Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Formed during the conflict of the Algerian civil war during the early 1990s, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is a Salafi-jihadist group operating in North Africa and the Saharan regions like Algeria, Mali, Morocco and Mauritania. Recently this group has thrust itself into European watch lists by declaring war on France, kidnapping tourists, and vocalizing goals of reclaiming Spain. Thought to be one of the best funded and fastest growing terrorist groups in the world today, the AQIM, as they are abbreviated, claim ties to Al-Qaeda. Of which they officially changed their name to reflect in 2006. This has prompted debate among scholars, professors, and analysts around the world. Is the AQIM really connected to Al-Qaeda or is it just a claim to add legitimacy to their cause? This topic has thoroughly been researched and I have come to the conclusion that the AQIM is indeed connect to Al-Qaeda due to their history, the change in ultimate goals and the benefits that connecting AQIM to Al-Qaeda would bring to Al-Qaeda.

The Algerian Civil war began in December of 1991 when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a political party in Algeria, gained popularity during the election year. The FIS were strong supporters of sharia law and one of their leaders Belhadj is quoted as saying “there is no democracy in Islam”. Fearing a loss the National Liberation Front (FLN), which held power at the time, canceled the elections after the first round. The FLN were formed to bring independence to the Algerians from the French government. At this time the country’s military then
seized control. The president was forced out of office and the FIS*** was banned and thousands of its members were arrested. Islamist guerrilla forces immediately began to form and arm themselves in a campaign against the government (Hagelstein). Two of the main groups that formed were the Armed Islamic Group or the GIA and the Islamic Armed Movement or MIA. The GIA mainly operated within the cities and town of Algeria while the MIA was based in the mountains. Eventually the GIA and the MIA took different stances on their opinion of the old FIS party. The Military was holding talks with the FIS leadership that it had imprisoned and formed and reached an agreement to the government change. This caused the GIA to declare war on the FIS and its supporters while the MIA joined other smaller groups, in support of the FIS, forming the Islamic Salvation Army or AIS. Fighting amongst the two groups, the GIA and the AIS, intensified. The AIS was under pressure from both the GIA and the Algerian Military and opted for a unilateral ceasefire with the military government, while the GIA was torn apart within by different internal groups disagreeing over their violent tactics. In 1999 a new President was elected and the Algerian government granted amnesty to most guerrilla groups. The GIA refused and its members were hunted down and killed. By 2002 the group was all but nonexistent (Roberts 269).

A splinter group of the GIA, formed in 1998, called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat or GSPC, and they continued to fight the government. It initially gained support from the Algerian population by “vowing to continue the rebellion while avoiding the indiscriminate killing of civilians, but an effective government amnesty program and counterterrorism campaign drove the group into
disarray in the early 2000s” ([CFR](https://www.cfr.org)). In 2003 the GSPC made known its allegiance with Al-Qaeda. In February of 2007 the GSCP officially changed its name to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb “in a public announcement following six near-simultaneous attacks of police stations in towns east of Algiers” ([Start](https://start.umd.edu)). It is often hypothesized that without the legitimacy of claiming Al-Qaeda the group would never have survived. **** The AQIM have threatened Europe and even declared war on France, but are they the threat that the name Al-Qaeda ensues? Are their beliefs and goals really aligned to those of an Al-Qaeda run organization?

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, is a Sunni Salafi-jihadist group. The term Salafism refers to the word Salafi, which means ancestors or predecessors. Salafi comes from the Arabic phrase 'as-salaf as-saliheen', which is referring to the first three generations of Muslims, starting with the Companions of the Prophet, otherwise known as the Pious Predecessors” ([Rainey](https://www.raineydesign.com)). It is the belief that the earliest Muslims are the example of true Islamic practice. Salafism has been associated with strict, literalists, and puritanical approaches to Islam. It is considered to be very similar to Wahhabism, some scholars would say it is almost the same, but others would disagree. Many Salafi followers find the term Wahhabi to be derogatory and object to being called it ([Roy](https://roydesign.com)). The desires of the Salafi are to emulate the ways of the Prophet. They believe in a unified Islamic state under sharia law, but Salafism does not necessarily mean holy war or jihad in the way the western world sees it. Most Salafi movements are not political, because they believe politics to be un-Islamic. All this said, Salafism covers a wide range of different beliefs and extremisms. It is hard to determine exactly which Muslim groups are
Salafi and which are not. The only things that can really be said about all Salafi Muslims is that they are conservative. Whether that’s through religious jihad against the Western World or just religious piety (Rainey).

Salafism can be hard to distinguish and some groups are hard to identify as specifically Salafi, but we do know that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is Salafi. In fact, they are what scholars and analysts classify as a Salafi-jihadist group. Not all Salafi believe is holy war, leading Salafi scholars have condemned attacks made by Salafi-jihadist group, but the AQIM does believe in holy war. According to Muhammed Hafez, in his book “Suicide Bombers in Iraq”, Salafi-jihadism can be characterized by five features. They have a great emphasis on the concept of twahid, the unity of God. Secondly they believe in God’s sovereignty, which defines right and wrong, good and evil. This sovereignty also makes humanism and liberalism unnecessary and un-Islamic. They also believe in the rejection of all innovation to Islam. This means any new idea or thought about Islam that is contrary to the Sunna or the Qur’an. A Salafi-jihadist also very strongly believes in the Muslim concept of Takfir, which is when a Muslim person declares another Muslim person to be an unbeliever due to lack of true resolve or a moderation in their faith. Lastly, Salafi-jihadism promotes the centrality and unity of jihad against infidel and apostate regimes (Hafez). The principle objectives of the AQIM include “ridding North Africa of Western influence, overthrowing apostate, unbelieving governments (including Algeria, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia), and installing fundamentalist regimes based on Islamic law or Sharia” (CFR). All these goals fall in line with typical Salafi-jihadism beliefs.
Then the GSPC first stated its allegiance with al-Qaeda many analysts dismissed the notion as a desperate attempt of a dying extremist group to gain more recruits and power by aligning itself with Osama Bin Laden. Other analysts were worried that the alignment would cause the GSPC to look abroad and declare grander goals (BBC). This seems to have proven true when the GSPC changed its name to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007 and made known greater goals of conquest of North Africa and into Europe. Originally the GSPC’s goals were oriented in the control of Algeria and implementing Sharia law in their own country. Now they have declared war on France and kidnap tourists for ransom.

The AQIM has been labeled as the fastest growing Militant Islamic group in the world as well as the wealthiest. According to some estimates, AQIM has accumulated $90 million since 2003 through kidnapping for ransom or KFR. The AQIM has perfected the art of KFR and takes an average of $3 million per person. Italy and Spain allegedly paid “$19.4 million for the release of 3 humanitarian aid workers kidnapped from the Saharawi refugee camps outside of Tindouf, Algeria, in 2011.” Due to recent violence and attacks in the region of North Africa, many Europeans have stopped going to Africa, which has stifled the KFR rate of the AQIM so they have turned to drug Trafficking. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, 13% of all the cocaine that travels from South America to Europe passes through North Africa, regions controlled by the AQIM (Kustusch). The city of Gao in Northern Mali has been nicknamed “Cocainebougou” which means “Cocaine Town”. The town’s two nightclubs were burned down after the AQIM takeover yet drug smugglers live in Mansions next to the squallier of their neighbors. AQIM is rumored
to levy “taxes” of up to $50,000 as “protection fees” for drug smugglers that pass through their lands. These taxes may not bring in as much revenue compared to KFR, but they are a much more stable form of income for the extremist group (Freeman). A well-funded AQIM means an organization that will grow and prosper. North African is in turmoil and regularly suffers from drought and government corruption which means a well paying job with the AQIM or drug smugglers is very enticing.

Al-Qaeda had much to gain by aligning with the GSPC. It has allowed them a foothold in North Africa that they might not have been able to gain otherwise. During the 10-year period of their alliance the AQIM as grow to be quite an asset. They are thought to be the most prosperous financially, of the Al-Qaeda groups as they are conveniently located on the drug route from South America into Europe. Trafficking drugs such as cocaine from South American cartels, and allowing for safe passage through Africa and onto Europe. They also move cigarettes and ammunition. The AQIM have also become very successful in kidnapping for ransom. France is one of their main kidnapping targets and has demanded millions of euros for the release of their French prisoners. Unfortunately this group is only growing. Due to the poverty of the northern Africa region it is hard to resist a job that makes a whole year’s wage. The draw for a good monetary wage has brought many to work for the AQIM. For the organization that is al-Qaeda, the alliance with AQIM has been very prosperous. They have become the arm of al-Qaeda in North Africa that can reach into the bottom of Europe.
Speculating over the reality of alliance between al-Qaeda and the AQIM seems vain at this point in history. In 2006, al-Qaeda’s second in command at the time, Ayman al-Zawahiri, publically acknowledged the alliance and described the merger as "a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness" for Algeria’s authorities (BBC). The growth of the AQIM and its new focus outside of Algeria also points to a greater plan and unity of al-Qaeda, which also looks to strike at the Western world. Most of AQIM’s leaders were trained in Afghanistan, during the 1979-189 war with the Soviets. “The group’s top leader, or emir, since 2004 has been Abdelmalek Droukdel, also known as Abou Mossab Abdelwadoud, a trained engineer and explosives expert who has fought in Afghanistan and has roots with the GIA in Algeria.” Droukdel was killed in the French intervention in Mali, he was quickly replaced by Algerian Djamel Okacha (Reuters).

Overall I believe it is safe to say that the AQIM is fully aligned with al-Qaeda. The evidence for it much overwhelms the evidence against. They were publically acknowledged by al-Qaeda in 2007, their group goals changed from conquering Algeria to conquering North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, and their commanders and leaders were trained in Afghanistan. Maybe there is some chance that they are not legitimately aligned together, but even without that they still positively affect each other by stating unity, even if it is false unity. They look united and thus people will see them as stronger, more powerful, more resolved. A unified al-Qaeda and AQIM is a greater extremist force in the Muslim world. One that is determined to right the wrongs they see in the world. They are a group that is looking to change not just Africa or Afghanistan, but also the world.


