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[Home](#)

> [Research Program](#)

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Algeria: Information on terrorism and banditry; measures taken by the state to fight terrorism and banditry (November 2011-July 2013)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

In a July 2013 article published in the Washington-based global affairs magazine *Diplomatic Courier*, a lecturer at the University of Pisa and Marist College who specializes in terrorism and North Africa (University of Pisa n.d.) asserts that "Algeria has long been a focal point of domestic terrorism, and is now a major source of international terrorism" (Bartolucci 3 July 2013). In its 2012 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the US Department of State identified the "deteriorating security situation" in northern Mali and the proliferation of weapons smuggled into Algeria from Libya as some of the factors contributing to the "terrorist threat" in Algeria (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2). Similarly, a 2013 report on terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel, published by the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies (ICTS) at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies in Arlington, VA, indicates that the Algerian government has attributed the escalation of violence in the country to the large numbers of militants arriving from Mali to escape military operations undertaken in northern Mali by France in early 2013 (Feb. 2013, 11, 12).

The US Department of State describes Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as "the most active terrorist threat" within Algeria (30 May 2013, Ch. 2). According to the University of Pisa lecturer, AQIM is "one of the most vocal and active terrorist groups in North Africa" (Bartolucci 3 July 2013). The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), an "independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher" based in the US (n.d.), similarly states that "many experts suggest AQIM is the primary transnational terror threat in North Africa" (24 Jan. 2013). AQIM has been designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 6) and is also listed as a terrorist entity by Public Safety Canada (Canada 20 Nov. 2012).

According to Magharebia, a website for news and information on the Maghreb that is sponsored by the United States Africa Command (n.d.), Algerian security reports described 2012 as the "calmest" year since 2002, with the total number of "terror attacks," most of which took place in the Kabylie region, reportedly reaching a ten-year low of 65 (8 Jan. 2013). However, the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism for 2012* indicates that the National Gendarmerie of Algeria reported at least 175 terrorist acts in the same year, with the majority occurring in the Kabylie region (30 May 2013, Ch. 2). Additionally, sources report that AQIM alone was responsible for 125 attacks in 2012 (ICTS Feb. 2013, 12; Bartolucci 3 July 2013).

2. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

AQIM was known as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat, GSPC) before joining with Al-Qaeda in September 2006 and changing its name to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (CSIS 2 July 2013, 31; UN [2013]; *Jeune Afrique* 1 Oct. 2012) in 2007 (ibid.; UN [2013]). According to the US Congressional Research Service, "[t]he practical meaning of AQIM's union with Al Qaeda is uncertain, and links between the two may be nominal but mutually beneficial" (US 18 Jan. 2013, 8). For its part, the CFR states that, according to analysts, the merger and the name change symbolize the organization's efforts "to move beyond the Algerian conflict and focus on jihadist aspirations in the broader region" (24 Jan. 2013). Sources indicate that AQIM has links with other African terrorist organizations, including al-Shabaab and Boko Haram (ISS 18 Mar. 2013; US 31 July 2012, Ch. 2). AQIM is also reported to have links to drug traffickers (ibid.) or smugglers (Magharebia 26 Feb. 2013).

Sources indicate that one of AQIM's objectives is to overthrow the Algerian government (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2; UN [2013]). Al Jazeera reports that the organization "stepped up its fight against the government in and around the Kabyle mountains" after formalizing its alliance with Al Qaeda in 2007 (24 Feb. 2013). According to the BBC, however, the organization has "evolved to take on a more international Islamist agenda" (17 Jan. 2013). Sources indicate that its goals include establishing Islamic regimes in the region (CFR 24 Jan. 2013; US 18 Jan. 2013, 8; UN [2013]) and removing Western-influences (CFR 24 Jan. 2013; CSIS 2 July 2013, 31). Additionally, CFR notes that AQIM has called for the "reconquest" of Spain and has declared war on France (24 Jan. 2013). Similarly, the US Congressional Research Service reports that the organization has called for jihad against the US, Spain, and France (US 18 Jan. 2013, 8).

Sources indicate that AQIM is active in northeastern Algeria, including the Kabylie region (CSIS 2 July 2012, 32; US 18 Jan. 2013, 8). It is also reported to be active in the south of the country (US 31 July 2012, Ch. 2; UN [2013]) and across the southern border in Mauritania, Mali and Niger (Al-Monitor 13 May 2013; Bartolucci 3 July 2013; CSIS 2 July 2013, 31). Sources indicate that AQIM has taken advantage of instability in the region in 2012 to conduct and expand its activities (ibid.; US 18 Jan. 2013, 1, 8) particularly in Mali (ibid.).

Sources estimate that the number of AQIM members is several hundred (CFR 24 Jan. 2013), between 600 and 800 fighters in Algeria and Europe (BBC 17 Jan. 2013), or under a thousand in Algeria with a smaller number in the Sahel (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2). The leader of AQIM is Abdelmalek Droukdel [also spelled Abd al-Malik Droukdel], who is also known as Abu Musab Abd al-Wadoud (CSIS 2 July 2013, 31; Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2013; *Jeune Afrique* 1 Oct. 2012). The organization is divided into brigades (AP 20 Jan. 2013; CFR 24 Jan. 2013; Al-Monitor 13 May 2013), which, according to the Washington-based Middle Eastern news site Al-Monitor, are led by local emirs who must pledge allegiance to the national leader (ibid.). The US Congressional Research Service notes that the cohesiveness of the organization is "questionable, as it may be operating as relatively autonomous and/or rival cells" (18 Jan. 2013, 8).

In 2012, Mokhtar bel Mokhtar [also spelled Moktar Belmokhtar], the leader of one AQIM brigade, reportedly separated from AQIM to form his own organization (AP 20 Jan. 2013; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 31 Jan. 2013; CF2R June 2013, 2). Sources report that the new group is known as the Signed-in-Blood Battalion (*The New York Times* 17 Jan. 2013; CFR 24 Jan. 2013; CF2R June 2013, 2) or the al-Mouthalimin ("the turbaned ones") (*Le Monde* 17 Jan. 2013). The French newspaper *Le Monde* indicates that the group has 200 to 300 [translation] "well-trained and well-armed" members (ibid.).

2.1 AQIM Activities in Algeria

According to the 2011 and 2012 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, AQIM carried out suicide attacks, attacks using improvised explosive devices, and ambushes in areas outside of Algiers, as well as yearly offensives around Ramadan (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2; US 31 July 2012, Ch. 2). According to a report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a bipartisan policy research and analysis organization based in Washington (n.d.), AQIM claimed responsibility for numerous suicide attacks against the Algerian military and police in 2011, which killed at least 20 people and wounded almost 50 more (2 July 2013, 31). Sources indicate that AQIM was responsible for 125 attacks in Algeria in 2012 (Bartolucci 3 July 2013; ICTS Feb. 2013, 12). These attacks were reportedly directed against state officials, the police, the military, civilians, and foreigners (ibid.).

Sources indicate that AQIM conducts kidnapping operations for ransom (US 31 July 2012, Ch. 2; CSIS 2 July 2013, 31; Magharebia 22 June 2012), usually targeting Western citizens (CSIS 2 July 2013, 31; US 31 July 2012, Ch. 2). Citing the Algeria-based African Centre for Terrorism Studies and Research, Magharebia indicates that profits from ransoms allow AQIM and its affiliates to purchase weapons and carry out their operations in Algeria and Mauritania (22 June 2012). The BBC notes that AQIM is one of the region's best-armed groups due to the profits acquired from kidnapping Westerners and trafficking drugs and cigarettes across the region (17 Jan. 2013).

In January 2013, militants seized a gas facility near In Amenas [eastern Algeria], taking numerous hostages, including foreign nationals (US 18 Jan. 2013, 2; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 31 Jan. 2013; BBC 21

Jan. 2013) and Algerians, over a four-day siege (ibid.; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 31 Jan. 2013). According to ICTS, 700 Algerians and 134 foreigners were reportedly held hostage (ICTS Feb. 2013, 12). Algerian forces launched an assault to free the hostages and the subsequent fighting resulted in the deaths of 11 Algerians and 37 foreigners (ibid.; *Jane's Intelligence Review* 31 Jan. 2013). At least 30 militants were also killed (ibid.; Algeria 20 Jan. 2013; Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2013). Sources indicate that the former AQIM commander Mokhtar bel Mokhtar claimed responsibility for the attack (*Jane's Intelligence Review* 31 Jan. 2013; US 18 Jan. 2013, 2; *The New York Times* 17 Jan. 2013), which was reportedly in retaliation for the launching of military operations in Mali by the French government (ibid.; AP 20 Jan. 2013; Jamestown Foundation 20 Mar. 2013).

3. Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

According to the 2012 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, MUJAO) is based in Mali (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2). MUJAO is described as an AQIM splinter group (UN 5 Dec. 2012; US 18 Jan. 2013, 8). It has carried out terrorist attacks in Algeria (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2; Magharebia 8 Jan. 2013; UN 5 Dec. 2012) as well as abductions of Algerians in Mali (ibid.; Magharebia 22 June 2012; US 18 Jan. 2013, 8). The group was reportedly responsible for a suicide attack in the southern city of Tamanrasset in March 2012 (Magharebia 8 Jan. 2013; US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2). Sources indicate that 23 people were injured in the attack, which was directed against a military base (ibid.) or paramilitary base (VOA 2 Mar. 2012). MUJAO also reportedly claimed responsibility for attacking the headquarters of the Gendarmerie in Ouargla in June 2012 (UN 5 Dec. 2012; Magharebia 8 Jan. 2013).

The ICTS report on terrorism indicates that MUJAO recruited unemployed youth from southern Algeria, offering financial compensation to the recruits' families (Feb. 2013, 12). Recruitment was reported to be particularly prevalent in the refugee camps near Tindouf in southwestern Algeria (ICTS Feb. 2013, 12). Corroboration could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. State Response

The US Department of State reports that Algeria "has a long history of fighting terrorism" and continued its "aggressive campaign" against AQIM in 2012 (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2). The same source indicates that Algerian security forces increased their efforts against AQIM in 2012, further isolating the group in the north and capturing a number of key militants (ibid.). Citing an unnamed anti-terrorism military official, the Algerian news website Tout Sur l'Algérie (TSA) indicates that the authorities killed 161 militants and arrested 309 in 2012 (31 Dec. 2012). An Arabic-language Algerian newspaper, *El Khabar*, reportedly stated that security forces killed 198 militants and arrested 350 members of AQIM in the same year, according to Magharebia (3 Jan. 2013). One of AQIM militants reported to be arrested in December 2012 was Salah Gasmi (also known as Salah Abou Mohamed), described as AQIM's "number two" in command (Magharebia 8 Jan. 2013; TSA 31 Dec. 2012).

Sources report that Algerian authorities prevented several AQIM attacks in 2012, including planned attacks against

- US and European ships in the Mediterranean Sea in January 2012 (CSIS 2 July 2013, 31);
- parliament (TSA 31 Dec. 2012; Magharebia 8 Jan. 2013);
- a military academy (ibid.).

Media sources report that two individuals were found guilty of some 500 murders and at least 60 rapes taking place between 1996 and 2004 and were sentenced to death by an Algiers court in May 2013 (ibid. 9 May 2013; AFP 5 May 2013). The individuals had reportedly been members of a terrorist organization based in Chlef [northern Algeria] (ibid.; Magharebia 9 May 2013).

The Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation (La charte pour la paix et la réconciliation nationale) was adopted in 2006 (Algeria 2006). According to Magharebia, the Charter allows militants who surrender their arms and repent to be pardoned and receive [translation] "lighter sentences"; 8,500 militants have reportedly benefitted from this law since it was adopted (4 Oct. 2012). TSA reports that 34 former militants benefitted from this option in 2012 (31 Dec. 2012).

Sources indicate that Algeria coordinates anti-terrorist operations with Tunisia and Libya (Magharebia 11 Apr. 2013; *La Presse* 14 Apr. 2013). Algeria is also part of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) (US 30 May 2013, Ch. 2; GCTF n.d.; Human Rights Watch 2013), which Human Rights Watch describes as "a multilateral group that the US created to broaden counterterrorism discussions beyond the western, industrialized countries" (ibid.). Algeria and Canada are co-chairing the GCTF's Sahel Region Capacity Building

Working Group, the objectives of which are police cooperation, building legal and judicial cooperation, border security, community engagement to counter extremism, and countering terrorism financing (GCTF n.d.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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[Top of Page](#)

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