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Unlikely bedfellows: Are some Saharan Marxists joining al Qaeda operations in North Africa?

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In the harsh desert Sahel region of Algeria, Mali, and Mauritania, according to Moroccan and Mauritanian government sources, some Marxist nationalists are colluding with France's most feared terrorist group, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In recent months, the group has abducted Westerners for hefty ransoms, trafficked arms and drugs from Latin cartels, and bombed sites in Algeria and Mauritania.

This may be a new development, but Arab governments have long attempted to accuse their opponents, domestic or otherwise, of links to al Qaeda in an attempt to curry support from the United States for their own suppression of criticism or opposition. However, there is some evidence that stalled discussions over independence or autonomy for Western Sahara may have created a marriage of convenience among some elements of the independence struggle and AQIM.

If accurate, these reports suggest that some members of the Algeria-based Polisario Front have joined al Qaeda in trafficking drugs, arms, and humanitarian aid in North Africa's desert borderlands. AQIM is a product of the Algerian civil war and bin Laden's jihadi campaign in Afghanistan. A few hundred AQIM members operate in southern Algeria and northern Mali and Mauritania, and are making inroads to Morocco, say Moroccan intelligence officials.

The heavily armed Polisario, an independence movement for Western Sahara, is based in southwest Algeria near the Sahel zone of AQIM control. Polisario's key supporters are Cuba and Algeria, which fund its military and political operations, and it has political support from many African nations including South Africa.

Recent arrests of Polisario members by the governments of Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania give credence to the unlikely link between an Islamist group and Marxist nationalists. Maj. Gen. Abdeljebbar Azzaoui, Morocco's director of intelligence and counterterrorism, alleged some 75 arrests by Morocco, Mauritania, and Mali of Polisario members involved in al Qaeda operations. He said the Moroccan government works closely with these two countries and shares a list of captives. On Oct. 30 Morocco's Interior Ministry announced its capture of a supposedly al Qaeda-linked terrorist cell, the "Saharawi Jihad Front," headed by a Polisario supporter.

In August, in response to AQIM's demands, Mauritania released Omar le Sahraoui, a Polisario veteran on hire for AQIM who kidnapped three Spanish aid workers in November 2009.

Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington (CSIS) reported some 20 other Polisario members were arrested for the kidnapping.

In January, Algerian security services arrested Sidi Mohamed Mahjoub, a Polisario imam, whose home allegedly contained arms, 20 kilos of explosives, and correspondence with AQIM leader Abd al-Malik Droukdel. Regional experts Abdul Hameed Bakier of the Jamestown Foundation in Washington and Claude Moniquet of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence & Security Center confirmed the capture. But in October, Emhamed Khadad, a Polisario leader and spokesperson, stated by telephone that the imam was back home, alive and well.

The edges of Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali are poorly policed and invite criminality. "Border policing is an ongoing concern for Mauritania," said Mohamed Lemine El Haycen, Mauritanian ambassador to the U.S. "To protect our citizens and foreign residents, we are focused on containing immigration and illicit traffic," said El Haycen. "We also try to discourage radicalism at home to refute terrorist ideology."

The "terrorist ideology" cited by the Mauritanian ambassador is a reference to Salafi jihadists who reject modern nationalist tenets. The Polisario Front, in stark contrast, formed as a secular Cold War independence movement for Western Sahara in 1973, following Spain's retreat as a colonial power. Since the mid-1970s, Morocco and the Polisario have sparred over this desert territory on Africa's Atlantic coast. After Spain, and then Mauritania, relinquished claim to Western Sahara, Morocco has occupied the majority of the territory, which borders 275 miles with Morocco and 26 miles with Algeria. The conflict's long history is punctuated by failed negotiations, Morocco's ongoing occupation of the territory, and repeated threats by the Polisario to return to armed conflict despite the 1991 United Nations-administered cease-fire.

The conflict undermines regional cooperation in North Africa and encourages terrorism and trafficking, said Sahara experts such as J. Peter Pham, senior vice president of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. "There is serious concern that the Western Sahara dispute has created an environment propitious for the spread of violent extremism," agreed Anouar Boukhars, assistant professor of international relations at McDaniel College and visiting fellow at the Brookings Institute, Doha.

The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC in French) officially became AQIM in January 2007. But since 9/11, GSPC and now AQIM have implanted bases and transnational

pipelines across North Africa and are responsible, along with local militant groups, for some 890 attacks in Algeria and hundreds of attacks elsewhere in North Africa, according to terrorism scholar Yonah Alexander, director of the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies in Arlington, Va.

Links between the two organizations date to a 2005 attack on a military base in Mauritania, said Arnaud de Borchgrave, director of the Transnational Threats Project of CSIS. Polisario vehicles were allegedly used in the attack and some attackers spoke the Hassani dialect of Western Sahara, said de Borchgrave.

Polisario camp residents are Saharan refugees of the Western Sahara war between Morocco, Algeria, and the Polisario in the late 1970s. They and their descendants rely completely on outside aid for food and water, infrastructure, and health care. Supplies are sporadic. The European Union Anti-Fraud Office has documented Polisario misuse and trafficking of aid sent to the camps by the United Nations and other groups.

Camp residents are not free to relocate or work, and are not given citizenship or refugee status by the Polisario or Algeria. The government of Morocco confirmed that, in 2010, some 1,500 people escaped the camps for the Moroccan side of Western Sahara. The exact population of the camps is unknown today, as the Polisario has not allowed the United Nations to administer a census of the camps.

Conditions are dismal for Saharans living in Polisario camps. Michael Braun, former U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration chief of operations and intelligence, is concerned that the camps are "a breeding ground for potential future AQIM recruits." Pham agreed. "These are a resentful, marginalized people who are well-trained militarily." And of course, that resentment and marginalization, a direct byproduct of the conflict, is expected to continue absent a political solution between Morocco and the Polisario.

Discontent among youth is evident elsewhere in Western Sahara. In November, violence erupted outside the Moroccan-administered town of Laayoune, where armed militants killed 11 Moroccan police officers after Morocco's dismantling of a protest camp. The two-week demonstration against Moroccan favoritism of returnees from camps in Algeria turned violent when Sahrawi militants overtook the camp and attacked Moroccan security forces.

Some Polisario members and youth first joined al Qaeda in response to bin Laden's call for Arab fighters in Afghanistan, said de Borchgrave. In Dakhla, Western Sahara, escapees from Polisario

camps said recently that young men, in addition to receiving military training, are typically sent from the camps to study in Algerian universities. While at universities in Algeria, Libya, and even Syria, these youth are influenced by jihadi ideology during their years of study, said Claude Moniquet of ESISC.

Polisario authorities deny any connection with AQIM. Emhamed Khadad, a Polisario leader and spokesperson, said that camp residents have no reason to join with AQIM. "This is not Somalia or Afghanistan," he said. "We are well-organized, secular, and interested in peace."

However, the movement's failed campaign for independence is decades-old, and loyalty among Polisario leadership is faltering. "Sahrawi youth," said Boukhars of McDaniel College, "are growing increasingly disenchanted with their leadership's passivity and inability to fulfill their nationalist aspirations."

Morocco's leaders in Western Sahara are convinced of the connection between the Polisario's treatment of refugees and the increase of trafficking and terrorism. "We condemn the Polisario's treatment of people in the Tindouf camps," said Abdeslam Azelhad, assistant to the regional governor of Western Sahara. "We do not want to become like Mali and Mauritania, which are nests of terrorism."

Of course, critics of Morocco's occupation may look askance at Moroccan government claims concerning the welfare of Saharan refugees, and this would not be the first conflict where refugees are used as a political football by competing power centers.

All parties to the dispute over Western Sahara -- Algeria, the Polisario, and Morocco -- have been accused of human rights abuses against prisoners and detainees. The Polisario has accused Morocco of abusing Sahrawi captives following the recent incident in Laayoune.

Aziz Mekouar, Moroccan ambassador to the U.S. noted, "If the countries of the region transcend their differences, this will enable them to address these challenges to stop AQIM and also to foster economic integration to create more jobs and prosperity for their people." The government of Algeria declined comment for this article, referring calls to a Polisario representative in Washington, D.C. Advocates of the Polisario argue that economic improvements are not the issue as much as the question of political rights.

Most critically, U.N.-led negotiations over Western Sahara remain at an impasse for the immediate future. Meanwhile, al Qaeda's operations continue in the Maghreb and Sahel regions.

Alison Lake is a staff writer for the Washington Post.

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