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**The GSPC/Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: a mix of low and high-tech capabilities**

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Two separate suicide blasts in Algeria, one heavily damaging the Prime Minister's office in the country's capital, killed 33 and injured more than 300 people in Algiers on March 11, 2007. These bombings, the most severe since 2002, reminded us that the Islamic insurgency was still active in the Maghreb, in particular coming in the wake of new kinds of terrorist attacks perpetrated by the GSPC (or more generally by Maghrebian groups in the whole region). The first in the coordinated attacks targeted the office of the country's Prime Minister, who survived to the blast. The other attack took place at a suburban police station, on the main road to the Algiers airport. The bombings were claimed by Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, formally known as the Salafist group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which published photographs of those it claimed were the three bombers on the Internet – "three martyrdom seekers of the lions of Islam".

These attacks offer new evidence that radical jihadi-salafi movements across North-Africa and diasporas remain intent on attacking secular ("infidel") regimes and their western supporters. There is not any reason to believe that these groups – the GSPC in Algeria, the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group (GICM) in Morocco, and so on, are united or taking direct orders from Al-Qaeda itself. They certainly have a doctrinal and claimed solidarity, but they may have infrequent and limited operational relationships. A French counterterror official notes "Enormous police pressure is making plotting local strikes hard enough. Trying to synchronize multiple strikes across borders would be begging to get caught."<sup>1</sup>

A massive country-wide demonstration and a rally was held on April 17<sup>th</sup> in Algeria against terrorism and radicals. The demonstration was initiated by the Workers' General Union (UGTA) to condemn the bomb attacks in the capital and to reaffirm citizens' support for national reconciliation. GSPC's founder and defector, Hassan Hattab, has publicly said that the group was a small one and wanted to "transform Algeria into a

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<sup>1</sup> [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1613233,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1613233,00.html)

second Iraq”.<sup>2</sup> Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, founders of the banned radical Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which were expected to win the banned elections in 1992, also condemned the attacks.<sup>3</sup>

The US embassy in Algiers came under criticism from local newspapers for issuing a warning about possible new terrorist attacks in the Algerian capital. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice officially defused the “crisis” with Algeria by dispatching the US Ambassador-at-Large Clint Williamson to make up for the US diplomatic faux-pas.<sup>4</sup> Algerian security forces have arrested 80 Algerian Islamists who made recent visits to Iraq for questioning about the bomb attacks in Algiers.

Stitching together a regional alliance of radical groups directly connected to Al-Qa’eda remains a longer-term ambition of the terrorists, who aim to strengthen their capabilities and then extend the fight to Europe. One indicator of this trend was Ayman Al-Zawahiri’s announcement, last September, that Algeria’s radical Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) had joined bin Laden’s organization.

Evidently, GSPC, intends to establish an Islamic State within Algeria. Founded in 1998, it eclipsed the Islamic Armed Group (GIA), which was roundly criticized for its tendency to strike civilians. Its leader is currently the “emir” Abdelmalek Droukdel, also known as Abu Mus’ab Abd-el Waloud (his *nom de guerre*), who opposed an amnesty offered under a reconciliation program by President Bouteflika. The amnesty expired in August 2006. The group is thought to fund its activities through criminal activities, including smuggling of items such as vehicles, cigarettes, drugs and arms (e.g. petty crimes or “Trabendo” in dialectal Algerian Arabic).

After renaming itself Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the group quickly adopted global jihadi practices, such as multiple and coordinated suicide bombings, followed up by post mortem videos statements by the “martyrs” broadcast on radical web sites. Thus, the group can be said to be mixing historical or cultural (bombings) and global imported practices (coordinated suicide bombings, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, videos and web sites propaganda). GSPC, at the operational level, still and always, combines high-tech and low tech at the same time. Its December 10, 2006, attack against a bus was a turning point on this matter. The attack occurred in Bouchaoui, Algeria, and left one dead and many wounded, including a Briton and one American: First, the terrorists targeted employees of BRC, a subcontractor for Halliburton, a US company very active in Iraq. Second, they had never attacked US interests in Algeria in the 1990’s. Third, a video of the attack has been shown on radical websites. This video presents a mix of low- and high-tech capabilities. The high tech is the use of satellite imagery (made by DigitalGlobe, one of the highest resolution commercial satellite imagery providers) for

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<sup>2</sup> [www.echoroukonline.com/english/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=5987](http://www.echoroukonline.com/english/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=5987);  
[www.maghreb.com/coccon/awi/xhtml1/en\\_GB/news/awi/newsbriefs/general/2007/04/17/newsbrief-01](http://www.maghreb.com/coccon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/news/awi/newsbriefs/general/2007/04/17/newsbrief-01)

<sup>3</sup> [www.temoust.org/spip.php?article](http://www.temoust.org/spip.php?article) 2043

<sup>4</sup> [www.elkhabar.com/FrEn/lire.php?ida=6671&idc=52](http://www.elkhabar.com/FrEn/lire.php?ida=6671&idc=52)

geolocalization and the planning of the attack. Then the video describes the bomb making process, apparently with ammonium nitrate (ANFO) and pieces of metal, in other words the kind of primitive device that was used in the past, for instance in the Parisian metro during the 1990's. In the same "classic" way, the detonator seems to have consisted in nothing more than halogen lights.

GSPC does not seem to have established network inside the US, but the group regularly attempts to strike US targets across the world. On April 4, 2000, for instance, Italian police arrested operational members of a GSPC cell who intended to bomb the US embassy in Rome. However, it should be noted that Algerians were involved in the Millenium plot against the LA Airport.

Since September 11, the US government has strongly enhanced its engagement in the Sahara. The Department of Defense has developed with the Department of State the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) (roughly 100 millions USD per year), which support African and Maghrebian States through a military-to-military and a police-to-police assistance to strengthen border security, counterterrorism capabilities and regional cooperation. The last events, both in Bechaoui and in Algiers, certainly will produce consequences – more intelligence cooperation in particular.