

By Scott Stewart and Fred Burton

Late in the evening of June 17, 2009, militants affiliated with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) detonated two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against a convoy near Bordj Bou Arreridj, Algeria, which is located in a mountainous area east of Algiers that has traditionally been an Islamist militant stronghold. The convoy consisted of Algerian paramilitary police vehicles escorting a group of Chinese workers to a site where they were building a new highway to connect Bordj Bou Arreridj with Algiers. After disabling the convoy using IEDs, the militants then raked the trapped vehicles with small-arms fire. When the ambush was over, 18 policemen and one Chinese worker had been killed. Another six gendarmes and two Chinese workers were wounded in the attack.

It was the deadliest attack of any type in Algeria since an Aug. 19, 2008, suicide vehicle-borne IED (VBIED) attack against a line of job applicants outside a police academy in Les Issers that killed 48 and injured another 45. AQIM regularly launches armed ambushes and roadside IED attacks in Algeria, and ambushes were frequently used by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) before it announced in September 2006 that it had become part of al Qaeda's regional franchise - AQIM. Indeed, we have seen four other ambush and IED attacks since May 20, 2009, but the death tolls in such attacks have usually been smaller than the June 17 attack.

In light of this anomalous attack, we thought it would be an opportune time to take the pulse of AQIM and try to get a sense of where the group stands today and where it might be going over the next few months.

History and trends

The GSPC began as a splinter of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in 1998 as the civil war in Algeria was winding down. At that time, Hassan Hattab led a group of other disaffected GIA members who disagreed with GIA's targeting of unarmed civilians. Hattab and his followers wanted to distance themselves from the large-scale massacres that had taken place while continuing their struggle against the Algerian government. They formed the GSPC to give themselves a fresh name and a new start.

Hattab eventually ran into disputes within the GSPC as the group was increasingly drawn to the transnational jihadist campaign espoused by al Qaeda. He "resigned" (though he was effectively deposed) as the group's leader in 2001 and was succeeded by Nabil Sahraoui, who declared the GSPC's allegiance to al Qaeda. Security forces killed Sahraoui in 2004.

In a message issued on Sept. 11, 2006, al Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that the GSPC had joined forces with al Qaeda in a union he hoped would be "a thorn in the neck of the American and French Crusaders and their allies, and an arrow in the

heart of the traitors and apostates." On Sept. 13, GSPC acknowledged the merger on its Web site with a message from its emir, Abu Musab Abd al-Wadoud, who wrote, "We have full confidence in the faith, the doctrine, the method and the modes of action of [al Qaeda's] members, as well as their leaders and religious guides."

The newly-established al Qaeda franchise in Algeria was not idle for long. On Oct. 19, 2006, it conducted two IED attacks, one against a police station in El Harrach, an eastern suburb of Algiers, the second against a fuel storage site belonging to the French company Razel in Lakhdaria. On Oct. 29, 2006, the group conducted near-simultaneous VBIED attacks against two Algerian police stations in Reghaia and Dergana. While simultaneous VBIED attacks were something seen in al Qaeda operations, these attacks involved vehicles parked near their targets rather than suicide vehicles and, as such, resembled past GSPC attacks, as did the selection of police stations as targets. Because of these features, the attacks were seen as examples of a hybrid, or transitional, kind of attack.

Other transitional attacks continued into early 2007, such as the twin attacks on March 5, 2007, which targeted foreign oil workers and Algerian security forces, indicating AQIM was incorporating the security-force targets of the GSPC with the foreign-influence targets of al Qaeda.

The focus on foreign interests and the energy sector was seen in several other attacks and attempted attacks against foreign oil workers and pipelines in late 2006 and early 2007. In spite of this focus, to date, AQIM has not been able to launch any truly disruptive attacks against the Algerian energy sector.

On April 11, 2007, AQIM passed another threshold when the group employed two suicide VBIEDS in attacks against separate targets in Algiers. One device was directed at the prime minister's office in the city center and the second targeted a police station near the international airport in the eastern part of the city. At least 33 people reportedly were killed in the blasts and more than 150 wounded. These attacks marked the first suicide attacks in Algeria connected with GSPC or AQIM and signified a change in tactics.

However, the group's increased operational tempo and less discriminate target selection came with consequences. In mid-2007 the Algerian government launched a massive operation against AQIM that resulted in large losses of men and materiel for the group. AQIM's shift in targeting strategy also caused disagreements within the insurgency's leadership. The schism arose between members who favored the tradition GSPC target set and opposed killing civilians, and those members who were more heavily influenced by al Qaeda and wanted to hit foreign and symbolic targets with little regard for civilian casualties.

In spite of the government crackdown, and in the face of growing internal dissent, AQIM accelerated its suicide bombing campaign, and there were several other suicide attacks during the last three months of 2007. These attacks included the Sept. 6 bombing of a crowd waiting to greet Algerian President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika in Batna that killed 22 people and injured more than 100; a Sept. 8 suicide VBIED attack against a naval barracks in Dellys that killed 30; and twin suicide VBIED attacks on Dec. 11 that targeted the constitutional court and the

headquarters of the U.N. refugee agency in Algiers that killed 47 people, including 17 U.N. employees.

AQIM conducted six suicide bombing attacks against military and police targets between January 2008 and the Aug. 19, 2008, VBIED attack against the police academy in Les Issers. During this time, military and law enforcement pressure by the Algerian government continued, as did the public criticism of AQIM for killing innocents. The criticism reached a crescendo after the Les Issers attack, which killed largely poor people looking for employment with the police. AQIM has only conducted one suicide attack since August 2008, and the bulk of its operations have been in sparsely populated areas instead of cities. It is unclear at this point whether these observable shifts are in response to the criticism of AQIM's tactics or if they are a result of the government's efforts to dismantle the group.

Large VBIEDs are resource intensive. In fact, the explosives required to construct one large VBIED could be used to manufacture many smaller IEDs or suicide vests. Since the Les Issers attack, AQIM has conducted several IED attacks but these have all involved smaller IEDs, and the number of bystander deaths has dropped as the attacks have appeared to have been more carefully aimed at government or foreign targets. Of course, suicide bombers are also a resource that can only be used once, and it takes time and effort to recruit new bombers.

We will be watching carefully to see if the current trend away from the employment of large VBIEDs in urban areas is a temporary lull caused by government pressure and a lack of resources, or if it is an intentional shift designed to assuage public anger. It is very difficult for an insurgent organization to thrive in an environment where the local population turns against it, and perhaps the AQIM leadership has learned a lesson from the high cost the GIA paid after it began killing civilians and lost public support.

In addition to the military and law enforcement pressure, the Algerian government has been very busy in its efforts to apply ideological pressure to AQIM. One way this pressure has been applied is in the form of former militant leaders associated with the group criticizing its change in targeting and tactics. For example, after the Les Issers bombing in August 2008, GSPC founder Hassan Hattab called on the militants to lay down their arms and surrender. There is also talk that the government may soon expand an amnesty offer to include members of the organization who have been excluded from the current amnesty offer because they were deemed to have too much blood on their hands. Like previous amnesty offers, this expansion could serve to further weaken the organization as members choose to turn themselves in.

Regional franchise?

By design, AQIM incorporated the GSPC with elements of Morocco's Islamic Combatant Group, Libya's Islamic Fighting Group, several Tunisian groups, most notably the Tunisian Combatant Group, and jihadists in Mali, Niger and Mauritania. However, in practice, the vast majority of the group's infrastructure came from the GSPC, and attacks since the founding of AQIM in 2006 have reflected this. Indeed, in spite of the many high-profile Libyan and Moroccan militants who serve as part of the al Qaeda core leadership, Libya and Morocco have been extremely calm since the emergence of AQIM, and the group has remained an Algeria-based phenomenon.

In Mauritania, attacks linked to AQIM began as early as December 2007, but AQIM militants there have not displayed the capability to carry out sophisticated attacks. Most attacks in Mauritania involve amateurish small-arms assaults such as the attack on French tourists on Dec. 23, 2007, or the Feb. 1, 2008, shooting at the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania's capital. As we were writing this, we learned of the June 23 shooting of an American teacher in Nouakchott. The man was reportedly gunned down outside the school where he taught, and Mauritanian officials are blaming the attack on AQIM rather than criminals.

The attacks in Mauritania have shown rudimentary tactics with poor planning, and the militants associated with AQIM in Mauritania simply have not displayed the ability to mount a large-scale, coordinated attack. The group's activities in Mali and Niger are also mainly constrained to low-level attacks against government or military outposts and foreign mining sites and personnel in the northern stretches of those countries. AQIM also conducts training and engages in smuggling and kidnappings for ransom in this deserted region.

This means that, in the end, in spite of all the hype associated with the AQIM name, the group is essentially a rebranded GSPC and not some sort of revolutionary new organization. It has adapted its target set to include foreign interests, and it did add suicide bombing to its repertoire, but aside from that there has been very little movement toward AQIM's becoming a truly regional threat.

That said, AQIM has received a lot of attention from the al Qaeda core leadership, which has sought to support it however it can and spur it on beyond Algeria. On June 23, 2009, al Qaeda media wing As Sahab released a 35-minute video statement from Abu Yahya al-Libi entitled "Algeria Between the Sacrifice of Fathers and Faithfulness of Sons." As his name implies, al-Libi is himself from Libya, and one of the things he does in the video is urge militants in Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco to mobilize and join under the "banner, command and emirate" of AQIM. The video appears to be an attempt by the al Qaeda leadership to counter ideological attacks by the Algerian government as well as AQIM's regional stagnation.

Coming home to roost?

In addition to fighting against the regime in Algeria, Algerian militants have also been very conspicuous on jihadist battlefields such as Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq. Some studies have even concluded that Algerians were the single largest group of foreign jihadists who fought in Iraq during the height of the insurgency.

One of the things we have been anticipating for several years now is a boomerang effect as foreign jihadists leave places such as Iraq and Pakistan and return home. While many foreign jihadists have been killed in such places, those who survive after fighting sophisticated foes like the American military are not only hardened but also possess insurgent tradecraft skills that make them far more lethal when they leave those battlefields than when they entered them. Indeed, we have seen a migration of IED technology and tactics from Iraq to other theaters, such as Afghanistan.

With developments in Iraq over the last few years that have made Iraq increasingly inhospitable to foreign jihadists, and with Pakistan now quickly becoming less friendly, many of the Algerian militants in those places may be seeking to return home. And this brings us back to the anomalous vehicular ambush on June 17.

That operation, while a common type of attack in Algeria, was uncharacteristically deadly. It is plainly possible that the high death toll was merely a fluke. Perhaps the AQIM militants got lucky or the Algerian gendarmes targeted in the attack made a fatal mistake. However, the increased death toll could also have been a result of superior IED design, or superior planning by the operational leader of the ambush. Such a shift could indicate that an experienced operational commander or bombmaker has come to AQIM from someplace like Iraq or Pakistan. It will be very important to watch the next few AQIM attacks to see if the June 17 attack was indeed just an anomaly or if it was the beginning of a new and deadly trend.

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