

Analysis of Suicide Car Attacks in Algeria

On the morning of Wednesday, 11 April 2007, terrorists struck Algerian government buildings in the national capital of Algiers with multiple suicide car bombings. A terrorist organization calling themselves “al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb” claimed responsibility for the operation, the first ever suicide attack in Algeria. Media reports have stated that at least 33 were killed by the bombings, with about 220 injured.ⁱ

The attack comes not long after al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM), formerly the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) announced its merger with the al-Qaeda organization in September 2006. The multiple suicide bombing served two main purposes: it represented a show of strength after the merger, in spite of the ongoing military operations against the group; and a tactical distraction from the concentrated Algerian military effort against the group in the Kabylie region.ⁱⁱ

The merger with al-Qaeda and this latest attack signal a definite change in the group’s strategy as well as the influence of al-Qaeda’s ideology on the group’s tactics. The attacks were a show of force by the group which has been speculated to be weakening in strength. Previous attacks have never targeted such prominent government buildings. The event may indicate a new boldness and aggression in committing such attacks.

The attack appeared to be an attempted triple-bombing, but only two car bombs were successfully detonated. There is no consensus on the exact number of bombings, with some media outlets reporting three bombs and some reporting only two.ⁱⁱⁱ An account by the New York Times related that there had been two successful detonations, with a third, unexploded device discovered by authorities after the attack. This account was later supported by some Algerian news reports.^{iv}

Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb Issues Statement and Video on the Operation

Shortly after the attack, AQLIM claimed responsibility for three bombings. They released the names and pictures of the three alleged suicide bombers; Mu’adz bin Jabal, al Zubayr Abu Sajidah, and Abu Dujanah.

In their statement, AQLIM claimed that the first bombing targeted the Algerian Prime Minister’s office, which shares a compound with the Interior Ministry. The second attack targeted Interpol’s office in Algeria, and the third bombing was against the Algerian Special Forces compound.^v Algeria reported that the bombers struck the Palais du Gouvernement, which houses the Prime Minister’s office, and a police station in the suburb of Bab Ezzour.^{vi}

The group called the operation “The Battle of Badr.” The battle of Badr was the first expedition conducted by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century. A number of terrorist operations have been named after this symbolic battle in which a small force of Muslims defeated a large, well-armed enemy.

The statement also revealed:

1. A man named Mu'adz bin Jabal was responsible for the attack in the compound housing the Algerian Prime Minister's office and the Algerian Interior Ministry. This target was located in Algiers, and the suicide bomber used a vehicle-borne bomb consisting of 700kg of explosives.
2. A man named Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah attacked the compound of Interpol in Dar al Baidaa' by detonating a vehicle-borne bomb consisting of 700kg of explosives.
3. A third bomber named Abu Dujanah attacked the Algerian Special Forces compound in Dar al Baidaa', utilizing a vehicle filled with 500kg of explosives.

These names provided in the statement are *konyas*, or nicknames. AQLIM did not identify the men by their given names, nor did they provide details on the type of explosives used in the attacks.

On 9 May 2007, AQLIM released a video detailing the bombings and its preceding preparations. The video showed Muadz bin Jabal and Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah reading their wills. It also showed only two bombings being executed. According to the video, the two bombings struck the Interpol structure and the Algerian Special Forces compound, both in the suburb of Dar al-Baidaa'. However, a spokeswoman for Interpol denied that the organization had an office in that suburb.^{vii}

The video also showed the faces of Mu'adz bin Jabal and Abu Dujanah. However, the face of Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah was obscured.

Bombers' Details Revealed in Algerian News Reports

In the days following the attacks, Algerian newspapers revealed the identities of the suicide bombers. **Abu Dujanah** – who allegedly attacked the Special Forces compound – was identified as Benchihab Mouloud Hossine.^{viii} He was a 44 year-old single male. Born in 1963, he is the second of five sons and “unnumbered sisters.” He was reported to be missing since 25 August 1994.^{ix}

Algerian authorities said Hossine was part of an armed group.^x His family live in the Telemny neighbourhood, near the Palais du Gouvernement, one of the targets.^{xi} He had been jailed previously and served sentences in the Serkaji, Berouaghia, and Ouargla correctional institutions for multiple crimes, including the 'promotion and consumption of drugs.'^{xii} His mother denied his involvement in the attacks.^{xiii}

Investigations by security services revealed that the car used in the Bab Ezzouar explosion was bought by a person residing in Hossine's neighborhood, and said that an investigation into the original owners of the car was ongoing.^{xiv}

Muadz bin Jabal, who targeted the Palais du Gouvernement, was identified as Marwan Boudina, aka Nabil. He was 28 years old, born in Algiers, and the third of eleven children.^{xv} Boudina resided on a farm in Benboulaid in Al-Maqaria neighborhood in Bash-Jerrah, an area in the east of Algiers known as a stronghold for both Islamists and criminals.^{xvi} He was reported to be involved with drugs and alcohol, but had allegedly “repented” in January and become a more “pious” Muslim.^{xvii} According to his sister, however, he “stopped praying, and soon started getting drunk and high at night.”^{xviii}

Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah, the person AQLIM claimed had bombed the Interpol building, was not identified. He was reported to be a close friend of Boudina. He lived in the Hay Al-Jabal suburbs in Bourouba, Algiers.^{xix}

Al Zubayr’s face was not shown in the AQLIM-released video which detailed the attacks. Algerian newspaper reported that he is “still alive”.^{xx} They said he escaped after he parked an explosive laden vehicle near the home of Colonel Tounsi, the Director General of National Security in Hydra (Algiers). The bomb was later defused.^{xxi}

The Algerian authorities denied that a bombing took place at the Interpol office.^{xxii} They have also announced that Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah is alive, and a warrant was even issued for his arrest.^{xxiii} AQLIM’s claim of responsibility detailing three successful bombings indicates that they prepared the statement for release prior to the attack taking place.

Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah’s retreat from impending martyrdom may explain why his face was not revealed in the AQLIM video released on 9 May. The group likely obscured Al Zubayr’s face to avoid assisting authorities in identifying and capturing him.^{xxiv}

The Algerian security services allege that AQLIM intended to “detonate the cars remotely with the drivers inside”, precluding the possibility of escape by bombers who changed their minds in the middle of an operation.^{xxv} A statement from the Algerian Interior Minister said a remote detonator was found in the vehicle used in the attack on the government building, and a cell phone had been discovered in the unexploded car bomb of Al Zubayr Abu Sajidah.^{xxvi}

Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb Foreshadowed Upcoming Operations in March Announcement

On 5 March 2007, about one month before the bombings, an audio recording was sent to the Qatar-based Al Jazeera news agency warning Muslims in North Africa to avoid places which may be attacked. It is unknown whether this announcement alluded to this attempted triple bombing in Algiers. While the group claimed responsibility for attacks against Algerian army personnel in the days immediately following this announcement, such a warning would be unnecessary in these operations, which targeted isolated troops in rural areas of Algeria. The warning implies an attack in a more densely populated area, such as the suicide bombings in Algeria’s capital of Algiers.

Previous Attacks

This is the fourth major attack in Algeria since the group's merger with al Qaeda. The first was launched against a bus carrying foreign employees of a Halliburton subsidiary in December 2006. Two employees died when an IED was detonated near the bus.^{xxvii}

The second attack occurred in March 2007 against a bus carrying workers for a Russian oil pipeline company.^{xxviii} Three Algerians and a Russian worker were killed. Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb dedicated this attack to the Mujahideen in Chechnya and the Chechen people.

The third was a string of five attacks in Algeria's eastern Kabylie region and caused a total of six deaths.^{xxix}

The attacks were:

- a. An ambush laid out for Algerian military forces in Al-Akhdariya.
- b. Two bombs set off next to an Algerian army convoy in Dalas.
- c. Two land mines set off next to soldiers from the Al-Akhdariya army base.
- d. A bomb set off next to a City Guard commander in Shu'bat Al-'Amir.
- e. A bomb set off next to Budkhan City Guard forces.^{xxx}

Group History

The roots of al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb can be traced back to the 1990s. In 1992, the GIA (French acronym for Algerian Islamic Group) was formed when the Algerian government decided to overrule an election which the Islamist group FIS (Front Islamique du Salut) were poised to win. After years of violent civil war, the GSPC (French acronym for the Salafist Group for Preaching and Jihad) was established as a breakaway group from the GIA.

The reason for split was the extreme violence committed by the GIA against civilians, government officials and other opposition groups. Instead the GSPC mostly targeted Algerian security forces in rural areas, causing little collateral damage.

The GSPC started off with a mission trying to overthrow the Algerian government. Over the years, their ideology shifted from a localised agenda to al Qaeda's regional-global Jihad. This was apparent when they merged with Tanzim Qaedat al Jihad in September 2006, and renamed "Tanzim al Qaeda bi Bilad al Maghrib al Islami" in January 2007.

This is the first attack in Algeria in which suicide bombers were used. The influence of al Qaeda Organization is proven by the apparent change in the tactics of groups which adopt its ideology and techniques.

However, by advocating violence to pursue its course, the group's strategy may backfire. Although the bombings were targeted against government and Western targets, the massive civilian fatalities and casualties are unavoidable. Terrorism against civilians may

win them the support of radicalized supporters, but at the same time it will also scrape away any support the rest of the Algerian population had for the group, making it harder for them to operate in the country.

ⁱ “Bombs raise N Africa terror fears,” by Magdi Abdelhadi, BBC News
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6550097.stm

ⁱⁱ “Algiers bombings: a diversion?” by Olivier Guitta
http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/04/algiers_bombings_a_diversion.php

ⁱⁱⁱ Two bombings were reported in “Toll in Bombings in Algeria Rises to 33; Manhunt Begins,” by Craig C. Smith, NY Times, 13 April 2007.

Meanwhile, three bombings were reported on “Violence ahead of Algeria polls,” by Mohamed Arezki Himeur, BBC Algiers, 14 May 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6654913.stm>, and “Algerian rebels kill three soldiers – paper,” by Reuters, 14 May 2007, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/AHM429709.htm>.

^{iv} “Toll in Bombings in Algeria Rises to 33, Manhunt Begins,” by Craig S. Smith, New York Times, April 13, 2007.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/13/world/africa/13algeria.html?ex=1334116800&en=f80dd30ec75d65d0&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

^v “The Badr War of the Islamic Maghreb”, the claim of responsibility for attacks, issued by the Media Department of Tanzim al Qaeda bi Bilad al Maghreb al Islami, 11 April 2006

^{vi} Warden Message, the Embassy of the United States of America in Algiers, April 11, 2007.
http://algiers.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/564_LkK-xdYJ5JDdw5ztow/Warden_Message__11_April_2007.pdf

^{vii} “New al-Qaeda Wing is Active in Algeria,” Associated Press, April 12, 2007.
http://www.journalnow.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=WSJ%2FMGArticle%2FWJSJ_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1173350695135&path=!news!today

^{viii} Echourouk El Youmi, 2 April 2007

^{ix} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^x Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xi} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xiii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xiv} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xv} Echourouk El Youmi, 13 April 2007

^{xvi} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xvii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xviii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xix} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xx} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxi} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxiii} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxiv} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxv} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxvi} Echourouk El Youmi, 16-17 April 2007

^{xxvii} “Yet another large-scale battle with militants may be brewing,” by Jill Carroll, The Christian Science Monitor
<http://www.gulfnews.com/region/Morocco/10118590.html>

^{xxviii} “Yet another large-scale battle with militants may be brewing,” by Jill Carroll, The Christian Science Monitor
<http://www.gulfnews.com/region/Morocco/10118590.html>

^{xxix} “GSPC claims responsibility for Algeria attacks,” by Nazim Fethi, Magharebia, 14 February 2007
http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2007/02/14/feature-01

^{xxx} “Video Shows Al-Qaeda Operations Against Algerian Army,” Middle Eastern Media Research Institute, Special Despatch Series – No 1468, 16 February 2007
<http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP146807>