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AL QAEDA TERRORISM IN THE ISLAM- IC MAGHREB (AQIM): AN EX- AMPLE OF SURVIVAL AND ADAPTABILITY

In this article we examine how Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has transformed itself over recent years into one of the most dynamic and productive parts -in terrorist terms- of Al Qaeda 'Central'. Exploiting the comparative advantage offered by the Sahel strip, in autumn 2012 AQIM was one of the major culprits for the deteriorating situation in the region. Its importance is demonstrated by its geographic scope, its terrorist attacks, its skill with propaganda and its significant terrorist financing activity. This is confirmed by its strategic strength in the north of Mali and its ties of all kinds with the highly active Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); Algeria; Boko Haram; Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC); Libya; Maghreb; Mali; Mauritania; Niger; Nigeria; Arab revolts; Sahel; Kidnappings; Illegal trafficking; Salafist Jihadi terrorism.

I. INTRODUCTION

The terrorist organisation Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (henceforth, AQIM) is continuing to build its global reputation. It has spread beyond Algeria where it began in January 2007 as a successor to the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC). It is skilled in propaganda, with its “Al Andalus” Communication Institute producing videos on its own battlefield, and on others it has adopted, such as Nigeria. It has also created a robust financial basis for its activities, based on banditry and organised crime (kidnapping and drug and other illicit trafficking in the Sahel); this can be regarded as terrorist activity when used to fund Jihadi combat.¹

The above serves as a presentation and justification for the purpose of this study, which is to test a working hypothesis that is becoming ever more widely accepted. This is that the decrease in the number of attacks claimed by or attributable to AQIM, and the ever decreasing difference between AQIM's economic activities and what we could term *major banditry*, show that the organisation is becoming closer to the world of organised crime and gradually moving away from terrorism. We can explain the particular nature of AQIM through a mixture of the nature of Salafist Jihadi terrorism and the volatile background to this in the Maghreb and, in particular, the Sahel. AQIM is still a terrorist group and is highly active. This is irrespective of whether it appears to be getting more involved in “mafia-type” activities, abandoning terrorist threats and moving towards crime.

¹ The importance of illicit trafficking of all types in this part of Africa is discussed in DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, Luis and GIMÉNEZ-SALINAS FRAMIS, Andrea: *Crimen.org. Evolución y claves de la delincuencia organizada* Barcelona, Ariel, 2010, pp. 411-413.

When AQIM carried out an intensive wave of suicide attacks in 2007 and 2008, nobody doubted that it was serious security threat for Algeria and the surrounding area. However, the passage of time and the relative slowdown in the pace of attacks has led some to claim the organisation is in decline. However, we argue that the unstoppable expansion of its territorial scope, its continued terrorist activities, despite the hostile environment, and, in particular, its intensive, sophisticated and successful economic and financial activities make AQIM a dangerous threat. This conclusion is not affected by the fact that it is not active in Europe or by its apparent internal struggles over leadership and splits: it attacks Europeans in the Maghreb and Sahel, faithful to the Jihadi concept of the universal battlefield, and its divisions and splits only result in increased diversification and greater scope for its terrorist tentacles.

2. AMBITIOUS GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

The Sahel is a vast area of Africa, stretching from Mauritania in the west to Eritrea in the east.² In this study into AQIM's terrorist threat we are only interested in the western part of this strip. This includes the whole of Mauritania, the borders of the western Sahara, the southern most parts of Algeria and Libya, the north of Mali and Niger and, at its limits, western regions of Chad and, to the south, Burkina Faso and the north of Nigeria.

Terrorist actions have been becoming ever more frequent in the western part of this region over the last decade. These started with kidnapping of westerners in the south of Algeria by the SGPC and frequent terrorist attacks by the SGPC in Mauritania and northern Mali from 2005. The intensification of these attacks and ambushes over subsequent years led the European Union (EU) to approve its *Strategy for the Sahel* in March 2011, with the European Union's Counter-terrorism Coordinator highlighting the danger of any expansion of this threat in Africa, particularly to Mauritania, Mali and Niger.³

AQIM is organised into “katibas” or branches. The strip of the Sahel we are interested in is the domain of two katibas: that of Yahia Abou Ammar Abid Hammadu (alias Abdel Hamid Abou Zeid) -active between the south of Tunisia and Algeria and the north of Niger- and known as “Tarik Ben Ziyad”; and that of Mokhtar Belmokhtar (alias Khaled Abu El Abbas) -active in Mauritania, the south of Algeria and north of Mali- and known as “Al Mulathimin”. Many claim that there are substantial differ-

2 Unidad de Coordinación de la Guardia Civil-Centro de Análisis y Prospectiva (CAP): *Indicadores: Sahel* Madrid, CAP-GC, August 2011.

3 For the *Common Strategy* refer to the *Council of the European Union 3076th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting* at www.eu-un.europa.eu/articulos/es/article_10849_es.htm and for the actions of the EU's Counter-terrorism Coordinator, see “Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, nº 10, October 2011, p. 26.

ences between these two “katibas”. However, whilst they are the most prominent and receive the most media coverage, we could also include others such as the Katiba led by Yahia Djuadi. Abou Zeid's branch is presented as being the most “terrorist” and the Belmokhtar branch the most “criminal”. This creates an initial differentiation -which we regard as somewhat pernicious- between “terrorists” and “bandits”. This characterisation is supposedly based on the greater cruelty of Abou Zeid, who had no compunction in killing two hostages -a British citizen in 2009 and a French citizen in 2010- when the governments in London and Paris failed to meet his demands, which were not just monetary. In comparison, Belmokhtar is presented as being more interested in making money, with political (i.e. terrorist) demands being secondary. However, no one should forget that Belmokhtar's branch has taken part in many bloody actions in the area in which the purely terrorist activities of the SGPC first and subsequently AQIM are most visible, with various attacks and ambushes in Mauritania, Mali and Algeria. Adn Abou Zeid's branch did not spring out of the ether. In 2003, as part of the SGPC, it was displaced from its area of action in north-east Algeria to the Sahel by sustained pressure from the Algerian authorities.⁴

This thesis of rivalry between the two leaders, and the resulting weakening of AQIM in the region worrying its emir Abdelmalek Drukdel (alias Abu Musab Abdel Wadud), observing the deterioration in the combat on the southern front from his refuge in the far north of Algeria, ignores the nature of the Sahel region. The enormous expanse of the region and the difficulties inherent to a desert make it a very different battlefield to the mountainous Cabilia region of Algeria where Drukdel is fighting within the triangle of Bumerdes-Bouira-Tizi Uzu, waging a classic armed struggle against the police, gendarmes, the military and community guards.⁵ The volatile Sahel has always been a hotbed of a variety of illicit trafficking, with a sparse population of divided Tuareg communities taking on the governments in Mali and Niger. In this region, AQIM has to spend much of its time building alliances and wrestling to establish itself in certain areas whilst, at the same time, getting on with its purely terrorist work, i.e. harassing Algerian, Mauritanian and Malian forces, and training terrorists from a variety of places in their mobile camps.⁶ It is worth noting AQIM's skill in overcoming these difficulties, including those of forging links with divided Tuareg groups, with whom they need to build loyalty to avoid leaks to the authorities. The difficulty of doing this is shown by how quick the Tuareg were to give up one of the fleeing sons of Muammar El Gadaffi to the National Transitional Council (NTC), despite his father always having boasted of his links with this community. On the other hand, at the beginning of

4 PORTER, Geoff D.: “The Impact of Bin Laden's Death on AQIM in North Africa” *CTC Sentinel* Special Edition, May 2011, p. 11.

5 For example, eight AQIM terrorists were killed in the Bumerdes region in the first two weeks of February, with a further five killed on the 20th of the month. Refer to “Cinq autres éléments de l'ex GSPC abattus à Boumerdès” *El Watan* 21 February 2012, at www.elwatan.org.

6 ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C.: “El terrorismo yihadista a las puertas de España: los campos de entrenamiento en el Sahel” *Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos (GEES) Analysis nº 20*, 5 July 2007, at www.gees.org.

2012, AQIM had been successfully hiding thirteen foreign hostages in Tuareg territory for several years whilst negotiating ransoms.

This latter point is important. The authorities in the countries in which they are active are making it ever more difficult for them to train their terrorists -for example, the Military Coordination Command set up by Algeria in September 2010, based in Tamanrasset, is starting to be effective at a sub-regional level. However, despite this, the progressive weakening of Mauritania over recent years and the surge in Boko Haram terrorism in northern Nigeria in 2011 and 2012 show that the organisation's terrorist activity continues to be important, although it might go unnoticed outside the region. There can be no doubt that the adaptation of AQIM terrorists to the terrain is a reality that makes it more difficult to combat them effectively.⁷

3. AQIM AND ATTACKS

AQIM's roots stretch back to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the SGPC, and the model it follows is based on Al Qaeda, as shown by the SGPC's declarations of loyalty to this in 2003, 2005 and, definitively on 11 September 2006. This history, its transformation into AQIM in January 2007 and its subsequent development confirm this commitment. AQIM has shown itself to be a committed representative of its parent across an ever increasing area, not just in terms of tactics, but also through its commitment to Al Qaeda's expansionary and universalist approach.⁸

Some argue that Al Qaeda and AQIM have weakened, due to attacks being less frequent than they were; an inability to stage attacks on western soil; attacks being less devastating than in the past; and both leaders -Ayman Al Zawahiri and Abdelmalek Drukdel- being questioned internally and lacking charisma. In reality, both play the same role, providing inspiration and a stimulus to keep the terrorist machinery ready to act, carrying out activities such as kidnapping of westerners to achieve this; and both agree on the need to mutually support each other and not forget the legacy of Osama Bin Laden. They have shown their determination to keep fighting, taking advantage

⁷ Two examples of the types of actions that are occurring regularly in these three countries include the 15 September 2011 clash between soldiers from Niger and AQIM that left one soldier and three terrorists dead, and AQIM's 20 December kidnapping of a Mauritanian police officer on the Mali border. See "Recent Highlights ..." *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, n° 10, October 2011, p. 26, and Vol. 5, n° 1, January 2012, p. 27.

⁸ Analysing the impact of Bin Laden's death on global Salafist Jihadism, in May 2011 the US analyst Geoff D. Porter argued that Ayman Al Zawahiri's probable ascent to the leadership of Al Qaeda would provide support for AQIM, because the Egyptian had traditionally been seen as closer to the Maghrebis than Bin Laden. Further to this argument, he added two additional arguments that support this closeness: Al Zawahiri's virulent hatred of France and his dedication to financing Al Qaeda, seeing AQIM's "financial" specialisation (discussed below) as particularly interesting. Refer to PORTER, G. D.: *op cit* p. 11.

of a range of illegal activities (kidnapping) for this, just like the Taliban with drugs in Afghanistan and Al Shabab with piracy in Somalia. They give these activities a “halal” (permitted by Islam) varnish by claiming they are to support Jihad and not for enrichment. Finally, both make use of videos and audio recordings distributed over the many Jihadi websites to provide propaganda for their struggle and to attract more recruits.

There are two frequently-heard assertions that should be analysed from the perspective of assessing the terrorist threat. The first is the displacement of AQIM activism towards the Sahel in the south, shows that it is gradual weakening; the other, which derives largely from the former, argues that the process of AQIM decline will become irreversible as it is diluted over such an immense area, with the additional temptation to become simply a group of bandits.⁹ There can be no doubt that activity has been displaced to the south as a result of increased efforts by the Algerian armed and security forces. This has been making life progressively more difficult for the SGPC in the north, as we saw with the case of the Abu Zeid “katiba” in 2003. However, the terrorists immediately presented this as a blessing, as it enabled them to open up new battlefields. Faithful to their universalist vision of their struggle, they regard this as a necessary step, gradually spreading their activities to Mauritania, Mali, Niger and even Nigeria. The presence stretching back years of recruits from Nigeria and Niger in, first, SGPC and subsequently AQIM training camps is significant.¹⁰ Furthermore, the opening of the Sahel front does not mean the terrorists are ignoring the northern front. There were major terrorist attacks and ambushes in various parts of the north of the country before the creation of AQIM and these have continued since, including suicide attacks since 2007. The pressure applied to AQIM in the north by the Algerian authorities, particularly on its sources of finance, has obliged the terrorists to seek finance in the south of the country, particularly in the Sahel.¹¹

AQIM was therefore able to launch suicide attacks in Algeria in July and December 2007 -its most high-profile attacks- showing it to be one of the active Al Qaeda franchises. It also extended its activities to Tunisia, training Tunisian terrorists in Algeria who entered Tunisia in December 2006, and kidnapped two Austrian tourists in the south of the country in March 2008. It has also put significant pressure on Mauritania, against which the SGPC symbolically launched its activities by killing soldiers in Lemgheity in June 2005. Since its appearance, AQIM has focused on Mauritania, the weak link in security in the Maghreb. This has included attacks and kidnappings and resulted in the symbolic victory of the Dakar Rally, the emblematic competition of

9 For the weakening of AQIM in Algeria, see CRISTIANI, Dario and FABIANI, Riccardo: *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations* Rome, Istituto Affari Internazionali IAI Working Paper 11/07, April 2011, p. 11.

10 ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C.: “El terrorismo yihadista a las puertas de España” *op cit.*

11 LEBOVICH, Andrew: “AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, n° 9, September 2011, p. 11.

the infidel, being forced out of the country.¹² The November 2009 kidnapping of three Spanish charity workers on the busy road between Nuadibu and Nuakchott provided a strong indication of how AQIM is exploiting this weakness, and its willingness to take this route; it also showed the logistical networks it has set up in the region. Two of the three victims remained in AQIM's hands until August 2010. In September 2010, terrorists captured seven employees of French companies in Niger, seven of whom remain in the terrorists' hands two years later. There have been other kidnappings in this time in Algeria, Mali and Niger. In 2012, AQIM were holding thirteen foreign hostages, the most ever, and only exceeded by the 32 westerners captured by the SGPC in 2003.¹³ The Jihadi attack on the Café "Argana" in Marrakech, which left 17 dead on 28 April 2011, was not claimed by AQIM, consistently with its negotiating strategy with France for the release of four French hostages it is holding. 8 of the 17 victims were French tourists. Whilst AQIM denied responsibility for the attack, it did congratulate those who carried it out and encouraged its followers to commit similar acts. Just two days after the attack, AQIM made threats to the Moroccan government to continue releasing Jihadi prisoners in the wake of the compassionate measures introduced by Mohammed VI shortly before.¹⁴

When we examine AQIM's alleged decline in 2011, we can see that this was not actually the case. There was in fact a major wave of attacks on Algerian soil in the middle of the year, coinciding with a critical point in the Arab uprisings that began in autumn 2010, and included the civil war in Libya. In April 2011 there were six attacks in Algeria against the Army and the Gendarmerie Nationale, resulting in 42 deaths and many injuries; in May there were eighteen attacks, one of which was the major "Al Qaeda-style" attack on the Azazga barracks in Cabilia, which left 21 dead and 66 injured. Shortly afterwards, in July and August, coinciding with Ramadan, a period traditionally considered propitious for Jihad, as it was by the bloody GIA in the 1990s, there were more what we might consider "Al Qaeda-style" attacks, because four of the 23 attacks were suicide operations and because of the nature of the targets. On 17 July, AQIM attacked a police station in Bordj Menaïel, killing two people; on 14 August, AQIM attacked another police station, injuring 33 people; on 19 August, three civilians were killed in a confrontation in Tizi Uzu, the capital of the Cabilia region; and on 26 August, the worst attack for a long time, and the closest to the Al Qaeda 'modus operandi', took place. In this attack, 18 people were killed in a double-suicide assault on the Chercell Military Inter-Arm Academy; 16 of these were soldiers, including two Syrian officers who were on a training course. This was one of the most difficult and important targets attacked over recent years, and is enough in itself to show that

12 ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C.: "The Recent Terrorist Activities in Sahel-Sahara Area" *African Journal for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (African Center for the Study and Research on Terrorism of the African Union, Algiers)* Vol. 1, nº 1, June 2010, pp. 29-31.

13 ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, C.: "La industria del secuestro en el escenario africano" *Ejército* nº 850, January-February 2012, pp. 114-115.

14 PORTER, G. D.: *op cit* p. 12.

terrorist activity is ongoing. It is also worth noting that, in addition to being one of the most prestigious facilities of the Algerian armed forces, being globally recognised for its courses and visitors, this double attack was in the western part of the country, a region that had been largely cleansed of the terrorist activity that was prevalent there in the 1990s. The AMIA attack coincided with another major suicide attack. This was Boko Haram's attack on the premises of a number of specialist UN agencies in Abuja, causing 18 deaths; and this followed a suicide attack on the federal police headquarters in Abuja on 16 June that killed two people.¹⁵ AQIM also launched a cross-border attack on a Mauritanian military base in Bassiknou on 5 July; the terrorists escaped to Mali.¹⁶ The intensive use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in this part of 2011 shows the availability of material to the terrorists; we can also deduce that some of this material would have come from the Libyan arsenals then being emptied as a result of the civil war then at its peak.¹⁷ On 16 September, the US Embassy in Algeria warned of the danger of AQIM acquiring anti-aircraft capabilities from Libya.¹⁸ The discovery of Nigerian (Boko Haram members) and Chadian nationals trained in AQIM camps in summer 2011, and the increase in terrorist and criminal activity in the Sahel at the same time, supports the theory of an increasing connection between AQIM and Boko Haram, and also demonstrates that the war in Libya is reinforcing the local threat in this strip of Africa.¹⁹ In this regard, on 28 November, the British Foreign Minister, William Hague, warned of the danger of mercenaries who had fought in Libya joining the ranks of AQIM.²⁰ A year later, the situation in the north of Mali deteriorated significantly, with the government in Bamako losing control of territory in the opening months of 2012. This led the UN Security Council to unanimously approve Resolution 2071 on 12 October 2012, enabling the possibility of international military intervention to help the national government regain control.²¹

One of the major difficulties in getting an overview of AQIM's terrorist activity in the Sahel is the complexity of the region, as its presence and actions overlap with other pre-existing issues that are equally -or perhaps more- complicated. The rebellious attitudes of Tuareg populations in the north of Mali and Niger dates from long before, and the superimposition of AQIM on this now, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) offshoot, in the area leads many to relate the two, or indeed

15 See "Recent Highlights ..." *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, n° 9, September 2011, p. 19. For the Abuja police station attack, see "Recent Highlights ..." Vol. 4, n° 7, July 2011, p. 23.

16 See "Recent Highlights ..." *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, n° 8, August 2011, p. 21.

17 LEBOVICH, A.: *op cit* p. 11.

18 See "Recent Highlights ..." *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, n° 10, October 2011, p. 26.

19 See "AQMI et Boko Haram: la filiation confirmée" *El Watan* 27 January 2012, at www.elwatan.org.

20 See "Recent Highlights ..." *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 5, n° 1, January 2012, p. 25.

21 See ECHEVERRÍA, C.: "¿Estamos cerca de una intervención militar en el norte de Malí?" *Atenea Digital*, 31 October 2012, at www.revistatenea.es.

to try radically to separate them.²² The same occurs with the aforementioned pre-existing scenario and the possible influence of the conflict in Libya that broke out in February 2011 -a civil war involving Tuareg elements traditionally supported by Gaddafi coupled with the destabilisation caused by the war itself and its ending- with some arguing there is a cause-effect relationship between events in Libya and the destabilisation of Mali in early 2012. In reality, we could also posit a relationship between the worsening of the security situation in the Sahel in general, and Mali in particular, with the drought that has been affecting the region for many months, and which means some twelve million people may need emergency aid in the coming months. In conclusion, we can point to many reasons for the Sahel being a very vulnerable region, but it will be much more so as a result of the activism of AQIM, both as a result of kidnappings of westerners and the spread of its radicalisation message, which has taken root, among other areas, in the turbulent north of Nigeria through Boko Haram.

4. AQIM AND INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PROPAGANDA

On 7 July 2011, just two months after the elimination of Bin Laden, the Instituto de Comunicación “Al Andalus” published a recording of an interview with Sheik Abu Ubaidah Yusef Al Annabi, a member of AQIM's Sharia Council, in which he swore loyalty to Al Zawahiri as the new emir of Al Qaeda.²³ On 3 August, an AQIM video claimed, as they usually do from time-to-time, a number of attacks by its members against the soldiers and police of the countries in which it is active. This video also contained interesting content in the form of statements by emir Drukdal and Al Qaeda emir Al Zawahiri, in which they gave their opinions on current topics, such as the Arab revolts and the need for commitment to the armed Jihad they preach. Emir Drukdal also sent a message to the French government in November 2010, indicating that negotiations for the release of the French hostages held by AQIM should be carried out directly with Osama Bin Laden: through this somewhat surreal format, Drukdal was once again demonstrating his loyalty and closeness to Al Qaeda's leader and his network of terrorist networks.²⁴

The recordings published by AQIM have increasingly related to Nigeria, encouraging Boko Haram's bloody offensive to consolidate its Jihadi activism, serving as a model to be followed by others in other parts of the Islamic world. On 13 November 2011, Algeria's deputy-foreign minister announced that the links between AQIM and Boko Haram that had been apparent in their propaganda for some time had now de-

22 In February 2012 there started to be talk of a fourth major Tuareg uprising, driven by ex-fighters returning well-armed from Libya, the drought of the previous months and the destabilising role of AQIM and, more recently, MOJWA over recent years in the northern part of the country; this has become a very real security issue. See “Malí. Los tuareg asaltan ciudades del norte” *El País* 19 January 2012, p. 6.

23 See “Recent Highlights ...” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, nº 8, August 2011, p. 22.

24 CRISTIANI, D and FABIANI, R.: *op cit* p. 4.

veloped into coordination between the two.²⁵ It is significant that two of the most significant attacks by AQIM and Boko Haram in 2011 -both suicide attacks- took place on the same day (26 August). These attacks were presented in their propaganda as acts of holy war in different theatres: the UN headquarters in Abuja and the Cherchell Military Academy (AMIA), which AQIM described as a “symbol of the power of the ANP (the Algerian armed forces) that supported Gadaffi”.²⁶

The purpose of such propaganda is to attract recruits, initially to the SGPC and subsequently to AQIM. Those who argue that AQIM is gradually weakening point to what they regard as the dying request to the people of Tunisia from Ayman Al Zawahiri to rid themselves of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, to reverse the direction of his efforts against AQIM; this invitation was met with little enthusiasm.²⁷ It has always been difficult to give even estimated numbers of the members of these terrorist organisations, or even the number of their members and sympathisers in Europe; however, it is even more difficult to do this in an area as volatile as the Sahel and Africa in general. The dynamics of kidnappings has revealed the varying levels at which many people in the Sahel region are involved with the terrorists, who must cautiously approach groups that are well established in the area to try to agree with them -not always successfully- certain loyalties. The number of fighters in the “katibas” may be more or less known, but we know less about the local groups involved with these and the terrorist groups that already existed in the area, such as Nigeria's Boko Haram. The picture is further complicated by the splits that take place in these groups. A good example of this is the AQIM offshoot “Jamat Tawhid Wal Jihad fi Garbi” (the Assembly for Monotheism and Jihad in the West, a name which subsequently evolved to that represented by MOJWA). This group claimed responsibility for kidnapping two Spaniards and one Italian from Saharan refugee camps in Rabuni, Algeria, who were released a year later.²⁸ Further evidence of AQIM's ability to adapt to the terrain by building loyalty is provided by the fact that they were holding nine western hostages in autumn 2012. This is despite the efforts that their countries will have been making to find them; the efforts of the local governments to stop the terrorists collecting funds from ransoms and other concessions; and despite the Tuareg uprisings in the region and the mass population displacements that have hugely altered the relatively calm scenario in which the terrorists had been able to move around easily in the area.²⁹ In

25 See “Recent Highlights ...” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 5, nº 1, January 2012, p. 24.

26 See LEBOVICH, A.: *op cit* p. 8.

27 Some months later, on 11 October 2011, Al Zawahiri addressed the people of Libya urging them to adopt Sharia and not to trust the Atlantic Alliance that was helping them fight Gadaffi at the time. See “Terrorist Highlights ...” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, nº 11-12, November 2011, p. 22.

28 CALVO, Erena: “Los cooperantes de Tinduf, vivos en un vídeo que han visto sus familias” *El Mundo* 13 December 2011, p. 18.

29 See ULD DAA, Maarouf: “Éxodo de tuaregs de Malí hacia Mauritania” *Diario de Navarra* 15 February 2012, and SAID, Rabia: “Conflit au Nord-Mali. L'Algérie appelle au dialogue” *El Watan* 15 February 2012.

comparative terms, it is interesting to note that, as we mentioned earlier, Saif El Islam could not manage to hide despite the cover major Tuareg networks had offered to him and his family, and that he was handed over to the NTC, whilst nobody seems to have seen the western hostages kidnapped in September 2010 or their kidnappers.

5. AQIM AND FINANCING: ANOTHER THEATRE OF COMBAT

The kidnappings we referred to earlier are now AQIM's main source of income. The fact that these have intensified recently, whilst the pace of attacks has fallen (although these are still not insignificant, as we saw in Algeria in mid-2011), has led some analysts to consider that the terrorist organisation is now moving more into straight banditry, or could easily do so in the near future.³⁰ It has been estimated that AQIM has so far collected over 50 million euros in ransoms. Taken together with the volume of illicit trafficking in the Sahel -including increasing drug trafficking- it is easy to see how this conclusion is reached.³¹

However, here we would like to introduce a new element into the analysis. This is the use of kidnapping as a weapon of war against the infidel enemy, a way of subjugating, humiliating and, simultaneously, extorting money from those who on other fronts they have been fighting, or are continuing to fight with attacks and ambushes in Europe, Iraq and Afghanistan. Abu Zeid and his “katiba” have been blamed for the killing of two hostages as part of its struggles with the United Kingdom, in the case of the British citizen Edwyn Dyer killed in 2009, and with France, in the case of the French citizen Michel Germaneau in 2010. The two hostages were cruelly killed during negotiations that featured the demands of a terrorist group, not just a group that wanted money. In the case of the British hostage, the demands included the British government releasing the terrorist ideologue Abu Qatada, considered to be Al Qaeda's “religious” voice in Europe. During the more recent capture of hostages in the Sahel in 2011, AQIM had no qualms about killing two French citizens and one German citizen when they resisted, without considering how valuable they would be, if they were kept alive.

However, at this point it is appropriate to remember the taking of the first 32 hostages in 2003 by the SGPC. At the time, this was considered -as it continues to be considered- a purely terrorist action, rather than a criminal one. The Al Qaeda-inspired group was set up in 1998 to rationalise, organise and increase the efficiency of the ever more chaotic Salafist Jihadi terrorism of the GIA. This kidnapping enabled the group to open a new front against its enemies: both the local enemy (Algeria) and the

30 VIMEUX, Johanna: “Les dérives mafieuses d’AQMI au service du financement du terrorisme” *Défense* n° 149, January-February 2011, pp. 19-20.

31 ECHEVERRÍA, C.: “Terrorism Financing: The Particular Case of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)” *African Journal for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism*, vol. 2, n° 1, December 2011, p. 53, at www.caert.org.dz.

wider enemy (the West, which supported the Algerian regime and was symbolically represented by these tourists). Of course, these kidnappings also served to raise money. However, the purpose of financing terrorism is to keep the terrorist machine oiled with the resources and weapons it needs, buying volunteers and loyalty. It is not for personal enrichment, a major difference from the criminal groups that use kidnapping only and exclusively for monetary gain.

AQIM's kidnapping activity may also have had a contagious effect on other groups. This possibility is illustrated by the kidnapping of two European workers -one British and one Italian- from a construction company in the Nigerian state of Kebbi on 3 August 2012. Al Qaeda claimed responsibility for the kidnapping in a video release to the media a few days later.³² And finally it is also worth remembering that the emir of Al Qaeda himself tried to pressurise the USA using a kidnap victim -the American charity worker Warren Weinstein captured in Pakistan- in a video distributed on 1 December 2011: blackmail in true AQIM style.³³

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this analysis we have examined in depth the current situation and actions of the Salafist Jihadi terrorist group AQIM. We have used this to test our working hypothesis that AQIM is neither in decline -although the pace of its attacks has slowed and it is perhaps not recruiting as successfully as in the past (although this is difficult to verify)- and that its activities must necessarily lead it to gradually abandon terrorism to concentrate on banditry, through things such as the noxious practice of kidnapping, particularly foreigners.

We have shown in the paper how the choice of the Sahel as a battlefield was not solely due to the expulsion of terrorists from the useful parts of Algeria in the north by police and military pressure, but also due to the search for new fronts as part of the universalist strategy of the Jihadis. The terrorists have had some notable “successes” recently in Mauritania, Nigeria and Mali. However, the geographic and socio-political characteristics of the Sahel have obliged the terrorists to adapt and to pursue their combat objectives in a theatre very different to their traditional zone of operations in the north of Algeria, before they were pushed to the south. This redeployment in the Sahel marks a new stage in AQIM's struggle. The terrorist networks no longer have the fixation that the GIA and the SGPC had with Europe as a sanctuary and a battlefield in the 1990s and part of the last decade. Nevertheless, western countries remain

32 See “Recent Highlights ...” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 4, nº 9, September 2011, p. 17. For the dramatic outcome of this kidnapping and the links between Boko Haram and AQIM, refer to ZENN, Jacob: “Boko Haram’s Dangerous Expansion into Northwest Nigeria” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 5, nº 10, October 2012, p. 5.

33 See “Recent Highlights ...” *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 5, nº 1, January 2012, p. 25.

vulnerable to AQIM, mainly due to the ease with which it can attack nationals from these countries and their interests in the region, successfully blackmailing them for ransoms to release hostages, and even trying to accelerate their withdrawal from combat zones in Muslim territory, such as Afghanistan.

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