

**12**

**AQIM & Mauritania:**

**Local paradoxes, regional dynamics and  
global challenges.**

Diego Guerrero Oris & Nahuel Arenas-García

Febrero de 2012

# Índice

Abstract:.....	4
Background.....	5
Organization's Strategies and Tactics.....	7
The regional context and players.....	9
Regional Dynamics .....	12
Al-Qaeda in the post-Bin Laden Era .....	15
AQIM in Mauritania .....	17
Conclusion .....	21
Notes & References:.....	23

# ***Abstract:***

The menace of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb Islamique (AQIM) gained particular international attention as a result of the abduction of western foreigners. During the last years AQIM has not only perpetrated attacks in various countries of the region but also diversified its methods and tactics. Mauritania, in particular, has been victim of all types of AQIM attacks: kidnappings, suicide bombings, attacks to Embassies and military bases, and so forth. However, *despite the efforts made by AQIM to secure a high profile and affiliation in Mauritania, the organization has not been able to establish permanent cells in the country nor has it been capable of building a strong foundation that would promote an increasing presence.* This paper argues that the connection of AQIM and its messages with criminal networks and local tribes is structurally fragile. In fact, the political agenda pursued by AQIM in Mauritania does not match with that of its *temporary allies*. The actions perpetrated by AQIM on Mauritanian soil had an enormous negative impact on the economy and on the popular perceptions. *Not only* radical Islam was thwarted to certain extent by the strong tribalism and the powerful brotherhoods that permeate social and religious structures, but also the links of the organization with trafficking and smuggling is a source of concern by many, who question the consistency of these illegal activities with Islam. Yet, the capacity of AQIM to make strategic regional alliances and benefit from scenarios like the conflict in Libya should not be underestimated.

Key Words: AQIM, Mauritania, Al-Qaeda, terrorism, Sahel, West Africa.

# *Background*

The presence and menace of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is not new to the region, yet it gained particular international attention as a result of the abduction of western foreigners. AQIM evolved from the Algeria-based Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC, for its acronym in French), which was created by a regional commander who defected the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The GIA pursued the objective of replacing the Algerian government with an Islamic state using violent tactics, including the slaughter of civilians. Many of its members were not comfortable with these methods and formed the GSPC in 1998, while others laid down their arms as a response to a Government amnesty in 1999. The GSPC was the responsible of kidnappings and attacks in Algerian soil directed to Algerian and foreign targets, including the kidnapping of thirty-two Europeans in 2003. The adherence of the GSPC to Al-Qaeda was the result of years of negotiation that ended in the formation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006. This 'blessed union' was announced by Ayman al-Zawahiri in an online video in 2007. The merger provided the Algeria-based group with an international profile.

AQIM expanded its area of action to Mali, Mauritania, Niger and parts of Chad. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (a.k.a. *Abdelmalek Droukdal*) is the *emir*, or leader of AQIM.<sup>1</sup> While his whereabouts remain unknown, he has led substantial operations in southern Algeria, for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment (*in absentia*). Among his commanders are Yahia Djaouadi, *emir* of the Saharan zone and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, considered to be responsible of most of the kidnappings of foreigners in Niger and Mali. Djaouadi replaced Mokhtar Belmokhtar, 'the Touareg', an Algerian national who moved to north Mali broadening the scope of action of the GSPC. From its Saharan refuge Belmokhtar leads attacks in Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

AQIM has recently replaced Djaouadi for Nabil Makhlaoui (aka Abou Alghama) as emir of the Saharan zone. Sources indicate that the move took place in mid-November 2011. It is believed that Droukdel tasked Abou Alghama with overcoming the divisions among the different AQIM factions, battalions and brigades in the Sahel and further developing the strategies of the Emirate. In fact, Abu Zeid and Belmokhtar compete for power and control of the Sahelian zone. It is said that the former has a stronger ideological adherence to Al-Qaeda, and the

latter is more of an 'opportunist';<sup>ii</sup> yet the large sums of money that Belmokhtar has raised for AQIM through smuggling operations cannot be neglected. Another salient figure is Abu Anas al-Shanqiti, 'the Mauritanian', who joined Belmokhtar and the GSPC in 2006 and commands AQMI operations in the border area of Mauritania, Mali and Algeria.

The North of Mali and Mauritania offered AQIM a fruitful source of recruits for the *jihad*. Mauritania was the scenario where, in December 2007, four French tourists were assassinated by a group of people linked to AQIM. The following year, gunmen attacked the Israeli Embassy in Nouakchott and twelve soldiers were killed in an ambush. In 2009, the French Embassy was the target of a suicide bomb attack for which AQIM claimed responsibility. Later that year, two Italians and three Spaniards were kidnapped by AQIM in southeastern Mauritania, and taken to Mali. In 2010 AQIM kidnapped eight persons in Niger in two separate operations, including five French nationals, of which its captors killed one. This year, two French hostages taken in Niamey were killed during the rescue attempt, one Italian woman was kidnapped in southern Algeria and a number of attacks by AQIM were prevented in Bamako and Nouakchott.

On the 24th November, two French nationals were kidnapped in their hotel in Hombori, North Mali. The following day, four tourists were attacked in Timbuktu, including two Dutch and one British who were kidnapped, and a German national who was murdered as he resisted the attack. These attacks were revendicated by AQMI. At the moment of writing this paper, twelve westerners are held by AQMI in the Sahel Region.

# ***Organization's Strategies and Tactics***

The kidnapping of western nationals has represented a lucrative business for AQIM.<sup>iii</sup> Many European governments succumbed to their monetary demands in exchange of the liberation of their fellow nationals, which in turn promoted the use of this method. In one case, the refusal of the British government to pay ransom ended in the killing of the hostage, Edwin Dyer. Yet many praised the position of the British government, acknowledging that ransoms would only contribute to the strengthening of the terrorist organization.

In some cases the organization demanded for the release of some of its members from African and European prisons. For example, in April 2009, two hostages kidnapped alongside Dyer, a German and a Swiss woman, were released along with a Canadian diplomat and his aide (taken in a separate kidnapping) allegedly in exchange of four AQIM imprisoned fighters. In fact, Dyer was indeed executed after the British government refused to release Omar Mahmoud Othman (a.k.a *Abu Qatada*), a Jordanian believed to be Al-Qaeda's spiritual leader in Europe, who was imprisoned in Britain shortly after the 2005 London bombings.<sup>iv</sup>

Beyond the financial reward or exchange of prisoners, AQIM benefited from international media attention, which served the objective of spreading its *jihadist* messages. Torres-Soriano (2011)<sup>v</sup> has analyzed the evolution of the discourse of AQIM. He finds a 'globalization' of the discourse especially after the merger of the GSPC with Al-Qaeda. While the GSPC produced mainly Algeria-centred messages, AQIM made an effort to link its activities with the Palestinian struggle and the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan with the objective of increasing the attraction of potential recruits to the organization.

AQIM has also been trying to strengthen its presence through the establishment of tribal alliances. Presenting itself as a protector and providing financial incentives, the organization has sought to secure a pool of *jihadists* that operate not only in the region but also in Iraq and Afghanistan. The exposition of *jihadist* fighters of the Maghreb to those contexts and their participation in trainings in different settings has resulted in the 'import' and increase in the use of tactics such as the use of explosives and suicide bombs.

Touareg tribes in Mali and Niger have cooperated with AQIM, selling abducted foreigners and participated in the negotiations for their release. The marriages of Belmokhtar with a young Malian woman from an Arab family, and two girls of Touareg and Brabiche Arab tribes are examples of how far the organization is ready to go in order to benefit from local communities and networks. This strategy endows AQIM not only with freedom of movement but it has also provided the organization access to smuggling and other lucrative illegal activities in the region.

Drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism are major threats in West Africa, a major transit area to and from neighbouring Europe. The vast Sahelian geography and the incapacity of the States to control border areas have been highly advantageous for illegal and terrorist organizations. These vulnerabilities are enhanced by an ineffective rule of law and a lack of adequate coordination and information sharing among neighbouring countries. The links between AQIM's terrorist activities and the trafficking of drugs, people and arms are evident, to the point of considering AQIM a 'hybrid' organization: concerned as much with the global *jihadist* ideology as with smuggling. As pointed out by the Security Council Special Research Report on the Emerging Security Threats in West Africa, 'negative trends due to structural deficiencies in the region have meant that the smuggling of arms, drugs and contraband, widespread corruption and poor governance can be exploited by terrorist organizations' operatives, and the lines between Islamic militancy and organized crime and piracy can become blurred' (2011: 2-3).<sup>vi</sup>

While it is clear that the organization has benefited from illegal activities such as trafficking of arms, drugs and people, the degree of implication of different cells in these businesses varies, showing a tension within the organization between the more ideological branches on one side and the more opportunistic on the other. Structural poverty, lack of State presence and a general lack of opportunities drive many West Africans towards illicit activities and radical messages.

# ***The regional context and players***

The Sahelian region has been observing during the last decades an alarming demographic growth that creates tensions around the access of rural populations to the scarce available resources to secure their livelihoods. Together with the effects of climate change, they contribute to the recurrent food crises and increasing vulnerability of the inhabitants of this part of the world. Many leave the rural areas to look for jobs in the cities. Yet urban areas are not being able to accommodate this influx of migrants and to provide them with the necessary means to satisfy their needs. Their lack of integration and exclusion is a fertile soil for potential instability and violent revindications.<sup>vii</sup> In many of the Sahelian countries, unemployment affects around 40% of the workforce. In this context, it is no surprise that young unemployed can often feel attracted to radical preachers or illegal activities.

On the other hand, the less populated Sahelo-Saharan areas have been the least benefited from socio-economic development. At the same time, the peace accords between the central governments and insurgent groups (i.e. *touaregs* and other disaffected ethnic groups) have not satisfied all expectations. Desert regions only allow for nomadic pastoralism and small subsistence farming in oasis. The extraction of minerals, such as uranium in Niger, is highly mechanized and generates only a small number of jobs. Not only the inability of governments to patrol such vast areas is beneficial to the development of illegal activities, but also governance is being compromised as security agents and government officials get immersed in a corruption network that seeks to ensure safe passage of smuggled goods.

The Taoudénit desert, which stretches through Mauritania, Mali and Algeria, is thus a propitious scenario for smuggling and other AQIM activities such as the establishment of mobile training camps. The cooperation between *touareg* tribes and AQIM is mutually beneficial. The collaboration between the two groups aids them to avoid law enforcement officials and to maintain their right to operate in that territory. This lucrative partnership will be hardly affected by peace deals between *touaregs* and Nigerien or Malian governments.

It could be said that until 2009 Malian authorities did not take an energetic stance towards fighting AQIM. Small and poorly equipped, the capacities of the Malian military to secure the area are low, and authorities restrained from stirring animosities among *touareg* rebels. In exchange, AQIM did not carry out attacks in Malian soil, but used it as its safe haven and



platform from which to conduct operations. However, after the assassination of hostage Edwin Dyer in Mali international pressure augmented. Joint military counter-terrorist operations were established by Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger, in April 2010. This initiative permitted the Mauritanian air force to attack suspected Al-Qaeda militant bases in Mali, in 2010, when kidnappers crossed to the country with seven foreigners that had been abducted in Niger. Yet the engagement of each of these countries to the joint initiative varies, resulting in weak results.

Although the advances brought in by this partnership are meagre, it did help countries like France and the US to be more assertive in the fight against the terrorist organization. After AQIM announced the killing of French engineer Michel Germaneau, in July 2010, French Prime Minister, Francois Fillon, declared France's war with Al-Qaeda. French-backed attacks of Malian military to AQIM around Tessalit and Toumbuctu followed suit. France directly supported the incursions of the Mauritanian army to attack AQIM bases in Northern Mali.<sup>viii</sup>

The increase of attacks to French targets and Mauritanian forces is contingent with the resolution of the French government to support their Mauritanian counterparts in their fight against the terrorist group. AQIM accuses Mauritania and its president, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz, to be an "agent of France". Mauritania's fight against terrorism has been indeed reinforced since the coming of Ould Abdel Aziz to power. The Mauritanian government has adopted a new anti-terrorist strategy that allows for 'preventive attacks'. Great Britain has also provided technical support for the training of specialised anti-terrorist units of the Mauritanian army. A new "West Sahel Project" launched in January 2012 and funded by the EU in partnership with the Spanish Guardia Civil intends to build Mauritanian capacity to monitor the country's land borders. The project will inject around 2 million Euros to boost security and migration management and to encourage regional cooperation among Sahelian countries.

Nonetheless, Algeria continues to be the main target of attacks and operations. Between July 7<sup>th</sup> and August 29<sup>th</sup> only, the Algerian security forces were attacked thirty-two times, killing and injuring more than two hundred people. The Algerian government has been accused of exaggerating the "terrorist threat" in order to access and keep logistical and political support from the United States. The American government has increased its investment in the AFRICOM, which has the objective of deploying troops to hotspots if necessary, training counter-insurgent and anti smuggling units and to better prepare governments in their fight against terrorism. AFRICOM has conducted military trainings in places like Tamanrasset

(southern Algeria) and Gao (Mali). A joint operational military command (CEMOC) was set up in April 2010 by Algeria, Mauritania, Niger and Mali, with base in Tamanrasset.

Even so, in the case of Algeria, the country not only counts with significant security capabilities but has also a solid experience in the fight against terrorist groups. While Algeria remains the main target of AQIM attacks, the government hit back killing or imprisoning important commanders and dismantling many of its terrorist cells. This has contributed to a rise in the activities of AQIM in the Sahelian countries.

# ***Regional Dynamics***

As many analysts point out, while the organization does show a much complex and coordinated action in Algeria, the kidnapping of westerners in the Sahelo-Saharan region does not imply, *per se*, an increase in the organization's capacity to strike. It might just imply a need to raise money and get international attention, or be the result of internal power struggles.

The internal fractures within AQIM lead us to question the real cohesion of the organization. Its activities in the Sahel region seem to better reflect the action of different cells with varied driving forces rather than a coordinated action with a clear identity and rationale. An example is the abduction of three Western humanitarian aid workers last October in the Polisario refugee camp in Rabuni (southern Algeria). This attack was claimed by a dissident group called Jamat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Garbi Afriqqiya (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa). The defections within AQMI might reflect the different motivations and / or weak allegiance of the new generation of recruits and leaders to the central command (i.e. the case of the Mauritanian Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, alias Abou Qumqum, who was seeking to create his own dissident group in response to discrepancies with the Algerian command of AQMI). Furthermore, the links of these groups with trafficking is a source of concern by many, who question the consistency of these activities with Islam.

While the actions of AQIM in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania and Niger are more evident, the presence of the organization in other countries is less clear. The capacity of AQIM to have an influence in North African countries like Morocco, Tunisia and Libya has been very limited. Since the 2003 bombings in Casablanca, the Moroccan security forces have dismantled many *jihadist* cells. Moroccan authorities admit that these cells serve to recruit fighters for the *jihad* in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the evidence of their link to AQIM is scarce. Even if two Austrian tourists were kidnapped in Tunisia earlier this year, the action is interpreted in isolation and not related to an augmentation of AQIM's presence in that country. However, in a meeting in Bamako, in May 2011, the foreign ministries of Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania, agreed on the need to associate and coordinate actions with their Moroccan and Tunisian counterparts, for the fight against Al-Qaeda in the region to succeed.

In the case of Libya, although there is no evidence of links between AQIM and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, rumours circulated of missing weapons from Gaddafi's regime being smuggled out of the country by Al-Qaeda. It is believed that the weapons, including advanced surface-to-air missiles, were taken to North Mali through Algeria. The president of Chad, Idriss Deby, declared last March to be '100% sure' that AQIM managed to smuggle these arms out of Libya. The possession of these weapons would provide significant muscle to AQIM when responding to Mauritanian air strikes.

The presence of AQIM in Chad is not strong, yet not inexistent. The organization is believed to be linked with drugs and arms trafficking, yet no attack was perpetrated in Chadian territory. Like its neighbor countries, Chad offers a vast terrain, especially in the North, where the state has very limited presence and control. This benefits smuggling and drug trafficking coming from Nigeria and transiting Chad in its route to Libya and Europe, or through Egypt to the Middle East. Early this year, vehicles transporting drugs and their armed Algerian, Nigerian and Malian passengers were detained while driving through the Tibesti region, in their way to Egypt. Chad has not only received the military support of France but also that of the US in the fight against terrorism and extremism.<sup>ix</sup>

The neglected North of Chad is home to the '*Toubous*', a nomad and pastoralist ethnic group<sup>x</sup> who inhabit the Region of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti. The National Toubou Council is an organization that seeks a Toubou state. Many young Toubous have participated in the Libyan conflict. Organizations like AQIM could take advantage of their return, probably armed, their disaffection and their knowledge of the terrain. In any case, the North-West of Chad is being considered by many analysts as the country's new hot spot.<sup>xi</sup>

While there has not been an official declaration of a strategic partnership, it is known that Nigeria's Islamist militant group, Boko Haram, has been reinforcing its ties with Al-Shabab and AQIM. Last August, Boko Haram took responsibility of two suicide bombings carried out in Abuja, one against Nigeria's police headquarters and the other targeting a UN building. The latter cost the lives of twenty-three people and injured eighty. The Nigerian authorities believed that the terrorists involved with the attacks were trained by Al-Shabab and AQIM. Near two-hundred and fifty people were killed by attacks linked to Boko Haram since the beginning of January 2012. The development of these terrorist alliances can significantly increase the potential impact of terrorist activities in the region.

Senegal's religious tolerance is not a fertile soil for Islamist extremism. However, AQIM has indeed been trying to set up networks and transit points. Cooperation between the Senegalese government and the US permitted the identification of terrorist groups operating within the country, although the lack of counter-terrorism legislation does not facilitate prosecution. Dormant cells are believed to exist in Guinea-Bissau and Burkina Faso. Burkinabé authorities have issued a communiqué last September warning all diplomatic missions and international organizations of the raising menace of Al-Qaeda in the Sahel. The next section will explore the possible consequences of the death of Bin Laden for Al-Qaeda and its franchises.

# ***Al-Qaeda in the post-Bin Laden Era***

The particular context in which Al-Qaeda was created and evolved changed considerably as a consequence of Osama Bin Laden's death, on May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011. The experience of past decades shows that the validity and strengths of terrorist organizations and movements are influenced by external and internal elements that bring them either to decay or to regenerate. When the contextual specificities that brought about a terrorist organization or movement cease to exist - or become less significant- organizations usually go through generational changes that often cause internal power struggles. In addition, they might eventually associate with other organizations that may not follow the same political '*leitmotivs*' or goals (e.g. criminal organizations), which contributes to changing the original political or ideological aspiration for mere criminal objectives. Or else, the security forces of national governments are able to reduce substantially their capacities, or even, eliminate them. In any case, history teaches that nothing is permanent in world affairs.

As a result of Bin Laden's death, Al-Qaeda faces a decisive moment in which it needs to confront several challenges in order to assure its survival. In the past, the organization has shown its chameleonic capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and particular contexts. A realistic analysis shows that Al-Qaeda still possesses this ability. However, the *post-Bin Laden era* opens many questions and challenges its mutation and adaptation capabilities.

The appointment and recognition, on June 16<sup>th</sup>, of the former deputy of Osama Bin Laden, the Egyptian Ayman Mohammed Rable al-Zawahiri, as the new leader of Al-Qaeda is a move that maintains the *status quo* at the highest levels of the organization. However, al-Zawahiri is no competitor against the messianic vision, authority and charisma of his predecessor. Bin Laden's character and personality, associated to a prolific relationship and admiration by Al-Qaeda affiliates, forged subordination, commitment and loyalty around him. The cult to Bin Laden will survive his death, yet it remains unclear whether this will be a cohesive factor or, on the contrary, it will contribute to further decentralisation and trigger fragmentation within Al-Qaeda. Al-Zawahiri also needs to overcome a shortfall of funds, a situation aggravated by the death of Bin Laden. In this sense, the Sahara becomes an important source of financing.

The specific contexts in which the different franchises operate, and their regional alliances, will ultimately determine the level of influence that the central leadership of Al-Qaeda can exert on them. The death of al-Zawahiri's lieutenant, the Libyan Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, on the August 22<sup>nd</sup>, represents an additional constraint to the already complex situation within Al-Qaeda's leadership, as al-Zawahiri was relying greatly on him in the *post-Bin Laden era*. Trusted by Bin Laden to oversee Al-Qaeda's daily operations, Atiyah was a consequential figure for the organization.

There is no doubt about the commitment of the different franchises to the cause of Al-Qaeda. Yet it appears that the decentralization process has been amplified in the past years making the alliance fragile and volatile. Their own networks, tribal links and ethnic connections, added to the personality of the 'franchise leaders', shape their capacity to survive and maintain their funding base and patronage systems. The risk of Al-Qaeda losing cohesion among its affiliates is therefore significant. However, we should not underestimate the prestige and legitimacy that the franchises gain from their association with Al-Qaeda's global cause.

# ***AQIM in Mauritania***

Mauritania is at the crossroads of various cultures, histories and peoples. Since ancient times, and due its geographical position as a hub between north (Maghreb, Europe) and south (Africa), Mauritania has been at the intersection of a variety of actors and interests. This strategic position, added to the poor governance and fragility of the state, the inability to exercise its sovereign power over this territory and its largely uncontrolled borders, are a fertile ground for the development of illegal trade networks and activities.

Smuggling has played a major role in the regional economy for decades, holding a fragile balance among its inhabitants and representing a survival mechanism in a place that lacks economic resources (despite the its natural wealth) and has been historically neglected, from the colonial times through the independence period, until today. Since the 1980s and 1990s, and contingent with the expansion of the cocaine traffic from South American drugs cartels, Mauritania has acquired a more prominent and central role in the network of illegal trade that substantially changed its importance due the high profit of the business. Consequences of these developments are the increasing corruption and the weakening of the already fragile state.

The stalemate of the Western Sahara conflict and the decomposition of the Polisario Front contributed to an increase of criminality in the area. There is clear evidence<sup>xii</sup> showing connections between the Polisario Front and organized crime, the former becoming not only increasingly involved in drugs, weapons, and human trafficking but also strengthening its connections with AQIM. As a result, Mauritania has become a pivotal zone for different actors taking advantage of a vast ungovernable area and trying to gain the maximum profit from it.

The following are contributing factor for AQIM to establish, develop alliances and expand:

- I. The vast Mauritanian geography, with highly porous borders, makes control difficult for the central government. This provides AQIM and its partners with an ample room for manoeuvring.
- II. The growth of AQIM has been associated in recent years to the development of criminal networks, which have been financially consequential for its expansion. As we noted earlier, the lucrative business of kidnapping foreigners provided the



organization with substantial financial benefits and international visibility, consequently attracting new recruits.

- III. Lacking a formal and strong structure in Mauritania, the mechanisms used by AQIM and the criminal networks are mutually reinforcing. Often criminal gangs adopt the Al-Qaeda style and rhetoric while AQIM uses these networks to perpetrate its actions.<sup>xiii</sup>
- IV. AQIM cooperates with the different tribes supporting historical grievances against the central state. The role of the tribal system remains fundamental to understand the political, economic and social conditions of the environment in which AQIM operates. Should there not be such system it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for AQIM to function.

We believe, however, that the connection of AQIM and its messages with criminal networks, tribes and local inhabitants is structurally fragile. The political agenda pursued by AQIM in Mauritania does not match with that of its temporary allies. Nonetheless the alliances serve AQIM to gain financial profits and, at the same time, nurture its political agenda and objectives.

Despite the efforts made by AQIM to secure a high profile and affiliation in Mauritania, and in spite of the fertile ground for its expansion, the organization has not been able to establish permanent cells in the country nor has it been capable of building a strong foundation that would allow it to increase its presence – as in other neighbouring countries.

Since the integration of the GSPC, the discourse and actions of the organization have sought greater media impact. By aligning its actions with Al-Qaeda and the global *jihad* the organization tried to combine its particular regional objectives with those pursued by Al-Qaeda globally. This double approach seems to have benefited AQIM presence in Mauritania, where western and national interests were targeted, attracting international visibility as well as recognition among Al-Qaeda affiliates. As we noted earlier, there was a significant increase in attacks in Mauritanian soil since the merger of the GSPC with Al-Qaeda. While these episodes might indicate that AQIM has been able to build a wide network inside the country, this is questioned by the numerous failed attacks of recent times, particularly since 2010.

Since the beginning of the present millennium, and more specifically from 2002 onwards, Mauritania has closely collaborated with the United States against the terrorist threat. The country received substantial support and military training to fight Al-Qaeda and its local franchise. In fact, the current Mauritanian President, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, was the commander of the forces sent by President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi to capture Salafist militants responsible for the killing of four French tourists in December 2007. Since 2009 France has heavily reinforced its military cooperation with Mauritania to combat AQIM, strengthening the existing historical ties between the two states. France's support and its declaration of war against Al-Qaeda served AQIM to legitimize its actions against the Mauritanian Government and its military positions.

In 2010 AQIM introduced a new method to create terror, bringing a new dimension and perspective to its actions in Mauritania. Using suicide bombers and targeting security forces and military positions, AQIM mirrored the actions of Al-Qaeda in other parts of the globe. At the end of August 2010 a suicide bomber tried to attack a military base using a vehicle packed with explosives. Again in February 2011 a plot to kill President Abdel Aziz and to attack other targets with three vehicles full of explosives was foiled by the security forces.

However, far from achieving their objective, these actions discredited the organization in the eyes of the local population thus reducing overall support. In addition, as the organization gets more connected with criminal activities and disconnects with the ideological discourse as justification of its actions, its tactics are subject to increasing criticism and rejection by religious leaders in the Maghreb and Sahel, which leaves AQIM at odds with its global discourse.

Various factors contribute to a lack of identification of the Mauritanian society with AQIMs message. First, the progressive islamization of parts of the Mauritanian middle class since the 1990s did not imply a systematic radicalization of the country. This does not mean that Mauritania escaped from the regional tendencies, but radical Islam was thwarted to certain extent by the strong tribalism and the powerful brotherhoods that permeate social and religious structures.<sup>xiv</sup> Second, Islam has been conceived as the fundamental pillar of the Mauritanian state, consequently it is considered as an integral part of its power. Hence, AQIM is perceived as an external threat that must be fought against. The discourse and rhetoric of AQIM is therefore at odds with the state and its structure. Third, the deep influence and

presence of Sufism in Mauritania, antithetical to Salafism, might have contributed to prevent AQIM's message to appeal the population.<sup>xv</sup>

Importantly, the actions perpetrated by AQIM on Mauritanian soil had an enormous negative impact on the economy, and particularly hit the tourist sector on which many Mauritians relied. The kidnappings of western nationals and demands of ransom generated a general fear and sense of insecurity that created a significant decline of the tourist business affecting the population that had in tourism its livelihoods. The presence of terrorists is also blamed for the rise of market prices and the reduction of commercial exchanges between the East of Mauritania and the North of Mali. The presence and actions of AQIM are therefore bringing no benefit. On the contrary, they are perceived as the cause of the loss of jobs and income generation activities for sectors of the population that see in AQIM a threat to their survival.

Finally, Islam is a powerful force for cohesion in a difficult and complex coexistence of the different ethnicities and cultures in Mauritania, having an important substrate in the short roots and limited acceptance of the ideological discourse of AQIM. Mauritania has been characterized for professing a tolerant form of Islam. Straddling the Arab and the Black Africa, this open and receptive Islam was instrumental to overcome the different cultural identities and provide legitimacy to the new Mauritanian state after independence.

The *Moors*<sup>xvi</sup> have always controlled power and access to the country's resources, while the majority of *Black Mauritians*<sup>xvii</sup> have been historically deprived. Furthermore, a growing fragmentation and rapid growth of the population increased marginalization and risks to legitimize potential alliances between different actors in a resources-driven struggle against the State (and the *status quo*). Recent violent protests denouncing racial discrimination in the census process are not only a reminder of racial fissures, but more importantly, they reflect how the Mauritanian society is changing as these events would have been unthinkable of in past decades. Despite these ethnical disparities, the Mauritanian population is proud to resist to imported Islamist ideas<sup>xviii</sup> and has openly denounced the acts of violence perpetrated by AQIM.

All these elements contribute to explain why AQIM's ideology and actions did not ferment as it was expected in the potentially fertile ground of Mauritania. Moreover, the Arab Spring has delegitimized the actions of AQIM in Mauritania while it brings to light the corrosive effects of the presence of the group in its territory.

# *Conclusion*

The real essence of AQIM presence in Mauritania is a complex combination of a variety of elements and different variables. To define a clear delimitation between the different groups and interests present in Mauritania and AQIM is not an easy or even useful exercise. On the contrary, the Byzantine puzzle made of all the actors and their interrelations make it difficult to demarcate one from the other. Criminal gangs, traditional smuggling networks and AQIM are heavily dependent from one another, and all engaged in lucrative businesses. This interdependence has raised growing concerns regarding AQIMs strategy, not only in the international community but also among Islamic religious leaders in the Maghreb and Sahel regions. Many imams in the region reject the illicit and obscure activities in which AQIM is involved. The religious discredit and the economic harm caused by their methods are solid grounds against AQIM. Furthermore, the civilian victims and collateral damage caused by the suicide attacks do not contribute to popular support and recognition.

Yet, the criticism and rejection received from the religious leaders, and the perceptions of Mauritians cannot, alone, explain the limited success of AQIM in the country. Ould Abdel Aziz has made the fight against terrorism one of his priorities, and has certainly used this determination to get international support (while Mauritanian opposition groups denounce it as a strategy to fight internal enemies, control religious groups and restructure the army). The military, intelligence and financial support received from the United States and the European countries, have augmented considerably the pressure over AQIM, reducing its room of manoeuvre within Mauritania.

The effort made by AQIM to increase its presence in Mauritania shows a clear determination to focus primarily in its own natural environment. Territorially concentrated and limited, AQIM relies for its functioning and survival on its local networks and its capacity to recruit new members offering attractive economics rewards in a region dominated by the lack of opportunities.

AQIM has, as any other organization, its internal disputes and fissures that put at risk its own roots and legitimacy. At the heart of these internal tensions is the question of how aligned are its tactics and funding sources with its ideological message. This has limited the capacity of the organization to establish a firm structure in Mauritania. However, we are far from the end

of the organization. The evolution of alliances with other extremist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabab, its access to dangerous weapons and its potential capacity to enlist fighters coming back from Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya should not be underestimated.

# Notes & References:

---

<sup>i</sup> The Algerian territory is subdivided into different regions (*wilayas*), each of them led by one *emir*, and all of them under the command of a national *emir*. This system was used by the GSPC and the GIA, and it is thought to evolve from territorial divisions drawn by the National Liberation Front (FNL) in their independence struggle.

<sup>ii</sup> "Special Report: AQIM; *The Devolution of al Qaeda's North Africa Node*". STRATFOR Global Intelligence, August 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> The profits made by AQIM since its creation are estimated in approximately 50 million Euros. However, this figure might fall short if we consider that only last month the group is said to have released two Spanish hostages for about 8 million Euros.

<sup>iv</sup> In February 2009 Algeria and Mauritania recalled their ambassadors to Mali after Mali released an Algerian AQIM member in exchange for a French hostage. Yet France also put pressure on Mauritania to release prisoners in exchange for Michel Germaneau.

<sup>v</sup> Manuel R. Torres Soriano (2011); "The Evolution of the Discourse of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Themes, Countries and Individuals". *Mediterranean Politics*, 16:2, 279-298.

<sup>vi</sup> Security Council Report (2011); "Emerging Security Threats in West Africa". Special Research Report; No. 1, 2 May 2011.

<sup>vii</sup> Jean-Bernard Véron (2011), "Les acteurs de l'aide au développement face à la montée de l'insécurité dans les pays du Sahel", *Humanitaire* [online], 28, published on July 20<sup>th</sup> 2011. <http://humanitaire.revues.org/index1017.html>

<sup>viii</sup> Last June, for example, a raid was conducted by Mauritanian forces against an AQIM camp in Northwestern Mali. The operation, that benefitted from the assistance of the Malian army, resulted in the death of 15 AQIM members.

<sup>ix</sup> Chad is involved in the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP), an initiative of the US Government to enhance regional coordination and capabilities to combat extremism, and has received over US\$ 8 million in military assistance from the US Department of Defense's Operation Enduring Freedom – Trans-Sahara.

<sup>x</sup> Composed by 36 tribes.

<sup>xi</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG); "*Chad's North West: The Next High-risk Area?*". [online] Nairobi/Brussels, published on February 17th 2011 <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/central-africa/chad/B78-chads-north-west-the-next-high-risk-area.aspx>

<sup>xii</sup> Laurence Aida Ammour (2010), "*Mauritania en la Encrucijada de las Amenazas Regionales*", CIDOB, October.

<sup>xiii</sup> Sahel and West Africa Club; "*Vulnerabilities and Factors of Insecurity in the Sahel*". August 2010.

---

<sup>xiv</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG); “*L’islamisme en Afrique du Nord IV : contestation islamiste en Mauritanie : menace ou bouc émissaire?*”. Rapport Moyen-Orient / Afrique du Nord, Mai 2005.

<sup>xv</sup> “Special Report: AQIM; “*The Devolution of al Qaeda’s North Africa Node*”. STRATFOR Global Intelligence, August 2010.

<sup>xvi</sup> Which include the White Moors (Beydhan) and the Black Moors (former slaves) of Arab culture.

<sup>xvii</sup> Which include different non-Arab ethnic groups such as *Soninke, Haalpularen* and *Wolof*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibidem, International Crisis Group.