Mediterranean to induce the EU to be less demanding about democratic reforms. However, whether this strategy will work or not remains to be seen. In conclusion, the "Sahelian card" can no doubt represent a major tool of influence for Algeria and its foreign policy. Its geopolitical effects can be much wider and can serve Algerian interests both in the Maghreb, as well as in the wider Mediterranean and international theatres.

*Updated: 4 April 2011*

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