

Insurgency Organization Case Study: Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, 2006-Present

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August, 2008
MIOBC 08-006
Van Deman Program

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE AUG 2008		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Insurgency Organization Case Study: Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, 2006-Present			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) University of Military Intelligence,Fort Huachuca,Sierra Vista,AZ,85613			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 23	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

“We are not insane to target our Muslim brothers.”

-Abdelmalek Droukdal, one of the leaders of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb¹

Introduction

This paper is a study of the insurgent organization al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM), an al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliated group based in Algeria.² The man quoted above, Abdelmalek Droukdal, is a leader of AQIM. Droukdal was responding to a *New York Times* reporter's question regarding his attitude towards civilians, who are often killed or injured in AQIM's attacks. The reporter's question specifically referred to AQIM's spectacular attack on the United Nations headquarters in Algiers in December, 2007, which killed 42 and injured 212, including 24 dead and 132 wounded civilians.³ In his meandering answer, Droukdal provides a number of different justifications:

We are not insane to target our Muslim brothers...We sacrificed ourselves and our efforts and our time only to defend the Muslims and to preserve their lives and their holy sites...If we really wanted to strike the civilians, we could have reaped hundreds in one strike...Our goals in our fight are very clear, which are the military and official targets of the government and the Western interests. We make sure as much as we can in our attacks that no Muslim gets hurt.

But the truth is that more than 95 percent of the injured are associated with the U.N. headquarters and are from the crusaders and from the police and guards, eventually with a civilian dress. Those are not all civilians. Also the people associated with the blasphemousness Constitutional council are in the scale of the commencing (religion) fighters and enemies of Islam.

We sacrifice our souls and blood to defend you and to protect you from the sons of France and the agents of America. Our nation must know that we are in a war against the apostates and their crusader masters. Mistakes may occur in the war but they are unintentional. We seek pardon from God and we apology to our nation about that.⁴

Droukdal's response is a noteworthy one, given how crucial popular support is for an insurgent group like AQIM. According to the Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual, 3-24, "the ability to generate and sustain popular support, or at least acquiescence and tolerance, often has the greatest impact on the insurgency's long-term effectiveness."⁵ As this paper will demonstrate, AQIM's attitude toward civilian bloodshed is a significant factor in any assessment of the group's long-term chances for success.

More specifically, this paper is a study of AQIM as an organization. The essay will consider the group's past, present, and projected future and the impact AQIM has had in Algeria,

regionally, and globally. It will also determine what threat the group poses to United States interests in Algeria and elsewhere. Ultimately, the goal of this essay is to provide recommendations on ways of defeating AQIM for the authorities who are fighting to do so. Structurally, the paper is composed of three parts: an introduction, a section on AQIM 's history, and, finally, recommendations on defeating AQIM.

There is one administrative point which must be addressed here in the introduction. Like many other terrorist organizations – e.g. Lebanese Hezbollah or Palestinian Fatah – AQIM was formed out of the fragmentation and splintering of other terrorist groups. AQIM's history in many ways it is not a clearly demarcated one and demands some explanation here.

AQIM's roots go back to the mujahedeen who left Algeria to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 1980's. Many of the Algerian mujahedeen returned home after the war eager to bring their religious fight with them. Copying the Afghanistan experience, many of them formed groups towards that aim. One of those groups was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA.) The GIA was formed in 1992 and over the next seven years earned a reputation for ruthless attacks on government as well as civilian targets. Within the broader context of the civil war which engrossed Algeria in the 1990s, GIA helped contribute to over 100,000 civilian deaths during that time.⁶

As the GIA began to splinter in the late 1990's, a group calling itself the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) emerged in 1998. When GSPC announced itself, the group pledged to avoid civilian bloodshed, which it mostly obeyed.⁷ The declared aims of the GSPC were "fighting in jihad against the Algerian regime."⁸ The GSPC's contacts with AQ began in earnest in 2004, when it reached out to Al-Qaeda's local leader in Iraq, Abu Musab Zarqawi, for assistance in a matter relating to the release of GSPC members being held by French authorities.⁹

That cooperation led to an internal discussion among GSPC leaders, and as early as 2003¹⁰ or as late as the summer of 2005¹¹ (accounts vary) several GSPC leaders publically declared their intention to ally with al-Qaeda.

In September, 2006, around the anniversary of the September 11th attacks, al-Qaeda's number-two leader, Ayman al-Zawahri, publically formalized the merger.¹² Under the merger, the GSPC would become al-Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa. Four months later GSPC began referring to itself as "al-Qaeda in the Maghreb."¹³ It is also known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. ("Maghreb" means sunset in Arabic and also refers to the Arabic word for the territory between Morocco and Libya, the Western edge of the Islamic world.)

There are common links connecting AQIM to GSPC to the GIA to the *mujahedeen* who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. As will be discussed in the paper, these links can be people, tactics, strategies, or ideologies. In the section dealing with recommendations for the warfighters and counterinsurgents fighting AQIM, those links will be particularly relevant. AQIM is best understood as the latest evolution of the Algerian Islamists – not entirely disconnected from prior groups but certainly its own, distinct organization. For the purposes of this paper, the history of AQIM is considered to be from the time of the merger with AQ until now – 2006-present.

Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, September, 2006 – Present

Organization and Leadership

Though it has an expanding network throughout North Africa, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb is based in Algeria. In addition to its activities in Algeria, the group runs camps in neighboring countries. These countries include Tunisia, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Senegal. Droukhal has said the group has members from the following countries: Mauritania, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Mali, and Nigeria.¹⁴ AQIM is able to operate in so many countries for three reasons.

First, much of the terrain surrounding Algiers is severely restricted. A mountain range running roughly east-west cuts off the coastal Mediterranean cities of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia from the rest of their countries, respectively. And south of the mountain range is similarly severely restricted desert terrain. Second, many of the countries where AQIM operates camps, especially Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Senegal, are run by governments who do not have a strong presence in their countries' peripheries. Third, Algeria shares almost 6,000 miles of borders with seven countries, which makes tracking AQIM a very difficult task.

Estimates of the group's strength vary. At the height of its powers the GSPC had an estimated 3,000 fighters.¹⁵ One study approximates AQIM has 300-400 fighters in the Aures mountain range (Northeast Algeria) and 200 supporters throughout the country. The study which estimated the GSPC's strength at 3,000 also cited reports from Saudi Arabia intelligence which estimated 1,200 fighters from Algeria fought in Iraq in 2006, which should give some indication of the group's overall strength.¹⁶

In terms of the group's organization, al-Qaeda in the Maghreb appears to be following in the tradition of the fracturing Algerian Islamist Insurgent group. The group's decision to publically ally with al-Qaeda caused a fissure among AQIM's leadership. Allying with AQ meant a change in strategy from focusing on affecting political upheaval in Algerian politics to a focus on regional and international *jihad*. In August, 2007 AQIM leaders held a press conference to announce a split in the group's direction.¹⁷ The AQIM leaders who held the press conference were from the faction which supported the alliance with AQ. They also announced intentions to form stronger relationships with like-minded groups from neighboring countries: Morocco's Islamic Combatant Group, Libya's Islamic Fighting Group, and several Tunisian groups.¹⁸ This new confederation declared to fight under a new name, the al-Qaeda Organization for the

Countries of the Arab Maghreb.”¹⁹ It is still referred to as Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb in the international media.

AQIM Operations

Al-Qaeda announced the formal merger with al-Qaeda in the Maghreb in September, 2006. Since that time until July, 2008 AQIM has carried out eleven major attacks.²⁰ These major attacks have consisted of spectacular bombings, attacks on foreign tourists, and one attack on Western contractors. Kidnappings of Algerians as well as theft of locals are a more common occurrence.²¹ AQIM fighters also shot and killed four tourists and attacked a military barracks in Nouakchott, Mauritania.²²

AQIM’s eleven major attacks bear the hallmarks of al-Qaeda-style operations. In February, 2007 AQIM carried out seven operations in different locations over the course of six hours. The attacks included several improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and several vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs.) Two months later AQIM blew up three VBIED’s simultaneously. One blew up at the governor’s palace, a second at a police station. The third bomb (at another government building) was discovered and defused. The combined blasts killed 33 people and wounded 222.²³

After four months of no major activity, an AQIM bomber set off an IED while standing in a crowd of people waiting to see President Bouteflika. The method of IED was a suicide vest; almost 100 people were injured.²⁴ Two days later a suicide bomber drove a VBIED into an Algerian naval barracks. Two months later, December 11, 2007, AQIM employed two more VBIED attacks. One targeted Algeria’s highest court while the other hit the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees building. Both bombings took place in Algiers. This especially spectacular attack, which occurred about 14 months after the merger, against symbols of the

Algerian government drew public praise from Zawahiri, who compared it to the 2003 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad by AQ's affiliate in Iraq, led by Zarqawi.²⁵

AQIM carried out two more VBIED operations in January, 2008, targeting police stations in both attacks. Since then, the group has not carried out any major operations.

What threat does Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb pose regionally? Globally? To American Interests?

While al-Qaeda in the Maghreb has formed relationships with other like-minded groups in neighboring countries, it has carried out only several small-scale attacks outside Algeria's borders since the merger in 2006. Four European tourists were shot in Mauritania in 2008 while two other Austrian tourists were kidnapped in Tunisia.²⁶

What is the significance of these regional projections of force? On the one hand, the tourist attack was far more simple in design than the complex VBIED and multiple-IED bombings which have been AQIM's trademark in Algeria. On the other hand, it is significant that the group could attack a target over 1,700 miles from Algiers. In addition, according to the communiqué it released to claim the attacks, AQIM claimed the operations were in response to the current situation in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.²⁷

More threatening to the government in Algiers and Washington, D.C. are AQIM's links to the insurgency in Iraq. Droukdal said members of AQIM have fought in Iraq: "there is a limited and very small number of the mujahedeen brothers who fought in Iraq than came back and joined us."²⁸ It is unclear just how many AQIM fighters have fought in Iraq. A figure of 1,200 was cited earlier from Saudi intelligence reports. The U.S. military announced in June of 2006 that twenty percent of suicide bombers in Iraq come from Algeria.²⁹

AQIM's relationship with the al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq merits mention. It was through this connection that the then-GSPC began serious talks of a merger with AQ. In 2005 the GSPC

asked Abu Musab Zarqawi to arrange an operation aimed at Algerian diplomats serving Iraq. The GSPC wanted to strike back at Algerian authorities in retaliation for a GSPC leader. Zarqawi arranged the kidnapping of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad in the summer of 2005 and eventually executed them. Though Zarqawi is now dead, the links between AQIM and al-Qaeda in Iraq most likely still exist and serve as a means for AQIM to project its message in Iraq.³⁰

AQIM's ability to reach targets in Europe is also a major concern. Police and intelligence agencies in several European countries have already broken up several Algerian Islamist plots in Europe. GSPC-linked terrorists have been arrested in London and Frankfurt.³¹ When police arrested one cell in Spain in 2003, they found evidence and intent to carry out a chemical attack.³² Droukdal has not said his group has cells in Europe – only “supporters.”³³

American interests in Algeria were struck in December, 2006, when AQIM attacked a bus carrying employees of a subsidiary of the American firm, Haliburton. One civilian was killed and nine injured.³⁴ There are a number of American businesses with offices in Algeria, most of them related to the energy sector. In April of this year the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened an office in Algiers, an indication of the severity of the threat AQIM poses to American interests.³⁵

Whether it is in Algeria, Iraq, or elsewhere, AQIM poses a threat to American interests. The group has the capabilities to conduct spectacular, coordinated attacks with IED's and VBIED's. It appears at this point the only factor prevent the group from attacking one of Algeria's neighbors, or European or American soil is the issues of logistics and supply. It is also possible that now AQIM is underneath the greater AQ umbrella, the Algerian group would not attack an international target unless ordered to do by AQ's leaders. In any event, Droukdal's

comments. regarding his group's intent are clear, and AQIM should be considered a threat to strike overseas, especially in Europe.

The counterinsurgency efforts against AQIM led by Algerian authorities (with American assistance) has been somewhat successful. The bomb maker responsible for the devices in the U.N. bombing was killed by the authorities this year.³⁶ The Algerian government captured or killed 550 fighters in 2006 and 1100 AQIM fighters in 2007. These numbers may indicate more effective counterinsurgency tactics on the part of the Algerian authorities, or they may indicate an increase in the numbers of AQIM fighters.³⁷

There is also evidence AQIM is suffering from technical and morale issues. In at least one instance, a pair of twin-IED devices failed to explode in one foiled attack.³⁸ In 2007 Algerian authorities found and defused one of AQIM's VBIED devices before it could detonate. There is recent evidence which indicates the group is now remote-wiring its VBIED's in case the drivers change their mind at the last second. In addition, there are reports claiming new AQIM recruits are not allowed out of the sight of veteran members for fear the newcomers might attempt to escape.³⁹

The indicators in the preceding paragraph are not indicators of a movement growing in capacity or increasing morale. The Algerian authorities have had success against the Islamists in recent years. Until merger talks with AQ began in 2004, the GSPC was being pushed to the brink by government forces: "We didn't have enough weapons," recalled a former militant lieutenant, Mourad Khettab, 34. "The people didn't want to join. And money, we didn't have enough money."⁴⁰

It is possible that despite the almost dozen major attacks since the merger, government forces have regained momentum against AQIM. There has not been a major attack in the past 5

months. The fissure among AQIM leadership may have weakened the group's operational capabilities. It is also possible AQIM is taking the AQ model of a slower operational tempo to yield larger attacks against high-profile targets. AQIM may currently be plotting a mission on the same scale as the *USS COLE* or 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings. It is unknown.

Recommendations on Defeating AQIM

As stated in the introduction, the ultimate goal of the paper is to provide recommendations to the authorities working to defeat AQIM. What follows is a list of recommendations. The recommendations are intended for two audiences: the applicable American policymakers and warfighters currently engaging AQIM and their Algerian counterparts.

As discussed in the previous section, the counterinsurgency effort against AQIM as of July, 2008 is at a critical point. On the one hand, AQIM retains many of its extremely dangerous capabilities. These include the ability to carry out catastrophic attacks in Algeria as well as the potential to strike in Europe or the rest of North Africa. AQIM's links with AQ and other AQ affiliates give the Algerian group the ability to strike in Iraq as well.

On the other hand, AQIM has weaknesses which are exploitable. These weaknesses include fissures at the top levels of the group's leadership and the low amount of public support AQIM currently receives from the Algerian population. After all, AQIM is the inheritor of the Algerian Islamist movement which was largely responsible for over 100,000 civilian deaths in the Algerian Civil War. And civilians are still suffering, as evidenced by the number of civilian dead and injured in AQIM attacks like the U.N. bombing of December, 2007.

Recommendations for American Policymakers and Warfighters

“al-Qaeda” and “al-Qaeda in the Maghreb”: Don't be fooled by the "Al-Qaeda" part of both group's names

The relationship between Algerian Islamists and Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda is not as robust as may appear. For example, when Bin Laden was looking for a new residence after being expelled from Saudi Arabia in the mid-1990's, Islamists in Algeria rejected his request to relocate to Algeria. At the time, they felt his presence would bring unwanted international pressure against their cause and thought it would distract from their objectives of toppling the Algerian government.⁴¹

It has already been pointed out that Droukdal's decision to ally with al-Qaeda caused substantial dissension with the ranks of AQIM. Many of AQIM's members disagree with the group's decision to switch its focus from operations aimed at the Algerian government to objectives more regional and global in scope. The issue of collateral damage is also a divisive issue. Fighting between insurgent groups and the government has continued for almost two decades in Algeria. Neither side has been able to assert themselves fully. Some of the recent second and third-order effects of this grinding conflict have been fissures in AQIM's leadership over the issue of targeting civilians. Most recently, two prominent members recently made public announcements in opposition of the group's tactics.⁴²

In addition, there is evidence which indicates the Algerian Islamists did not perceive themselves as part of a global movement until public comments by President Bush associated the “war on terror” with a “crusade.” The comments were a catalyst for a movement that was lacking at the time in cohesiveness or a unifying ideology:

...The world was between Muslims and Christians has already begun...the leader of the infidels, Bush, has clearly declared this war three times to be a crusader war...the defeat that America is suffering now along with the other Western nations...has played a critical role in awakening young Muslim men around the world, including Algeria. There is no doubt that defeating evil America will bring an end to all the apostate and treacherous regimes on the planet, including the apostate regime in Algeria.⁴³

It is in the U.S.'s interest to dislodge AQIM from the orbit of global *jihad* and back into the orbit of a national insurgency. Being linked with Osama Bin Laden's group has given AQIM greater capabilities to strike and to network throughout North Africa. It has also given the group a surge in media attention. Without those connections, AQIM could be made to be seen as just another national insurgency responsible for hundreds of civilian deaths in Algeria. By successfully marketing this narrative, U.S. and Algerian authorities could more easily persuade the Algerian population to support their aims – and achieve those aims outside of the spotlight of the international media.

Disassociating AQIM and AQ might prove to be harder in practice. It may be impossible to return the relationship between Algerian Islamists and AQ to where it stood before September 11th. But there are two steps U.S. authorities can take to at least partially to “un-lump” or “de-link” AQIM and AQ. To incorporate these recommendations would require a larger overhaul or re-thinking of the current Global War on Terror.

First, the U.S. should begin referring to the insurgency in Algeria with a new name that does not include the word “al-Qaeda.” This simple switch could have an impact internally among AQIM members. How to dissociate the two groups? If AQIM reacted to the White House linking the group with AQ, then it stands to follow AQIM would react if the White House stopped linking the group with AQ. A simple name change might convince some AQIM members the enemy is no longer “the Americans” and AQIM's objectives may switch accordingly.

Similarly, when reporting on operations against AQIM in Algeria, the White House should stop framing the actions within the larger Global War on Terror. This broad perspective acts to remove the effort against AQIM in Algeria from a local orbit of insurgency to a global orbit of international *jihad*. Under the banner of the Global War on Terror, an AQIM member in Algeria becomes the same as a member of Abu Sayaf in the Philippines. By removing the label of the Global War on Terror, the White House would allow U.S. authorities working against AQIM to understand the group as it really is: a national insurgency with some international connections.

Create the appropriate facilities and training in Algeria which will allow the U.S. to launch operations against AQIM in Algeria and throughout North Africa

It has been mentioned already that AQIM runs mobile training camps all over North Africa and that it has completed operations in neighboring Mauritania. The U.S. has already lent assistance to the Algerian authorities in operations against AQIM.⁴⁴ Building up the kind of infrastructure which will allow American forces to reach AQIM's camps in Algeria and the rest the region should reduce AQIM's capabilities. These facilities could be coordinated with the newly formed African Command. Second, if it isn't already being done, American Special Forces troops training the Algerian military is an idea that should be implemented. At a minimum, operations should be carried out against AQIM's direct action cells as well as strikes against AQIM's links to allies throughout the region.

The U.S. should also consider higher risk strategies aimed at marginalizing AQIM. The fissure with AQIM's leadership over the merger with AQ is an opportunity for the counterinsurgents fighting AQ. One possible strategy is to drive a wedge between the factions of

the group that supports the alliance with AQ and the faction that doesn't. If the faction which does not support the alliance can be persuaded, that splinter group could turn its guns on the pro-alliance faction. Ideally, the U.S. and Algerian authorities could use one faction to eliminate the other and then direct operations against the remaining faction. Alternatively, the situation between the two factions could be developed to a point where they are grinding each other down in an indecisive manner. (An historical analogy would be U.S. support for both sides in the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.) Either way, this strategy if successful would be immensely helpful to American authorities.

Defeating AQIM in Algeria requires defeating AQIM in Iraq

As discussed earlier the paper, AQIM is helping to funnel foreign fighters into Iraq. As the experiences of Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia make clear, there is "blowback" involved when foreign fighters travel to countries on jihadist missions and then return to their home countries, eager to bring back the fight with them. This was how the GIA was formed in the early 1990's. To reduce AQIM's number of fighters and to prevent a larger blowback sometime in the future, American forces must interdict foreign fighters coming into Iraq. This could mean interdicting foreign fighters when they attempt to enter Iraq, capturing them while in Iraq, or as they leave Iraq to return to North Africa. This policy would require greater attention to Iraq's border security and a better level of cooperation and coordination with Iraq's neighbors, particularly Syria.

Another strategy to consider is a set of policies designed to goad AQIM into taking the "Zarqawi route." According to AQ expert Michael Scheuer, AQ's only failure thus far in its efforts to set up local affiliates like AQIM around the globe has been in Iraq, where Zarqawi

overplayed his hand and incited too much sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites. If American and Algerian authorities can provoke AQIM to target civilians in the manner Zarqawi did in Iraq, it may turn popular support against AQIM in the same manner Zarqawi lost popular support among Iraqis.⁴⁵

Alternatively, the U.S. should consider adopting a strategy which has the long-term goal of avoiding Algeria become another Chechnya. In Chechnya, according to Scheuer, there is a stalemate between Russian forces and local fighters thanks to sustained support to the local fighters from AQ. In the process of the ongoing deadlock, the local group's interests have expanded to a larger, more Caucus-focused set of objectives – thanks to the AQ members who have subtly turned the movement in that direction. AQ may be attempting to create a similar situation in Algeria and North Africa, said Scheuer. If so, the U.S. should work in cooperation with the Algerian authorities to avoid this kind of scenario.⁴⁶

Recommendations for Algerian Warfighters and Policymakers

Consider a revision of amnesty programs for imprisoned fighters

Counterinsurgency doctrine recommends amnesty programs for former insurgents who can be co-opted by counterinsurgents, often to track or identify their former comrades.⁴⁷ This strategy is often successful with insurgents who are not part of the resistance's hardcore constituency. A recent example of this is the Awakening Councils in Iraq.

Algeria also has an amnesty program. This study was unable to determine the number of former insurgents released since the merger. Droukdal said this about Algiers's amnesty program:

[If] you mean those whom the government released, within what you call reconciliation, and then joined the jihad, they are plenty, thanks to God. And this is proof that the reconciliation program that [Algeria President] Bouteflika promotes has failed badly, and the matter of jihad is still alive inside the hearts of Muslims in Algeria.⁴⁸

It is possible the amnesty program is a success and the vast majority of the released prisoners has been co-opted by the state – or at least has decided to remain neutral upon release. It is also possible Droukdal was bluffing. Nevertheless, Droukdal's comments ought to at least prompt the government in Algiers to re-assess the current amnesty release programs.

Allow recent profits from the energy market trickle down to the average Algerian

In the past several years Algeria, a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, has benefited greatly from rising oil and natural gas prices. In 2006 its Gross Domestic Product grew four percent⁴⁹; in 2007 it grew 4.8 percent.⁵⁰ 98 percent of the country's exports in 2006 were petroleum, natural gas, and petroleum products.⁵¹ Some estimate the government in Algiers has made as much as \$120 billion in energy profits during this time.⁵²

Yet in the same year unemployment was at 15.7 percent.⁵³ More than 500,000 students drop out of Algerian schools each year. Twenty percent of students attend high school – and about half of that group makes it to university:

A vast majority of dropouts are young men, who see no link between work and school...Algeria's young men leave school because there is no longer any connection between education and employment, school officials said. The schools raise them to be religious, but do not teach them skills needed to get a job.

This is another cause for extremism, and it is one reason the police do nothing to stop so many young men from illegally selling everything from deodorant to bread at makeshift stands...“These stands are illegal, but they let them do it as a matter of security and because of unemployment — instead of them going out and carrying weapons,” said [a middle school teacher.]⁵⁴

Addressing the issues of maldistribution of oil wealth and flaws within the education system are clearly part of a larger discussion Algerian policymakers must have about

domestic policy. Correcting these issues would have a positive impact in the fight against AQIM. There is a reason elements of the country have been at war with the government in Algiers for the greater part of the past two decades. Improving life for the average Algerian, especially economic prospects, will not only increase popular support for the government among the mass base but also make it more difficult for AQIM to recruit new members.

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