

Car Bomber Strikes Algerian Police Station, Kills 42 Civilians

Date: 19 August 2008

Location: Police Training Academy near Algiers

Group: Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb

Incident

On Tuesday, 19 August at 7:30 am a suicide bomber detonated an explosives-filled car outside a gendarme training school in Les Issers east of the Algerian capital of Algiers. Forty-three people were killed, 42 of them civilians and one gendarme. At least 38 were injured.

At the moment the attack occurred, prospective gendarme recruits were standing outside waiting to register for a qualifying examination to join the force.¹

The attack destroyed the entrance of the school and damaged nearby buildings and cars. Several of the injured were passengers in cars close to the explosion.

The Perpetrators

Al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM) claimed responsibility for this attack as well as another bombing which took place the following day in Bouira. The claim of responsibility was posted to a Jihadist website on August 21. AQLIM identified the bomber by the name "Haroun" and stated that his car was carrying 500 kilograms of explosives.²

This attack comes after the "Amir," or leader of al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb, Abdul Malik Droukadel (aka Abu Musaab Abdel Wadood) announced in a statement that his organization had a great number of suicide bombers waiting for their turn to attack.³

This attack is the second of its kind this month, and was followed by a third attack the very next day. On 10 August a suicide bomber attacked a beach resort killing eight people.⁴ On 20 August,

¹ Brothers, Caroline. "Algerian Bombing Kills Dozens" *International Herald Tribune*, August 19, 2008
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/08/19/africa/20algeria.php>

² Media Committee of al-Qaeda in the Land of Islamic Maghreb. "The Raid of Revenge for a Group of Martyrs in Tizi Ouzou," 21 August 2008. Distributed on Jihadist websites.

³ Al-Shirazi, Kamil. "al Qaeda Suicide Bombers Attack Algiers Again" *Elaph*, August 20, 2008
<http://65.17.227.80/Web/Politics/2008/8/358338.htm>

⁴ Al-Shirazi, Kamil "Algiers: The Simultaneous Suicide Attacks Warn of a New Confrontational Stage" *Elaph*, August 21, 2008

two car bombs exploded near a military command post and popular hotel in the town of Bouira, killing 12 people.⁵

AQLIM was known as the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) prior to January, 2007, when it formally merged with al-Qaeda and changed its name. Since the merger a change in AQLIM's tactics has become apparent. There has been a shift from the discrete targeting of individuals associated with the government, military, and police to larger, indiscriminate attacks which kill civilians. Prior to the merger, Algerian authorities had steadily enhanced security in its country, and therefore AQLIM may now find it easier to hit "soft" civilian targets.⁶ Further, AQLIM is likely retaliating against authorities' ruthless counterterrorism efforts against the group's bases in the mountainous areas of the country by striking the civilian population they are charged with protecting – the group's claim of responsibility for its recent attacks states that its recent operations have been revenge for these counterterrorism efforts. Also, al-Qaeda's leadership in Central Asia may have ordered AQLIM to change its modus operandi to more closely resemble its own.

This incident came as Hassan Hattab, the former leader of the group, from the time when it was still the GSPC, released a statement beseeching members of the group to cease their militant activities and return to their homes and families. Hattab, a reformed militant, explained in his statement that he has concluded that the group's activities are useless and defy the Islamic teachings.⁷

State Response

The attacks this month have been embarrassing for the Algerian authorities, who have tried to demonstrate that their counterterrorism efforts have been effective. The group executed large suicide bombings in April and December of 2007. After each bombing the Algerian government claims great progress in eradicating the group, and each subsequent incident casts doubt on these claims.

Algerian Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni stated his belief that this attack suggests AQLIM's confusion and weakness, explaining vaguely that AQLIM must have needed to attack such a target to "regain its confidence" following the government crackdown. He added that "targeting

⁵ For a complete incident report, see Khan, Jesmeen. "Car Bombs Follow Suicide Attack in Algeria," International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, 20 August 2008.

<http://www.pvtr.org/pdf/GlobalAnalysis/Car%20Bombs%20Follow%20Suicide%20Attack%20in%20Algeria.pdf>

⁶ <http://65.17.227.80/Web/Politics/2008/8/358639.htm>

⁷ Algiers, "The Amir of the "Salafist Jihadist Group" Asks His Followers to Disarm and Leave the Mountains" *Alhayat*, August 20, 2008

http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/08-2008/Article-20080819-dc2f3d4b-c0a8-10ed-01bf-ee339132b316/story.html

unarmed civilians reflects their deterioration and their attempt to seek revenge against the citizens who condemned such actions”.⁸

French President Nicholas Sarkozy condemned the attack, describing it as barbaric and an act of blind violence.⁹ France and Algeria have a close relationship because of their colonial history. AQLIM often derogatorily refers to Algeria’s leaders as “the sons of France” and has expressed the desire to attack France in revenge for its support of the Algerian government.

Previous Attacks

AQLIM has carried out more than 60 attacks in 2008, mostly against military and police targets in the mountainous areas east of Algiers where they are strongest. These attacks focus on protecting areas surrounding Bomadras, Tizi, Zo and Bouira where AQLIM is believed to have its bases.¹⁰

Some of the most substantial attacks include two simultaneous attacks on 11 April this year, the first targeting the Prime Minister’s office and the second targeting a police station in Bab Ezzouar in Algiers. Another important attack occurred in December 2007, when two simultaneous attacks hit the UN’s offices and a court building in Algiers.

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⁸ Maqdam, Mohammed “Algiers: 43 Killed by a Suicide Attack Targeting Volunteers in Dark” *Alhayat*, August 20, 2008

http://www.alhayat.com/arab_news/nafrica_news/08-2008/Article-20080819-dc5c8882-c0a8-10ed-01bf-ee333a0baa85/story.html

⁹ The New York Times, “Bomber Kills at least 43 Near Capital of Algeria” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2008

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/world/africa/20algeria.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

¹⁰ Al-Shirazi, August 20, 2008