THE ROOTS OF TERRORISM IN NORTH AND WEST AFRICA

AQIM and Boko Haram

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North and West Africa comprise a region of vast and sparsely populated territories covering some of the most rugged landscapes on earth. Its geographic complexities pose numerous challenges to governance and the extension of security. As an operating environment for both state security forces and terrorist groups, it presents urban and desert terrain that puts intelligence collection and logistics to the test. For the region's under-resourced governments, lasting counterterrorism offensives have often relied on political suppression and brutality rather than security operations integrated with comprehensive law enforcement, development, and political co-optation.

The most prominent terrorist groups operating in North and West Africa today are historical products of domestic insurgencies in Algeria and Nigeria. Algeria's violent anti-secular Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) later rebranded itself to become al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Nigeria's Boko Haram evolved from a fringe sect of religious radicals to a full-blown militant organization attacking the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

Yet neither AQIM nor Boko Haram has ever focused primarily on confrontation with the West. To a great degree, the causes and conduct of these two groups have been largely independent phenomena, with little to suggest that AQIM and Boko Haram will join forces in the future. To better understand AQIM and Boko Haram today, this chapter examines their roots, the political conditions that motivated their historical and contemporary manifestations, and how regional governments—in particular Algeria and Nigeria—have acted to combat them.

From the party to the guerrilla: Algeria and the rise of violent political Islamism

Although not all extremists in West Africa have their roots in Algerian domestic politics, Algeria's history of tension between secularism and Islamism casts a long shadow over political violence in the region. Having lost the fight over the religiosity of the Algerian state, Islamist factions have proven tenacious, adaptive, and migratory, spreading into the broader region without ever abandoning hope for a theocratic Algeria. In response, the Algerian government has tried a variety of strategies to defeat their Islamist opponents, from suppression to amnesty to a regional policy designed to crush terrorism at home and abroad.

Foundational to its history is Algeria's experience as a French colony, when repression of Islamic institutions and cultural practices helped to galvanize a defiant sense of Muslim identity.¹ Independence led to

26 years of a single-party system, but a struggle over the composition of the Algerian state erupted in 1988, with Islamic identity serving as a natural organizing principle.

After activists pressured the government to allow the formation of political parties, the Islamic Salvation Front became the most significant player. The Islamic Salvation Front won approximately a third of local seats in the 1990 election and performed well again in the first round of national parliamentary elections in 1991.² Fearful that the party would take total control of the government, the secularist military regime canceled the second round of elections, arrested many of the Front's leaders, and installed a Higher Executive Committee to run the government.³

The new military regime systematically dismantled every Islamic Salvation Front connection to Algerian politics, catching them off guard. The party was split over the best way to respond to their sudden expulsion from national politics. Some advocated continued peaceful political organization, while others viewed the military's actions as imposing war-like conditions.⁴ Violent events swiftly overcame those advocating a return to legitimate politics, as extreme repression at the hands of the government pushed many Islamists into a guerrilla mindset and the advocacy of "violent rejectionism."⁵ Under pressure from security forces, a number of resistance groups sprang up and eventually coalesced under the general moniker of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), resulting in a civil war.⁶

Despite the common enemy, the solidarity of the GIA was not guaranteed, and different opinions over strategic purpose and tactics began to unfold almost immediately. In particular, Islamists launched what would become the movement's perennial debate over the merits of privileging domestic or "pan-Islamic" goals.⁷ This debate echoed the Islamic Salvation Front's earlier differences over the use of violence, with the nationally focused GIA members hoping for an eventual return to mainstream Algerian politics and the pan-Islamists seeing in those same politics the corruption and evil of Western governing models—evidence that only the total destruction of the state could make Islamic governing possible. The pan-Islamist faction saw their purpose as connecting with the broader Islamist movement.

To a great extent, the debate also echoed the divide between core jihadis and the bulk of Algeria's Muslim population, which was motivated not by a global religious ideology but by economic and cultural interests and relied upon Islamic identities to reinforce national and local solidarity. Algerian Islamists returning from the Afghan-Soviet war added their voices to the civilizational arguments, inspired by the notion that the world is divided between believers and the *takfir* (those whom extremists have deemed apostates and no longer Muslim).⁸

Such a division allowed GIA hard-core members to include Muslim Algerians in their growing list of enemies. They argued that any individual willing to embrace Western practices was detrimental to the cause of Islamic purity. Put simply, there were those who believed the struggle was for Algeria's identity and those who believed it was just a battleground in a wider war.⁹

The GIA eventually espoused the latter, emphasizing Muslim identity over Algerian identity, and as a result saw no hypocrisy in targeting Algerian Muslims who embraced nationalist or secular values. Yet in practice, the group remained largely focused on the Algerian state and any institutions that buttressed it.¹⁰ Under the anti-Western and anti-secular rubric, the GIA destroyed infrastructure and schools, killed teachers, and raped and tortured its victims.¹¹ The targets were almost always Algerian, especially concentrated in the capital city and, counterproductively, in many communities that "formed the backbone of the Islamic opposition."¹²

It is instructive that Usama bin Ladin made a brief foray into supporting the GIA financially at this juncture, but the GIA was too embroiled in its own agenda to prioritize cooperation with the wider jihadi movement.¹³ Although the GIA did undertake a few spectacular attacks against foreigners, including the hijacking of an Air France jet in 1994, the vast majority of their offensives focused on Algerians.¹⁴

Perhaps because of these internal contradictions, or due to its own brutality, the GIA struggled to gain real traction inside Algeria. The GIA became famous not so much for its cause but for its violence. With a "notorious reputation for mayhem and murder," the GIA made its mark beheading journalists, killing

women who refused to wear the *hijab* (veil), and murdering women and children related to members of the military.¹⁵

Some argue that although the group was organized as a response to the economic and social failures of the socialist regime, it did not offer any realistic solutions, instead promoting ruthless social engineering at the expense of stability.¹⁶ Although political Islam still resonated with the population, the GIA's nihilistic experiment with destroying the state did not appeal to those who saw integration of Islamic and secular governing institutions as a possible outcome.

In the end, the moderates were too numerous, and those on the fence turned away from the GIA's vicious tactics. With a narrow public base of support, pressure from the security forces—coupled with a government amnesty and reconciliation program—further picked off members and delegitimized the group.¹⁷

As the civil war wound down, many Algerian Islamists adapted by relaxing their views toward Muslims who did not actively oppose the government. Some members of the GIA began to peel away, and they organized themselves into a new entity in 1998: the GSPC. The GSPC carved out a middle path between the “bloodthirsty” GIA and the “apostate” Islamic Salvation Front, rejecting violence against civilians and focusing its energy on the Algerian state.¹⁸ Operating in the mountains and deserts rather than in urban areas, the GSPC primarily targeted military officials. Their most common tactic was to combine a false roadblock with an ambush, with pursuant attacks once local security forces responded to the initial call for help.¹⁹

Under persistent pressure from security forces, the GSPC divided itself into regional commands, none of which seemed to have a fixed base of operations.²⁰ The group struggled to appeal to a war-weary public because of its distance from population centers and its inability to offer a meaningful alternative to the government. As a result, the GSPC began to emphasize its links with international jihadi groups to build credibility.

The birth of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb

The GSPC leadership reached out once again to al-Qaida, an overture both sides considered carefully. Although the GSPC appeared to be the new center of Islamist gravity in North Africa, Bin Ladin opposed privileging operations against the “near enemy” over the Western “far enemy.” Meanwhile, the GSPC's senior leadership cadre could not decide whether an al-Qaida affiliation would help or harm their domestic political goals.

In the end, they compromised: the GSPC would attack a mix of Western and Algerian government targets, implementing tactical elements of al-Qaida's global agenda, while continuing to threaten the integrity of the Algerian state.²¹ Al-Qaida's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced the merger on September 11, 2006, and the GSPC's head, Abdelmalek Droukdel, made a subsequent statement of loyalty.²² Four months later, Droukdel announced that the GSPC would change its name to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

The old group, now operating under the new AQIM moniker, undertook a spate of deadly terrorist attacks in Algiers designed to leverage the credibility bestowed by its new relationship. Targeting government buildings, security forces, and the United Nations, AQIM reintroduced suicide bombings in Algeria, killing hundreds of people. Dual suicide car bombings—one outside the Algerian prime minister's home—in April 2007 took 23 lives, with speculation that AQIM employed methods learned in, or transferred from, the insurgency in Iraq.²³

Droukdel also expanded operations into the wider region, adopted al-Qaida's media style, and encouraged Algerians to join al-Qaida's efforts abroad.²⁴ The result was the appearance of transnational terrorist solidarity and aggrandizement for both groups. Yet there is no evidence that al-Qaida exercised any direct control over AQIM, and some analysts have concluded that the so-called merger was simply a “marriage of

convenience” for both sides.²⁵ The adoption of the AQIM title was thus more of a rebranding of the GSPC than a true “expansion” of al-Qaida. The leadership and members of the former GSPC were unchanged, and its essential preoccupation with the Algerian government did not waver.

AQIM’s area of operations did shift, however, and its survival mechanism became blending in with Sahelian populations, particularly those also aggrieved by their own governments. Chief among these groups are the Tuaregs of northern Mali, to which AQIM brought a fresh supply of resources.²⁶ As the Algerian government pushed GSPC cells out of Algeria into the Sahelian and Saharan zones that straddle ancient trade routes, the network discovered that kidnapping for ransom and various forms of smuggling were highly lucrative activities.²⁷

AQIM members brought this wealth to their new communities, married into poorer families in the region, and acted as an “Islamic charity”—effectively becoming an integral element of society.²⁸ These profit-making ventures muddled AQIM’s commitment to its ideological goals and at times turned AQIM into an extremist criminal cartel. One of its senior commanders, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, was even known by the nickname “Marlboro Man” for smuggling such a high volume of cigarettes around the Sahel.²⁹

The influx of cash may have exacerbated existing tensions, and a splinter group calling itself the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa was established in 2011.³⁰ A spate of subsequent divisions and mergers continued, when the remnants of the Movement and other groups, including al-Murabitoun, merged to form yet another organization called *Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (Group to Support Islam and Muslims).³¹

The Algerian state’s success at infiltrating and quashing Islamist groups within its own territory has pushed extremists to the fringes of the Sahara and Sahel. Combined with recent counterterrorism operations by other regional states and France, Algeria’s long-term fight against AQIM and its predecessor organizations means the group today is fractured and searching for ways to survive—perhaps by re-joining splinter groups and competitors.³²

AQIM has a shown a resiliency possible in part by its ability to shift focus on Mali’s border regions with Niger and Burkina Faso. Although the group remains contained to the Sahel, it continues to menace Sahelian countries. The group also still struggles to hold territory when confronted with law enforcement or military operations.³³ Time will tell whether the loss of its long-time leader, Droukdel, in June 2020 will degrade AQIM’s operations.

Al-Qaida’s Sahel affiliates also have continued to experience several rounds of splintering and re-alignment. For one splinter group, al-Mourabitoun, this process included a complete shift in loyalties to the Islamic State, which now recognizes al-Mourabitoun’s successor organization, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, as one of its regional affiliates.³⁴

Boko Haram: act locally, align globally

If AQIM proved surmountable operationally, the theocratic and ideological sources of its agenda appear to be more durable and resonant in other contexts. In 2002, some 4,000 kilometers away, a man named Mohammed Yusuf began preaching against the secularism and corruption of the Nigerian state from his mosque in the northeastern city of Maiduguri.³⁵

Although his message contained an inherent tension between opposition to so-called Western culture and opposition to Nigerian politics, Yusuf focused on Nigerian targets. Echoing the earlier fundamentalist ideology of the GIA in Algeria, Yusuf and his followers began to use violence to punish Muslims whom they accused of indulging in apostasy, often relying on quick hit-and-run tactics using light arms and traveling by car or motorcycle.³⁶ These attacks drew police attention, and over the next several years, the group’s engagement with law enforcement escalated into ever-deadlier exchanges. The violence spread into neighboring Nigerian states and culminated in a conflagration in 2009 that left Boko Haram leader Yusuf and several hundred other adherents dead, with hundreds more captured by police.³⁷

The group seemed to be in full retreat and was inactive for almost a year until Yusuf's second-in-command, Abubakar Shekau, released a video and a manifesto announcing his leadership of Boko Haram and threatening revenge on the Nigerian state as well as its Western supporters. A one-time theology student, Shekau took pride in extreme violence and appears to have cheated death at the hands of security forces multiple times.³⁸ Although it is unclear how directly he commands the whole of Boko Haram's forces, much of the terror Boko Haram inspires is rooted in Shekau's ruthless personality.

Often expressing common cause with al-Qaida, Boko Haram launched a series of improvised explosive device attacks at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, targeting government installations, religious leaders, and politicians. In mid-June 2011, the group executed its first suicide bombing inside Nigeria against the police inspector-general, and in August, the group launched another suicide bombing against the United Nations offices in the country's capital, Abuja.³⁹

Attacks escalated throughout 2013 and 2014, when Boko Haram expanded its array of targets, frequently engaged Nigerian forces directly, and overran border towns and increasing swathes of Nigerian territory. The attacks became numbing in their frequency.⁴⁰ The group so succeeded at cowing security forces and terrorizing local populations that Shekau declared it had enough territorial control to establish a "caliphate" in northern Nigeria.⁴¹

By the end of 2014, Boko Haram had earned the dubious honor of being called the world's deadliest terror group by the Institute for Economics and Peace.⁴² In its 2015 report on global terrorism, the institute noted that in 2014 Nigeria "witnessed the largest increase in terrorist deaths ever recorded by any country, increasing by over 300% to 7,512 fatalities."⁴³ It also reported that Boko Haram was responsible for 10 of the 20 most fatal terrorist attacks worldwide in 2014.⁴⁴

The bloody campaign that included more Muslim than non-Muslim victims did not sit well with every Boko Haram member, and a splinter group known as Ansaru formed in 2012 partially in response to this concern. Loosely affiliated with al-Qaida, and guided by leaders who had received training in Algeria, Ansaru focused its operational energies on kidnapping foreigners in the northern and northwestern regions of Nigeria.⁴⁵

With a much smaller member base than Boko Haram, Ansaru served to slightly widen the scope but not the scale of militant Islamic activity in the country. In a video from 2015, for example, the group argued that Boko Haram "launches physical and bomb attacks at Muslims and public places. . . . These acts are contrary to the teachings of Islam."⁴⁶ Eventually, the Ansaru-Boko Haram divide came to reflect the competition between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Regardless, the divisions among Islamist groups in the Sahel reveal a variety of competing goals and ideologies that prevent the modest numbers of militants from massing into a truly formidable challenge to established governments like in Nigeria.

The state response to Boko Haram

The initial Nigerian government response to Boko Haram was swift and brutally executed, imposing a series of setbacks on the organization, including the death of its leader, Mohammed Yusuf, in 2009. Under the new leadership of Shekau, however, Boko Haram regrouped and pushed back with increasing lethality, leveraging their reconstituted numbers, training, and often-superior equipment.⁴⁷

In this second phase of the group's development, Boko Haram's boldness and tactical dominance throughout 2012 and 2013 largely pushed government forces out of much of the northeast. Declaring a state of emergency in the northern states of Borno, Adamawa, and Yobe, the Nigerian government launched a Joint Military Task Force and stationed divisions in the north to push back against the group.⁴⁸

Security forces reportedly responded to Boko Haram's brutality in kind, using ruthless tactics and indiscriminate violence to intimidate both the terrorists and any possible sympathizers.⁴⁹ In its 2014 Country Report on Human Rights, the U.S. State Department noted, "observers asserted that the climate of impunity for serious crimes led to the victimization of the civilian population by both Boko Haram and

government forces.”⁵⁰ Despite international pressure and a renewed effort to professionalize the military forces, accusations of extrajudicial killings continued to follow Nigerian forces.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Boko Haram was organizationally displaced, if undeterred. Much of the group withdrew from northeastern towns and villages into the Sambisa Forest in Borno State and frequently sought haven across the border in northern Cameroon, as well as in Niger and Chad. Their will did not appear to suffer, as they continued to conduct coordinated attacks in Nigerian and Cameroonian territory, signaling an enduring commitment to threatening local populations and government forces.⁵²

Upon his election in 2015, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari pledged to defeat Boko Haram by the end of the year and took several actions to advance this goal, including moving the army’s command center from Abuja to Maiduguri and dismissing several senior military officers suspected of corruption.⁵³ The government also increased resources for the military after years of underinvestment.

The reinvigorated effort, coupled with regional pressure on the group, paid operational dividends. Nigerian forces successfully routed Boko Haram from all of the territory it previously held, seized weapons caches, and destroyed former hideouts. At the same time, the Buhari administration announced renewed efforts to investigate and prosecute military human rights violations.

Nigeria’s revitalization of its counterterrorism operations was preceded by a regional push for collaboration to combat the Boko Haram threat in the wake of the Chibok kidnappings in 2014. The Chibok incident—in which Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 female students—served as a wake-up call for the Nigerian government.⁵⁴ International pressure on Abuja mounted, and U.S. Congressional pressure on the Barack Obama administration to conduct a rescue operation also inspired a renewed American effort to assist the Nigerian security services.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, representatives from Benin, Chad, Cameroon, Niger, and Nigeria met in Paris in May 2014 with officials from the United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union and conducted a series of follow-on meetings to reactivate a long-standing but disused Multinational Joint Task Force originally organized through the Lake Chad Basin Commission. Member countries pledged troops to the fight against Boko Haram, and by January 2015, the African Union endorsed plans for an 8,700-strong force and requested a United Nations trust fund to resource the effort.⁵⁶

The tasks include targeted operations against Boko Haram, capturing members of the terrorist group, border security, recovery of abductees, regional coordination, and intelligence sharing.⁵⁷ Coupled with Nigeria’s renewed offensive, regional efforts paid real dividends: under this pressure, Boko Haram split into two factions, presumably also dividing resources and fighters in a move likely to weaken terrorist efforts operationally.⁵⁸

Despite the international diplomatic and political support for the mission, the task force frequently suffers from materiel and logistics shortfalls. Task force members focus largely on their own border regions, and it is unclear how much tactical, operational, or strategic coordination actually occurs.⁵⁹ Boko Haram also refuses to fade away despite the increased pressure, demonstrating its withering, if episodic, ability to overtake military bases. Boko Haram’s capture of Baga along with the town’s task force headquarters in early 2015 marked an early setback for regional efforts.⁶⁰ Militants are continuously able to regroup after task force operations, since the offensives are typically not sustained.⁶¹

Like the GSPC, Boko Haram has demonstrated its ambitions to benefit from connections with global Islamist terrorist movements since at least 2009. Shekau began by emulating al-Qaida’s propaganda style and tried to connect to its core leadership. Yet rather than substantive loyalty, Shekau’s interest seems to have been more in affiliating with whomever’s public profile loomed larger. After 2011, for example, as core al-Qaida seemed to be in retreat, Shekau shifted his attentions to the Islamic State. Boko Haram began to refer to the territory seized in northern Nigeria as a caliphate and expressed support for Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁶²

By March 2015, Shekau had publicly declared Boko Haram’s allegiance to the Islamic State, a fealty that appeared unsolicited but which al-Baghdadi eventually accepted.⁶³ The effect on Boko Haram, at least in

terms of its media profile, was stark. Gone were the fuzzy videos. In their place were slick video techniques, a social media presence, a new logo, and the Islamic State flag branding.⁶⁴

In 2016, however, Boko Haram split into two factions. Shekau continued to lead one faction, but the second faction came under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, the purported son of Boko Haram's original founder Mohammed Yusuf.⁶⁵ Al-Barnawi's faction, the Islamic State West Africa Province, claimed it split from Shekau because it disapproved of his rampant attacks on other Muslims.⁶⁶ The Islamic State appeared to withdraw its official support to Shekau's faction and instead recognized the al-Barnawi-led faction as an official affiliate. The Islamic State West Africa Province prioritizes attacks on state security forces and is more discriminate in its targeting selection, while Shekau's Boko Haram continues to conduct more indiscriminate attacks. The degree to which the two factions coordinate remains unclear.⁶⁷

Conclusion

The Algerian and Nigerian experiences with Islamist terrorism demonstrate the fundamentally parochial concerns that animate members of global jihadi networks and the extent to which capable government institutions make the difference in terrorists' success or failure. In the case of the GSPC and AQIM, the durability of the Algerian state and pressures from Western countries have proven formidable obstacles to Islamism in the Sahel. Yet for Nigeria, government fecklessness allowed an initially surmountable extremist group to flourish and expand.

Local terrorist organizations benefit in terms of recruitment and respect when they affiliate with internationally recognized groups such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Strategically, these affiliations are meaningful: the ideological commonalities between far-flung groups and their tendency to share motivational grievances against Western actors and cultures do indicate a broad challenge to U.S. and European security and freedom of engagement. Operationally, groups such as AQIM and Boko Haram remain grounded in their immediate political and social surroundings.

These surroundings, however, matter. After the civil war, the Algerian state consolidated political power once again and maintained a robust security capacity. AQIM fled into the Sahara because it could not find reliable havens in Algeria. In contrast, Nigeria systematically divested in its military and engaged in transparent corruption, supplying ripe political and operational targets for an anti-state insurgency. Only when Abuja began to reinvest in its security capacity and welcome more regional cooperation did Boko Haram face setbacks.

Throughout the lifecycle of these two movements, links to global jihadi groups have proven more cosmetic than structural. This is in part due to history. Violent Islamism in North and West Africa has leveraged global narratives to serve local goals in part because it springs from an anti-colonial framework that is itself about local action referencing a transnational movement.⁶⁸ This sense of common history squares the circle between domestic politics and global jihad, and minimizes rivalry among groups on the continent while keeping them fixated on their own capitals.

They also suggest an increasing appreciation among these groups for a common purpose: the rejection of decades of failed governance in their home countries and an effort to replace those failures with a rigid form of Islamist authority.⁶⁹ To the extent that the West is perceived as connected to those governance failures, that is where these groups consider themselves global actors—but the actions themselves are nevertheless still against proximate targets, such as AQIM's attack against the United Nations compound in Algiers.

In the end, groups such as AQIM, Boko Haram, and its offshoots pose a limited threat to North and West African stability. When they succeed in launching attacks and holding territory, they provide a demonstration effect—a kind of warning to those who do not invest in governing institutions and fail to comprehend the structural role Islam plays in the politics of North and West African states.

Notes

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