



# Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb a Meta Strategy of Survival

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**In the last decade, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) managed to survive despite suffering four major fragmentations. There are several drivers behind the group's survival.**

Since the French military intervention in 2013, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been considerably weakened on its Sahelian front. Nevertheless, the recent creation in March 2017 of *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen* with the merger of Ansar Dine, the Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and *Al-Mourabitoune* demonstrates its resilience and adaptability to the regional constraints. Furthermore, AQIM still has a capacity to launch terrorist attacks in North and West Africa.

How has AQIM managed to survive for the past decade despite experiencing fragmentation and numerous losses in battles with the Sahel-Sahara regional security forces? Its resilience seems counter-intuitive but AQIM has managed to survive so far for several reasons, which this article will explore. But not before a brief overview of the group's origins.

### AQIM's origins

AQIM is a transformation of the *Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat* (GSPC), an Algerian jihadist group created in 1998. At that time, the GSPC was trying to survive and to find a new legitimacy after the murderous civil war in Algeria, notably caused by Islamist hardliners and jihadist groups. The GSPC was in crisis because of its lack of support from the population, the numerous defections of members due to the amnesty proposed by the Algerian

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government, and the losses caused by the clashes with the Algerian security forces.

To survive and renew its forces, the leadership decided to internationalize its rhetoric to connect with the younger generations willing to fight a global jihad, particularly after the American intervention in Iraq in 2003. After a merger with Al-Qaeda, the GSPC changed its name to AQIM in 2007. However, the group continues to be strongly attached to regional and local realities despite its apparent allegiance to a global jihad. In 2007 [Jean-Luc Marret](#) described AQIM as a “glocal” group.

### **Survival and fragmentations**

In a [recent paper](#) published in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, I described the leadership’s preference for survival as “the meta-strategy of survival”. As with other strategies, the “meta-strategy of survival” is a dialectical process between the goal(s) – in this case the survival of the group – and the means used for the realization of these goals. I prefer the use of this concept rather than just calling the group “opportunistic” or “pragmatic”. The latter descriptions can neither capture the logic of decision-making within the group, nor help us to understand the clash of preferences between members and the concomitance of resilience and fragmentation in the AQIM’s history.

AQIM has survived four significant fragmentation periods:

- 1) the departure of “Algerianist” jihadists in the first years of the group, between 2005 and 2007;
- 2) the defection of Sahelian members and the creation of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) in 2011;

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3) the departure of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the historical emirs of AQIM in December 2012 (even if it seems he came back once again);

4) and the defection of the emir Abdelmalek Gouri pledging allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) and creating, in September 2014, the group *Jund al-Khilafah* (“Soldiers of the Caliphate”).

These fragmentations were caused by polarization of the “**preference divergence**” conceptualized by Shapiro which means that the leadership and the local emirs on the ground are not interpreting and, in some cases, not even adhering to the logic of the meta-strategy of survival. They have different personal agendas, different beliefs and/or different information coming from the field.

At the same time, the leadership of AQIM is trapped in what Shapiro calls, “**the terrorist’s dilemma**.” This means the leadership wants to keep control of the group without threatening its operatives in the field. In the case of AQIM, the leadership decided to maintain centralized power in an ambiguous way. In our last paper, we called this power structure “**the centralized and deconcentrated power**.” However, this structure is confronted with the reality of field. Despite the organizational power structure, local emirs keep an important autonomy because of the fluid and multiple constraints and opportunities in their environments. And this tension – between the power structure and the realities in the field – can explain some fragmentations, particularly in the case of Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

### **Contexts of survival**

Despite the fragmentations, the group survived because its local emirs and members operating in the Sahel-Saharan region developed good relations with their local

environments. As [Ducol and Campana](#) said, jihadist safe heavens, like in Northern Mali or Southern Libya, need to be interpreted as a social space. The local emirs, their lieutenants and the members of their *katiba* (brigades), developed networks, pragmatic alliances, matrimonial alliances with the local communities and connections in the economic illicit activities of the Sahel-Sahara region, particularly in Northern Mali. One example, commonly used, is that [Belmokhtar](#) married a woman from a [Berabiche Arab tribe of northern Mali](#).

For the last decade, the group negotiated the liberation of hostages with important Tuareg figures playing the role of brokers in the Malian case. [Iyad Ag Gali](#), a Tuareg militant, is the best-known broker between the Malian government and jihadist groups.

During the rebellion, AQIM demonstrated an ability to work with local components of the society in northern Mali such as [Iyad Ag Ghali](#) and his group: [Ansar Dine](#). This was possible because some parts of the population considered AQIM to be legitimate. This was particularly true in the case of the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Gao. Some of the locals accepted the MUJAO and AQIM out of fear, for financial incentives, or because they considered these groups as the lesser evil when compared to the state and the Tuareg rebels, particularly in [some parts of the Songhai communities in Gao](#).

Some were also convinced of AQIM's legitimacy for ideological reasons. When the armed groups conquered the Northern Mali, the jihadist groups tried to demonstrate their ethics and sense of justice to the populations. Some testimonies that I collected in Mali between 2016 and 2017, even in the Tuareg elites from Timbuktu and Kidal, mentioned that a large proportion of their respective communities' trust AQIM more than French troops.

Somehow, the meta-strategy of survival was compatible with the logic of the precarious alliances characterizing the fluid dynamics in northern Mali, particularly during the last Tuareg rebellion in 2012. In a [previous paper co-written with Professor Campana](#) published in *Mediterranean Politics*, we identified three intra-organizational and inter-organizational mechanisms explaining the constant reconfigurations of the alliances during the last rebellion in northern Mali:

- 1) brokerage,
- 2) competition
- 3) and shifting alliances.

These three mechanisms are partly explained by the volatility and high contingency of the northern Mali and Sahel-Saharan region. However, we did not develop on the causes of the “high contingency” of the environment and it is particularly hard to identify the underlying reasons.

### **Tactical elites and fluid conflictual contexts**

What I can add after months of field research in Mali between 2016 and 2017 is that the contingency and high volatility of the Malian context can be partly explained by the behavioral paradigm shared by the local actors, particularly the Malian elites (officers, *cadres*, and leaders of the armed groups). Drawing on the research, my impression is that these elites are highly tactical but not necessarily strategic in their decision-making. The lack of resources (a reality in the region) is strongly present in their actions, which seem to be guided by their will to get “a piece of the Malian cake.” Everyone, even in Bamako, seems to act with the short term in mind and tries to increase their relative

power. Guichaoua named this configuration: the “bricolage.” Thus, the conflicts and the resolution of the conflicts in northern Mali seem to be trapped in a vicious circle when the power balance is constantly renegotiated between the different actors.

Finally, smuggling is also key in the resilience of the regional jihadist groups. The “drug barons” help actors guarantee the best climate for the continuation of their illicit activities. In 2012, they helped the armed groups and, among them, the jihadist groups. Political instability can reinforce the climate of impunity. However, too many conflicts between the different armed groups can also threaten the drug barons’ economic activities. The lack of state control can be advantageous for the barons, but it is even better for them to control the state institutions by corrupting its members and through gaining elected by buying the local votes. These barons become notable and “respected figures” in northern Mali, integrating the different Malian institutions. They have changed the social norms, being accepted by parts of the different communities. In studies conducted a few years ago by Judith Scheele and Ines Kohl, the divisions over what is morally acceptable and immoral was still present in the different communities.

My observations and interviews in the last months in Mali and Niger, between 2016 and 2017, suggest that the communal divisions are becoming increasingly blurred. This will be explored further in a forthcoming book chapter discussing the limits and aporia of the “crime-terror nexus” concept. When the norms of the communities are shaped, transformed and accepted, even partially, by locals, it helps local and transnational jihadist groups survive in these “safe heavens.”

As such, simply reinforcing the security forces in the region is not a viable solution by itself to the regional jihadist problem. Beyond military responses, it will be necessary to rebuild the region's social fabric, living conditions and social norms by encouraging debates within and between the ethnic communities and through transforming the cynical activities and attitudes of political elites in the Sahel-Saharan region. Indeed, if the populations and the local elites are not helped by foreign actors to think strategically the social contract, jihadist groups, like AQIM, will be able to survive, develop and continue terrorist attacks in the Sahel region.

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