

# ALGERIA RISK FLASH

November 2008

## Bombings target foreigners

American companies operating in Algeria face great risks due to the recent rise in insurgent activity. The threat presides not only in Algiers, the largest city and capital of Algeria, but also throughout the surrounding countryside. American companies in Algeria remain high on the target list of Islamic insurgents, operating under the regional name Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), reflecting their realignment with the Islamic terrorist network.

Recently, AQIM went on an August bombing rampage in the Berber heartland just east of Algiers. Potent vehicle bombs in towns like Tizi Ouzou, Issers and Bouira killed and wounded scores of people. Most of the bombing targets were military, police and gendarmerie facilities but with most of these targets in close proximity to civilian dwellings, the majority of those killed and wounded in the blasts were Algerian civilians.

One of the AQIM-planned bombings in August directly targeted employees of a foreign company, SNC-Lavalin. A mini-bus driving employees of the Canadian construction and engineering firm to work was demolished in a suicide bombing in downtown Bouira. Twelve of the employees, all of them Algerian citizens, died in the explosion. Another 15 Algerian passengers were wounded.



## A terrorist agenda

AQIM has a tendency to ramp up its terrorism agenda before and during the holy month of Ramadan, which began this year on Sept. 1. However, AQIM claims that its August bombing spree was retaliation for an Aug. 8 military operation in Tizi Ouzou Governorate in which a dozen of its terrorists died. In a statement released in late August, the group said that the Bouira bombing was the last operation in that retaliatory campaign. It also promised to retaliate violently again to avenge any future governmental attacks against its fighters.

The willingness of the group to accept a high level of civilian casualties and property damage in its operations has sparked outrage throughout the Berber heartland and the Algerian capital. AQIM has acknowledged a sharp decline in its already low popularity by issuing several media statements since the Bouira operation. One falsely claimed that all the passengers aboard the bus were Canadians. In other statements, AQIM defiantly insisted that it never has and never will target innocent Muslims.

## Expanding borders

While AQIM's is still the most active in the three governorates (Bouira, Tizi Ouzou and Boumerdes) in the Berber heartland east of Algiers, there have been a number of recent indications that the group is strengthening its terrorist presence in other eastern parts of the country. Other signs indicate that the Islamic insurgents, who up to now have been largely thwarted in their attempts to open a reliable bombing corridor to Algiers from the east, are attempting to spur such an opening from the west of the capital.

## Fighting back

In late August, government forces mounted an ambush against AQIM in which ten fighters were killed and at least one other captured. The attack was a reaction to reports that villagers in a remote area of Ain Defla governorate (70 miles west of Algiers) were being harassed by armed intruders. The guerillas were armed with five AK-47 assault weapons, four rifles and a grenade launcher. An important home base for AQIM's predecessor organizations during the mid-1990s, Ain Defla has been relatively peaceful for several years now.

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## The future of AQIM

Public outrage sparked by civilian deaths in recent AQIM bombings may cause the group to focus their operations on generating more collateral damage in the future. AQIM's nihilistic leaders are unlikely to stop the bombings altogether since in a military sense, they have been largely successful.

## Personal Security Advice

Foreigners living and working in Algeria should keep a low profile and avoid places where foreigners tend to gather. The number of employees representing foreign firms should be kept to a minimum and great care should be taken in selecting office locations.

Individuals and families can take simple steps that lower the risk of kidnapping.

**Be alert.** Be aware of your surroundings. If you see someone or something that is suspicious, react immediately.

**Be anonymous.** Don't discuss personal or business information with strangers. Don't advertise your affiliation. Luggage should not call attention to your status, company or affiliations. Baggage tags should bear only your name and phone number. Do not use company logos on luggage tags, shirts, jackets, bags or any other item that can be recognized.

**Be unpredictable.** Don't follow routines. Vary your routes, departure times and any other activity that can be used to predict your presence at a certain place and time.

Foreign companies operating in Algeria have an obligation to their employees to conduct a rigorous security and vulnerability assessment that identifies the risks. Security specialists should then rate those risks and discuss them with employees. Assessments need to be reviewed each quarter and adjustments made as necessary. Businesses should be in frequent contact with embassy security personnel and evacuation plans should also be prepared.

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