

North Africa Feared as Staging Ground for Terror



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TUNIS — The plan, hatched for months in the arid mountains of North Africa, was to attack the American and British Embassies here. It ended in a series of gun battles in January that killed a dozen militants and left two Tunisian security officers dead.

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Fayez Nureldine/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

A policeman spoke with a man last Tuesday at a police station in Si Mostapha, Algeria, that had been bombed.

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Algerian Police, left

Amari Saifi, left, is serving a life sentence in Algeria for kidnapping 32 European tourists. Lassad Sassi, above, a militant leader, was killed by Tunisian forces.

But the most disturbing aspect of the violence in this normally placid, tourist-friendly nation is that it came from across the border in [Algeria](#), where an Islamic terrorist organization has vowed to unite radical Islamic groups across North Africa.

Counterterrorism officials on three continents say the trouble in [Tunisia](#) is the latest evidence that a brutal Algerian group with a long history of violence is acting on its promise: to organize extremists across North Africa and join the remnants of [Al Qaeda](#) into a new international force for jihad.

[Last week, the group claimed responsibility for seven nearly simultaneous bombings that destroyed police stations in towns east of Algiers, the Algerian capital, killing six people.]

This article was prepared from interviews with American government and military officials, French counterterrorism officials, Italian counterterrorism prosecutors, Algerian terrorism experts, Tunisian government officials and a Tunisian attorney working with Islamists charged with terrorist activities.

They say North Africa, with its vast, thinly governed stretches of mountain and desert, could become an Afghanistan-like terrorist hinterland within easy striking distance of Europe. That is all the more alarming because of the deep roots that North African communities have in Europe and the ease of travel between the regions. For the United States, the threat is also real because of visa-free travel to American cities for most European passport holders.

The violent Algerian group the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, known by its French initials G.S.P.C., has for several years been under American watch.

“The G.S.P.C. has become a regional terrorist organization, recruiting and operating in all of your countries — and beyond,” Henry A. Crumpton, then the United States ambassador at large for counterterrorism, said at a counterterrorism conference in Algiers last year. “It is forging links with terrorist groups in Morocco, Nigeria, Mauritania, Tunisia and elsewhere.”

Officials say the group is funneling North African fighters to Iraq, but is also turning militants back toward their home countries.

The ambitions of the group are particularly troubling to counterterrorism officials on the watch for the re-emergence of networks that were largely interrupted in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. While most estimates put the current membership of the group in the hundreds, it has survived more than a decade of Algerian government attempts to eradicate it. It is now the best-organized and -financed terrorist group in the region.

Last year, on the fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, Al Qaeda chose the G.S.P.C. as its representative in North Africa. In January, the group reciprocated by switching its name to Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, claiming that

the Qaeda leader, [Osama bin Laden](#), had ordered the change.

“Al Qaeda’s aim is for the G.S.P.C. to become a regional force, not solely an Algerian one,” said the French counterterrorism magistrate, Jean-Louis Bruguière, in Paris. He calls the Algerian group the biggest terrorist threat facing France today.

“We know from cases that we’re working on that the G.S.P.C.’s mission is now to recruit people in Morocco and Tunisia, train them and send them back to their countries of origin or Europe to mount attacks,” he said.

The G.S.P.C. was created in 1998 as an offshoot of the Armed Islamic Group, which along with other Islamist guerrilla forces fought a brutal decade-long civil war after the Algerian military canceled elections in early 1992 because an Islamist party was poised to win.

In 2003, a G.S.P.C. leader in southern Algeria kidnapped 32 European tourists, some of whom were released for a ransom of 5 million euros (about \$6.5 million at current exchange rates), paid by Germany.

Officials say the leader, Amari Saifi, bought weapons and recruited fighters before the United States military helped corner and catch him in 2004. He is now serving a life sentence in Algeria.

Change of Leadership

Since then, an even more radical leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, has taken over the group. The Algerian military says he cut his teeth in the 1990s as a member of the Armed Islamic Group’s feared Ahoual or “horror” company, blamed for some of the most gruesome massacres of Algeria’s civil war.

He announced his arrival with a truck bomb at the country's most important electrical production facility in June 2004, and focused on associating the group with Al Qaeda.

Links to the G.S.P.C. soon began appearing in terrorism cases elsewhere in North Africa and in Europe.

In 2005, Moroccan authorities arrested a man named Anour Majrar, and told Italy and France that he and two other militants had visited G.S.P.C. leaders in Algeria earlier that year.