

HAMAS' ARMED STRUGGLE AGAINST ISRAEL



The name Hamas - acronym for the Arabic translation of Movement for Islamic Resistance - first appeared on a flyer against Israel in 1987. The most important figure within the movement was Sheykh Ahmad Yassin, a paraplegic cleric known for his virulent sermons against the Jewish State. He had studied at the Al Azhar University in Cairo and had joined the Brotherhood. Yassin worked with his "Islamic Association" that was allowed to operate by Israeli authorities in 1977. It dedicated its efforts to proselytism and provided health care and education for the poorest households. At the same, Yassin spread his radical opinions in both religion and politics among Gaza's mosques.

Yet the history of Hamas begins on the year preceding the flyer, 1986, with the creation of a Muslim Brotherhood cell in the Occupied Territories. During a secret meeting in Hebron, seven associates of the Brotherhood decided to create a new organization. Among them were Ahmad Yassin, Sheikh Hassan Yusef from Gaza, Jamal Hamami from Jerusalem, Ayman Abu Taha from Gaza, Mohamad Jamal al Natsheh from Hebron, Jamal Mansour from Nablus and Mahmoud Muslih from Ramallah.

In 1987 the big leap forward: Yassin officially announced the creation of Hamas alongside influential people such as Abdul Aziz Rantissi, a doctor, just like many of the most important figures within the Muslim Brotherhood. At this stage Hamas was not a terrorist group, but only a political one. Its armed wing, the Ezzedin al Qassem brigade, will see the light only several years later.

The following year, in August 1988, the Movement puts its statute - and radical thesis - into writing: the essence of which is the fight against the existence of Israel. The organization was headed by Sheikh Yassin and comprised a Consultative Council, the "Shura", a political office, and the Dawa, the "call", for all proselytism and humanitarian activities.

But why had Israel - which then controlled the Gaza Strip - allowed Yassin to set up his organization without intervening against an organism whose purpose was the destruction of the Israeli State itself?

The enemy of my enemy...

The answer to this question is of machiavellian simplicity: the OLP (Organization for the Liberation of Palestine) was (and still is) a secular organization where only a small faction, led by Sheykh Tamimi, represented the Islamic wing of the movement. Allowing Hamas to spread its influence automatically diminished the power and the hegemony of Yasser Arafat. In other words, in that historical moment, the OLP was the real threat, not Hamas.

Furthermore, Tel Aviv's evaluation - partly mistaken - was that the link between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas would have helped Israel in combating this political-religious phenomena. The Brotherhood was banned in Egypt where repression against radical Islamism had increased after Sadat's assassination in 1981. They were strictly monitored in Jordan where it was still not clear whether they intended to go undercover or work in plain sight. They had been wiped out in Syria by Hafez Assad after the 1982 rebellion in Hama.

The reasoning behind Israel's stance was that the repression against the Brotherhood in the Arab countries would have allowed, when needed, Tel Aviv to eliminate Hamas and circumscribe its activity to the Gaza Strip. Concentrating the most radical Palestinian wing to a single area made the military option more favorable. In basic terms, Israel apparently adopted a self-damaging tactic for a wider strategic objective: the weakening of its arch-enemy Arafat.

This ruthless policy had already been adopted in the past. During the so-called "Black September" of 1979 when King Hussein of Jordan had attacked and chased the Palestinian out his territory, Israel had allowed the Palestinian Fedayn to sneak out through the West Bank and into Lebanon. At that time it was far more important for Israel to destabilize its Arab neighbors than to eliminate Palestinian organizations.

But why had the Muslim Brotherhood favored the creation of a satellite structure instead of working directly with the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories?

Pretending to be separate

The decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to help create Hamas lied in the relationship between the Brotherhood, Egypt and Syria. The Islamic movement wanted to keep its troublesome political co-existence with the regime in Cairo separated from its radical opposition to Damascus.

If Hamas pursued its Jihad against Israel (and it was not much appreciated by Mubarak) the Brotherhood in Cairo could always appear as not being party to it. On the other hand, if Israel was attacked Hamas would have obtained Syria's support, which they could not have had they been linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

It was hence necessary that the two organizations appear distinct without harming each other. When this option was chosen Hamas did not have the amount of followers, nor the structures outside Gaza it has now. In Jordan the movement's representative, Ibrahim Ghoshe, spoke to local authorities under the double identity of Hamas/Muslim Brotherhood.

Targeting the leaders

Sheikh Yassin was arrested in 1989 for the killing of two Palestinian informers and was sentenced to life in jail. This did not prevent Hamas from expanding and strengthening its role. Yassin was released in 1997 following talks between Israel and Jordan. His freedom was exchanged with that of two Mossad agents held in Amman. Once free, he immediately went back to his preaching and menacing of Israel. But now he had become a threat and was put on the black list of terrorists to be eliminated. Following a first failed attempt in

September 2003 - Yassin was slightly wounded in a plane bombing - the Sheikh was killed on March 22, 2004, when a missile from a helicopter struck him while leaving a mosque.

By then Hamas could walk even without its founder. Yassin's place was taken by Abdal Aziz al Rantissi, a figure arrested several times by the Israelis. Al Rantissi was also black listed and was killed about a month after his nomination on April 17, 2004. The same technique was employed: a missile from a helicopter. But yet another leader was ready to take his place: it was Khaled Meshal who, while living in Amman, had survived a poisoning attempt by the Mossad in 1997. Meshal had moved the headquarters of Hamas to Damascus in 1999.

An unavoidable partner

By 2004 Hamas had become a military and political force that extended its influence well beyond the Gaza Strip and into the West Bank, challenging the PLO's supremacy. It had achieved what Israelis had wanted since 1987: the weakening of the PLO. At the same time it continued to threaten Israel and the PLO. It also continued to lead Palestinians towards more radical positions.

At the same time, Hamas fought Israel and was contrary to all negotiation attempts - like the ones attempted by PLO chairman Mahmoud Abbas. In 2006 Hamas won the majority in the Palestinian elections. While this happened we witnessed a correlated effect: the more Israel posed harsh negotiating conditions to the Palestinians, the greater was the prestige and influence exerted by Hamas.

Hamas had also become an actor for several countries and regimes by developing its very own foreign policy. On Libya's behalf, the Islamic Resistance Movement negotiated an agreement between the Muslim Brotherhood and Tripoli. Hamas stepped in to solve the controversy between Lebanon's Hezbollah and Geddafi on the spoils of the shiite cleric Mousa Sadr who disappeared - maybe killed - during a trip to Libya in 1978. Today Tripoli has decided to allow a Lebanese judge to participate in the re-opening of the case.

The latest act that has made of Hamas a vital actor for the solution of the Palestinian problem is the recent negotiation for the liberation of the Israeli soldier Ghilad Shalit. The Movement, even though it is still considered a terrorist organization, has forced Netanyahu to the negotiating table and allowed for the release of 1027 Palestinian detainees. Talks were complex and participated by numerous actors over a period of 5 years. This was a blow for Israel, which was forced to negotiate by its own domestic public opinion. It was also a blow for Abu Mazen and any residual hope for a two States solution.

The Arab Spring

The future of the Palestinian cause depends on this new evolution: from Hamas terrorist organization to Hamas political organization. From Hamas rogue group to Hamas negotiating partner. In other words, without Hamas, or rather without room for this movement's requests, a negotiated solution to the Palestinian question is presently extremely unlikely.

This is probably one of the reasons that have lead the PLO and Hamas to try to reconcile and possibly form a government of national unity. Abu Mazen has been re-structuring his party in order to allow other Palestinian groups to come together under a unique organization. It is in this spirit that a Palestinian Electoral Commission was formed to allow a new round of legislative and presidential elections in the Occupied Territories. There have also been talks about the liberation of prisoners.

The reconciliation between the two movements has one common denominator: the PLO needs to review its moderate stances that are not producing any result in negotiations with the Israelis. The recent failure to obtain UN recognition of the Palestinian State being their latest failure. On the other hand, Hamas needs to

reposition itself on a less radical stance. This could hence be a marriage of interest that could burst into real love. We'll wait and see if this reconciliation takes place and, foremost, whether Israel or other Palestinian actors will exacerbate the situation on the ground to make Hamas' de-radicalization more difficult.

The fall of Mubarak in Egypt can surely bring on a multiplier effect in the long term on Hamas' influence and power thanks to the greater support they will receive from the mother organization - the Muslim Brotherhood - and from the territorial contiguity with Egypt. In the past this had limited the movement's military aspirations, but today it could turn out to be in Hamas' interests. The same can be said of what is happening in Tunisia, the new government in Jordan and the role of Islamic parties in Morocco.

The Arab Spring has also created problems to Hamas and especially in its relationship with Syria. Many medium to low officials are leaving Damascus and even Hamas' leader, Khaled Meshal, could leave soon. Hamas' new political course is in opposition to Bashar al Assad's repression of dissent. The Syrian regime has also been officially condemned by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Hamas' stance will lead to a divergence with the Hezbollah in Lebanon, who continue to support Assad, and thus to the inevitable loss of Iranian political, financial and military backing. The need to find a new host country for its leaders also pushes Hamas on milder positions. Surely enough Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Turkey will never host a movement dedicated to the armed struggle.

A new Hamas

In a recent meeting in Cairo with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, Hamas' leader Khaled Meshal spoke about the transformation of his movement from "armed resistance" to "popular resistance". He also underlined that the movement will not disarm, at least for the time being. Meshal's statement could pave the way for a cease fire with Israel. Furthermore, for the first time since its founding, Hamas seems to have accepted the idea of a Palestinian State within the 1967 boundaries with East Jerusalem as its capital. This implies the recognition of Israel in the remaining portion of Palestine. By doing so, Hamas is shifting from a bilateral and military confrontation with Israel alone to a multilateral political arena.

The new political Hamas has also influenced the leadership in Gaza. Over the last weeks, the Palestinian PM, Ismail Haniyeh, has left the Strip for the first time since 2007. Haniyeh toured several Arabic countries such as Turkey, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Qatar and Bahrain. Hamas in Gaza has a domestic problem which will have to be taken into account: the more it shifts towards negotiated positions, the more the Islamic Jihad gains proselytes in Gaza. History repeating itself.

The return of Hamas in the Arab hive following the dismissal of their Iranian supporters and the new geo-strategic situation in the Middle East has surely made the movement more flexible, thus opening up new political opportunities for the future. We'll have to wait and see whether this transformation will be a tactical or strategic initiative.

THE ITALY – LIBYA DEALS

On December 29th 2007 the Italian Interior Minister, Giuliano Amato, landed in Tripoli on an Italian Aeronautics' Falcon jet for an official visit. With him were the head of Police, Antonio Manganelli, his chief of cabinet, Gianni De Gennaro, the Chief of Staff of the Guardia di Finanza (financial police), Gen. Paolo Poletti, and his diplomatic counsel, Guido Lenzi. Amato was received by the Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdurahman Mohamed Shalgam, and signed two cooperation protocols to fight illegal immigration to Italy.

The first protocol dealt with the "temporary" handing over of 6 Coast Guard vessels owned by the Guardia di Finanza (3 "Bignami" class vessels and 3 class "V 5000") for the patrolling of Libyans coasts. The deal also included: joint crews on board, training/assistance/maintenance paid by Italy, area of intervention spanning from Libyan territorial waters to international ones, a joint inter-force Command (Libyan commander, Italian vice-commander) that would coordinate sea-borne operations and act as a link with Italian authorities in Lampedusa, Italy's far-most island .

The Italy-Libya deal on illegal immigration was an integral part of the European initiative known as Frontex, a system of joint patrolling of the Mediterranean coasts put in place in October 2005 and that never produced any relevant result.

The Amato-Shargam protocol also specified that the migration control would cover the 2.000 km of Libyan coasts on the Mediterranean and the 5.000 km of desert borders down South. On this topic the protocol cited a Memorandum signed by the European Union only months before. This also implied that a radar control system on both fronts would be put into place.

The second protocol was signed between the head of Italian police, Antonio Manganelli, and the Libyan undersecretary for Public Security, Faraj Nasib Elqabaili. This document integrated the first one and defined details and procedures. Among other things, it mentioned that the boats provided by Italy would bear neither badges nor insignia. A number of Italian police officials would be sent to Tripoli to liaison with the locals.

The horse of Troy

The document also mentioned other aspects deemed very important by the Libyans:

- within 3 years from the signature of the protocol, Italy would have to hand over to Tripoli 3 vessels.
- Italy would have lobbied so that the European Union sign a similar deal with Libya and pay Tripoli a fee.

Besides getting three boats for free (even though unarmed, the vessels were military ones), it was the second point that Libya was after. Tripoli wanted the illegal immigration issue to be high-placed in the agendas of both Italy and the EU, with Libya coming out as the victim of this traffic. In other words: make of the issue an international one, get Libya to enter in direct talks with Europe (with Tripoli gaining a positive image for its regime and gaining the upper-hand in the talks that were due in Brussels), make some cash.

The deal struck by Giuliano Amato in December 2007 was not the first one of its kind between Italy and Libya on this very same issue: in the year 2000 a similar deal had been signed by the respective Prime Ministers and two more, at Ministerial level, were signed in 2002 and 2005. As a part of these prior deals Italy had already supplied Libya with all sorts of equipment and assets: vessels, cars, off-road vehicles, pick-up trucks, IT systems for managing and protecting data, small coast guard boats, solar panels for street lighting, rafts, sniffer dogs for both drugs and explosives, machinery for the detection of finger prints, training courses for Libyan police (from language classes to investigative techniques, piloting of light aircrafts, airport security, VIP protection etc.), the building of 3 facilities (a police station in Gharyan finished in 2007, a health center in Ghat and one in Kufra still in the making), tents, first aid kits etc. The

cost of these goods and services was estimated between 50 and 60 million euros.

It was probably the Italian uncritical disposition to pay - for nothing, seen as illegal migrants kept arriving by the thousands - that led Libya to believe it could cash in the immigration problem both politically and financially. Libya knew that the arrival of migrants in Italy was a domestic political issue and it had the instruments to stress its relevance: get more people on those boats bound for Lampedusa. At the same time Tripoli aimed at Europe as the next victim of this blackmail. And who should have convinced the EU to treat with Libya? Well, Italy, of course.

Migrants used as a weapon

The Libyan scheme was evident, as was Italy's subordinate role. And since the deals signed between the two countries were not producing - politically and economically - what Geddafi wanted to obtain, the flux of migrants to Italy continued without pause:

- 13.594 migrants arrived in 2004
- 22.824 in 2005
- 21.400 in 2006
- 16.875 in 2007

In 2008 the center-right wing governed in Italy and its Interior Minister was from the ranks of the extreme right-wing Northern League party (Lega Nord). The fight against illegal immigration became more relevant paid off well politically. The friendship, partnership and cooperation Treaty signed by Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi and Muammar Geddafi on the 30th of August 2008 in Benghazi - article 9 mentioned cooperation in the fight against terrorism, crime, drug trafficking and illegal immigration - seemed to pave the way for real cooperation on the issue. But contrary to expectations, in 2008 the number of migrants landing in Italy from Libya increased to 34.540.

Between the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 more meetings between Tripoli and Rome were scheduled to reach an agreement. The most relevant political event at the time was the first visit by Muammar Geddafi in Italy in June 2009.

On May 20th 2009 the first 3 coast guard "Bignami" vessels landed in Tripoli. Libya refused to accept the smaller crafts and the original agreement was modified to a total of 6 "Bignami" vessels. They were deployed in the port of Zuwarah. The joint patrolling started five days later. What made the bilateral accord tricky until the last minute were both Libya's continuous negotiating and the clashes within Tripoli's administration. Negotiations were initially conducted by the Minister of public security and his Italian counterpart but were later passed on to the Libyan Navy who took over the coast guard vessels.

Just a few days earlier, on May 7th 2009, Libya had accepted - for the first time - that illegal immigrants intercepted by the Italian Navy be repatriated to Libya. In the port of Tripoli arrived 120 migrants that were brought ashore by 3 Italian boats (two from the Coast Guard and one from the Guardia di Finanza). The migrants were mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa and were treated brutally by the Libyan security forces. Among them were pregnant women, young and dehydrated migrants who were not going to receive a humane treatment. What happened to them after their detainment by Libyan authorities is unknown.

Negotiated blackmail

In order to highlight its commitment to the fight against human trafficking, Libya set up an ad hoc organism: "The High Committee for the Fight against Illegal Immigration". Its head was Gaddafi's brother-in-law Abdallah Senussi. He was (and still is) currently wanted internationally on terrorism charges. This did not

prevent him from dealing with Italian authorities on security issues.

Finally, Libya seemed to have taken a more cooperative path. Until the repatriation of the first migrant boat on May 7th 2009, the illegal migrants landing in Italy had been 6.340. From that day until the end of the year a mere 1.800 arrived in Lampedusa, while the vast majority of attempts were blocked at sea and returned on Libyan soil by the joint patrolling and with the frequent exchange of migrants in international waters.

Libya's efforts were compensated by exorbitant economic requests, thus exploiting Italy's passiveness. During an official visit to the Italian ministry of Interior in June 2009 Libyans put forward requests worth billions of euros. They asked for more and bigger vessels (four 60/70-meter long vessels, ten 35-meter speedboats, 2 tug boats), airplanes (2 bi-motors, 6 helicopters Augusta 109, other unspecified planes for reconnaissance and support), a ruinous amount of vehicles (70 4x4 vehicles, 40 support and combat vehicles, another 800 off-road cars, 250 pick up trucks, 120 6x6 lorries to which they wanted to add 550 vehicles to be deployed in the desert and 120 thematic vehicles such as ambulances and tanker lorries). Suffice to say - with reference only to the vehicles - that Italy had already provided Tripoli with 80 off-road jeeps, 150 pick ups and 4 land cruisers.

This situation of "cooperation under negotiated blackmail" continued until the beginning of the so-called "Arab Spring" in Libya. In the meanwhile Tripoli had managed to receive three more speedboats and funding for a project longly cherished by Gaddafi: a radar system on Libya's Southern border. Officially its deployment was part of the fight against illegal immigrants, but in truth - as Italy also knew well - a radar system is notoriously not suitable to scan a series of moving points like migrants marching along desert dunes. The contract was worth 350 million euros and Italy decided to award it to Selex Sistemi Integrati - part of Finmeccanica. Half of the funding would be provided by Italian taxpayers, a minimal part by Libya, and the rest by the EU (which expressed its disagreement for the lack of an international tender for the project). The project is still operative even after Gaddafi's fall. A number of Italian police officers have been recently deployed to Tripoli for this purpose.

A deafening silence

It is still not clear how the new Libyan government will behave regarding illegal immigration. The country has other priorities at the moment. Surely the problem is not as immanent as it was before the conflict since most migrants, especially those from Sub-Saharan Africa, have already left. The threat of a civil war, the danger of being mistaken for a mercenary from Niger or Mali, the disbanding of the trafficking networks have all contributed to the blocking of the exodus.

Over all these years, the Italian cooperation initiatives with Libya on illegal immigration have all been focused on contrasting the phenomena, without ever dealing with the issue of the migrants' fundamental rights. In practice, when the repatriations of migrants started, Italian authorities never asked the Libyans to respect their fundamental rights.

In 2009 there were about 20 detention centers for migrants in Libya where abuses, beatings, rapes and ill-treatment were the widespread. Such abuses happened in dire hygienic conditions and in overcrowded structures with no health care and where men, women and children were all confined together in the same cell. Religious persecution for whoever declared himself a Christian was also abound. The detention of migrants did not follow any rule regarding the length of the detainment. Most of the times it depended on how much the jail guards were paid off or if one was lucky enough to work (for free) for the local power-brokers.

Only few international organizations were - at least in principle - allowed inside the prisons. Those authorized - usually only in specific facilities - dared not report the abuses in fear of being kicked out of the

country. This is what happened to the UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), which had been in Libya since 1991 and whose presence was not based on a Memorandum of understanding with Libyan authorities. This meant there was a limit to the organizations' ability to report on abuses. In fact, Libya never accepted the term "refugee" as such and especially if combined with the adjective "political".

Another international organization based in Tripoli since 2005 was the IOM (International Organization for Migration), whose role was to repatriate the migrants who wished to return to their home country. The IOM also avoided exposing the abuses. They probably feared Libya's reprisal, but also - since Italy is one of the organizations' main financiers - to put its main donor in a bad light.

Then there was the CIR, (Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati, an Italian NGO) that worked through a local non-governmental organization, the International Organizations for Peace, Care and Development, led by the son of a member of the Revolutionary Council, Khaled Kwellidi al Humaidi. This made any criticism of the regime highly improbable.

Lastly there was the International Red Cross whose offices were not in Tripoli, but in Tunis and which was not allowed to visit the detention centers. All of these factors meant that little or no light was shed on the plight of the illegal immigrants detained in Libya.

Nothing new under the sun?

The last chapter of the Italy-Libya deals on illegal migration took place on January 21st 2012 as the Italian PM Mario Monti landed in Tripoli to meet the new authorities. The August 2008 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation signed by Berlusconi and Gaddafi (both out of office) has been renamed "Tripoli Declaration" (even though it was signed in Benghazi). The Italian Interior Minister is expected in Libya to re-open – once again – negotiations on the issue. Libya's Interior Minister, Fawzi Abdelali, has already stated that his country "is not the border patrol of Europe" and that in order to curb illegal immigration, his country needs both money and assets. Nothing new under the sun...

TERRORISM IN THE MAGHREB

In September 2006 the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), a terrorist organization active in Algeria, officially changed its name into Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) thus shifting its operational range from the fight against Algerian authorities to a wider international context. On January 3rd, 2007, the group's leader, the so-called national emir Abdel Malik Droukdal aka Abu Mussab Abdel Woudou, announced in a video posted on the internet his intention to join forces with Osama Bin Laden.

During the 23-minutes film, Droukdal is shown sitting down with a kalashnikov in his hand, just like Bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri. In the video, Abdel Malik Droukdal declares his sympathy for Al Qaeda, and attacks the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his policy of national reconciliation. He states that his group's military capabilities are intact and accuses Algerian authorities of squandering the country's rich natural resources (oil and gas). Droukdal blames France and the United States for their aggressive neo-colonial policy against muslim communities. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat was born in 1996 following a split within the Islamic Armed Group (GIA). The GIA was active since the 1992 coup d'etat by the Algerian army that had ousted and arrested the leadership of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the islamist party that had just won the elections. Hassan Hattab, a former parachutist in dissent with the then-national emir, had accused the GIA of indiscriminately targeting the civilian population during its terrorist attacks. A modus operandi that Hattab decried due to its effects on the sympathies and support of the people (and on financial backing from abroad). For this reason he decided to form his own group: namely the GSPC.

The splinter group

Hattab had dedicated himself to striking ferociously the regime's military and security targets. His attacks were concentrated in the Kabylia (Tizi Ouzou, Bouira, Bejaia) and Boumerdes areas where his militias were based. Slowly the GSPC had extended its control to other areas of the country at the expense of the GIA that gradually began to come apart. Abdel Malik Droukdal, former GIA member, joined the GSPC and ousted Hattab who was in favor of national reconciliation and in open opposition to joining Al Qaida's orbit. Droukdal's purge of the GSPC's leadership also involved militants close to Hattab such as Sadaoui Abdelhamid, in charge of Zone 2, known with the "nom de guerre" of Yahia Abou al Haytem. By 2004 Abdel Malik Droukdal had taken complete control of the organization.

The GSPC had inherited an operational structure very similar to the GIA's: a national emir (Abdel Malik Droukdal), a Shura (a consultative council) and a division of Algeria into zones controlled by local emirs. Zone 2 was in Boumerdes, in Algeria's centre-north, and it was probably the most important one because most of the military operations against the regime took place there and in Kabylia. Within each zone operated a number of Katibeh (phalanxes or battalions), military units led by commanders who reported to the local emir. The Katibeh had logistic and financial independence. Their fund-raising activities included robberies, extortion and thefts perpetrated against the local population.

Hassan Hattab's GSPC already had the financial support of the Algerian diaspora in Europe that

sent its money through couriers, money transfers or the less detectable “Hawala” system. Al Qaeda had promised support, but their cash never showed up.

New opportunities

By joining the global terrorist network the GSPC opened up a series of opportunities:

- The access to Al Qaeda's international financial and logistical network;
- The possibility of recruiting other terrorist groups active in the wider Maghreb region;
- An increased publicity for its actions against the authorities in Algiers.

The first group to join AQIM was the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (“Al Jamaa’ a Al Islamyiah al Muqatilah bi Libya” – LIFC) that already stationed on the Algerian territory at the border with Libya. Then came the Moroccan Islamic Fighting Group and a series of armed groups that were dedicated more to banditry than to ideologic or political battles:

- Then came the group led by Mokhtar al Mokhtar alias Khaled Abul Abbas, a group of thugs based on the north-east of Mali bordering Algeria. Linked to local Tuareg tribes fighting the government in Bamako, the group finances its activities through smuggling, robberies and abductions (they are responsible for abducting 2 Canadians);
- Next came the group led by Abdel Hamid Abu Zeid, a competitor of Mokhtar al Mokhtar, active in the same region of Mali. Abu Zeid is responsible for the abduction of a German, two Swiss and a British. The latter was killed during a sloppy rescue mission by Special Forces.

The two groups above are also known for having held for ransom two Italians, Sergio Cical and his wife (then freed), and for currently holding Rossella Orru and Maria Sandra Mariani.

In time Mokhtar and Abu Zeid, both initially fighting against the regime in Algiers and former members of the GIA and the GSPC, had developed their illegal self-financing. Their adherence to AQIM formally meant their robberies now had a political backing. Droukdal had and has no role in their decision-making. This is probably why Abdel Malik Droukdal has recently nominated a new emir in charge of Zone 9, the Sub-Saharan sector: Makhloufi Nabil, also known as Nabil Abu Alqama.

The local governments' response

The declared internationalization of North African terrorism has led local governments to respond. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria has gone ahead with his national reconciliation project by trying to separate Hassan Hattab from Abdel Malik Droukdal. A similar experiment had already proven successful in September 1997 (completed in 1999), when the Islamic Salvation Army had given up the armed struggle and broken up with the GIA.

In Libya - through the good offices of Hamas - authorities had freed a number of Muslim Brothers incarcerated in March 2006 with the promise, supported by the Brotherhood's leadership in Egypt, that they would stop fomenting armed opposition against Muammar Gaddafi. At the same time Seif al Islam, on behalf of his father Muammar, had gone ahead with the “redemption” of the LICG

leaders in jail. Their confinement in isolation was loosened up and some of the group's members were released in December 2006 and in January 2007. In order to gain their freedom, the LICG members declared their disengagement from Osama Bin Laden's global jihad.

Alongside their peace-making attempts, the two regimes intensified their military operations. In Algeria the armed forces proceeded with a series of sweeps, aerial and artillery bombings. In Libya the Security Services were in charge of the physical elimination of opponents and of the persecution of their families. In February 2007 the two countries began developing joint operations and, in September of that year, a joint patrolling of the common borders.

On April 23rd and 24th 2007, Libyan authorities summoned the Directors General of the Security Services and of Police of the AMU – Arab Maghreb Union (Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) – to Tripoli to study a common strategy against the growing terrorist threat.

Terrorist franchising

What has led the GSPC to become Al Qaeda in the Maghreb is the transhumance of terrorists from other groups in that area that decided to join Droukdal's formation. The entry in the jihadist orbit has also caused the dispatch/arrival of armed volunteers from/to other theaters such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.

Algerian volunteers have fought alongside the “Tanzim Qaidat al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn” (i.e. the Organization of al Qaeda for the jihad in the country of the two rivers, that is Mesopotamia) of Abu Musab al Zarqawi; Algerians and Libyans joined the ranks of “Ansar al Islam” (i.e. the partisans of Islam) of Mullah Krekar or the “Jaysh al Mujaheddin” (i.e. the army of the fighters) along the Iraq-Syria border. A portion of these fighters returned to their countries of origin with a strong military experience. The direct consequence was a renewed vigor of Algerian terrorism, the first kamikaze attacks in Cyrenaica (July and August 2007), and other similar events in Morocco. The anti-terrorist cooperation in North Africa increased in 2007. In June of that year the Chief of Staff of the Algerian Army, Ahmed Gaid Salah, met in Tripoli with the Libyan Minister of Defence, Abu Bakr Younes Jaber. Topic of the discussion: the protection and control of the common borders. Libya was closing down its Southern border and had created a 300 km Security Zone controlled by its army.

In April 2008 the first batch of 90 LICG terrorists was freed. None of them had actually taken part in assaults or attacks. They all declaredly gave up the armed struggle. Some of them even supplied information on the group's logistical network in Libya. The initiative was taken by the Libyan II.SS. with the political avail of Seif al Islam, who acted as bestower of clemency. During the same period the Libyan intelligence services began a secret negotiation with the political wing of the LICG, in the United Kingdom at the time, that had never agreed to the merger with AQIM.

The anti-terrorist cooperation between Algeria and Libya continued on the military front. In August 2008 a penetration attempt by the “Katibah al Shuhada” (the martyrs' battalion), AQIM's main military unit, on Libyan territory was intercepted. The group, annihilated during the clash, was formed by 70-100 combatants, mainly Libyans and some Algerians. In this occasion, the two countries agreed to a prisoners' swap and the return of the bodies for their identification. All of the common border between Ghadames and Ghat was under a high terrorist threat. Nonetheless, the

Libyan intelligence services had managed to convince the political wing of the LICG to give up the armed struggle.

A regional rapid response force

The Al Qaeda terrorist franchising in North Africa has also led to new offsprings in the area spanning from Mauritania to the Horn of Africa. New groups have seen the light - al Djazaira ala Salafya and al Tafkir wal Hijra in Algeria, al Muharabi al Islamya in Libya, al Barakat al Islamya in Somalia – alongside to new threats: attacks against oil installations, tourist abductions, bomb attacks.

In March 2009, 136 members of the LICG were released by Libya. Another one hundred were released in June that year after the Libyan Islamic Combat Group's political wing in London declared a cease fire with Gaddafi. From this moment onwards, the regime in Tripoli claimed that there existed no armed opposition to the government. The remaining LICG members were labelled bandits and Al Qaeda terrorists.

Before the 40th Anniversary of Gaddafi's rise to power in 2009, the regime invited all opponents to return to the country, thus highlighting the will to proceed with a national reconciliation. The LICG leaders still in Libyan jails wrote and issued a document – favored/steered by the Security Services – that claimed that all ideologically-led armed struggle was against Islam. Hence, AQIM was committing an act of apostasy. The initiative was anticipated by the liberation of 88 among former terrorists and Muslim Brothers.

In July 2009, during an African Union meeting in Tripoli, the Security Services from Libya, Mali, Niger, Algeria and Mauritania met. They approved an operational plan to create a joint rapid-response military force of about 22 thousand men (7.000 Algerians) that would be deployed in the fight against AQIM in Sub-Saharan Africa. About three thousand Tuareg from Mali, Niger and Mauritania who knew the terrain were also added to the force. Bamako had managed to sign a deal with the internal Tuareg opposition of the “Alliance Démocratique du 23 Mai pour le Changement” in order to fight AQIM.

The plan also included the creation of a regional database on terrorism and the possibility – with previous notice – of allowing troops to cross the borders during pursuit missions. The plan also included Algerian and Libyan financial support to the people in Northern Mali and in Niger (who benefited from the terrorist's actions and from the ransoms paid) and the intensification of aerial patrolling. The attention was concentrated on Northern Mali and Niger where the terrorist groups are still at large.

An uncertain future

The outbreak of the Arab Spring has come into this picture. There is no sure data on the number of terrorists roaming in the Sahel, but several analysts agree that a reasonable number is about 400 elements. There are strong connections between the terrorist activity and weapons' and drugs' smuggling. In the recent past the traffics also included human beings. Today, as in the recent past, the most valuable activity is the abduction of foreigners. There is no certainty regarding the link between the North African terrorist groups and those in the Horn of Africa, namely the Somali al

Shabaab, or in the Arabian peninsula, that is Al Qaeda's branch in Yemen. No information is available regarding the contacts between AQIM and Nigeria's Boko Haram.

Analysts disagree also on what will happen to Al Qaeda in the region now that the regimes in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt have fallen. The political resurrection of Ennadha in Tunisia, the presence of former LIGC members in the ranks of the insurgents in Libya, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and of the Salafists in Egypt are all part of a strictly orthodox vision of Islam as applied to society. These factors could either increase radical terrorism or bring it to an end. The case of Abdelhakim Belhadj is extremely symbolic. Belhadj is one of the leaders of the rebels that ousted Gaddafi. He was a veteran of the war in Afghanistan against the Russians, became a member of the Libyan Islamic Combat Group, returned to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Talebans with the nom de guerre of Abu Abdallah Sadaq. He was captured by the U.S.A. in Kuala Lumpur, extradited to Bangkok and successively handed over to the Libyans. Abdelhakim Belhadj was then granted an amnesty and freed. He is now one of the most influential people in the new Libya. Will he be capable of putting his jihadist past aside and become a politician?

The only hard fact is that totalitarian regimes in North Africa have been replaced by political and social forces who share a common islamist root. This phenomena has two explanations: one is strictly ideological because no alternative socialist/secular ideas have been accepted in the Arab world as has happened elsewhere. Many believe, as the Muslim Brotherhood preaches, that “Islam is the solution”. The other is merely practical as the only alternative consensus that could have been built against totalitarian regimes could only have come from the mosques and the Imams.

It remains to be seen whether the political supremacy of Islam will be a moderate one – as has happened in Turkey with Recep Erdogan – or a radical one, as some indicators seem to accredit. On the other hand, the question is also whether Al Qaeda's terrorism will be capable of adapting to the new social context, whether it will come out more powerful than ever or disappear.