

**Sujet :** Algerian Situation Report

**De :** "Edward Gabriel" <ed.gabriel@thegabrielco.com>

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**Pour :** <ed.gabriel@thegabrielco.com>

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## **ALGERIA MONTHLY SITUATION REPORT**

### *Executive Summary*

#### **Political Trends**

- *Gen. Ahmed Kherfi has been replaced as head of the DSI, the domestic security branch of the DRS, by Gen. Bachir Tartag, who has a reputation for brutality in combating islamist subversion.*
- *Parliamentary elections which are to be held in the first half of May look set to be considerably more transparent than previous polls, and there is a strong possibility that islamist parties will fare particularly well.*
- *The regime appears to be preparing for a carefully managed hand-over to an islamist dominated coalition government, although this is likely to unsettle the 'secular-modernist' within the regime itself.*
- *In what seems to be a tactical move ahead of the elections, the government has begun legalising new political parties, the better to ensure that no single party can win an outright majority.*

#### **Foreign Relations**

- *Moroccan Foreign Minister S. Othmani's visit to Algeria – his first foreign trip since taking office – has been taken as a sign that a rapprochement between Rabat and Algiers is making headway.*
- *Othmani, like his colleagues in the new islamist-led, does not have an entirely free hand, however, and those who really wield power in both Rabat and Algiers still seem reluctant to make compromises over the key issues dividing them: the border, and Western Sahara.*
- *Morocco has been invited to take part in the second Ministerial Conference on security in the Sahara-Sahel region to be held in Bamako in February, largely because Algiers now recognises that broader international cooperation is necessary to confront the challenge of the spread of weapons from Libya across the region.*
- *A source at the Algerian presidency has spoken disparagingly of Polisario's ability to contribute to the counter-terrorism effort in the Sahara.*

#### **Security**

- *After a lull, AQMI's level of activity picked up again in late December and January. Most incidents were as usual concentrated in Kabylia.*
- *In the Algiers region, the security forces have clashed with jihadists just to the south of Houari Boumedienne Airport.*

- *The governor of Illizi province in the south-east has been abducted and held for a time in Libyan territory before being freed by a Libyan militia.*
- *Both AQMI's Sahel branch and the dissident group which kidnapped three Western aid workers from Polisario's camps in Tindouf last autumn have issued communiqués threatening France.*

## Political Trends

As the Algerian regime gingerly negotiates the changes brought on by the 'Arab Spring', there has been a change at the head of the crucial Directorate of Internal Security (DSI) within the DRS intelligence and security service. On Dec. 22, Gen. Abdelkader 'Ahmed' Kherfi, who had headed the DSI for just over two years, was replaced by Gen. Bachir 'Athmane' Tartag, a DRS career officer with a reputation as a hardliner<sup>[1]</sup>, who was apparently called back from retirement for the occasion.

The move – officially made necessary by Kherfi's unspecified health problems – attracted an unusually large volume of media comment, most of it speculative (and possibly encouraged by the military and security establishment itself), with various explanations being put forward for the change at the top of this important institution. *El Watan* claims Kherfi was dismissed because of “the many setbacks suffered by the security services in the fight against AQMI”; Tartag's task, the newspaper argues, is to “eradicate the last foci of AQMI that still exist in the north of the country and to prevent the possible proliferation of terrorism to the borders with Libya, Niger and Mali, particularly in the wake of the major geopolitical upheavals in North Africa”. *Le Matin* concurs that Kherfi was ditched because of shortcomings in counter-terrorism, pointing to the kidnapping of European aidworkers on from Polisario's Rabouni camp in October as a particular failing; the appointment of Tartag is “synonymous with a strategic shift in the strata of power”, argues *Le Matin*. Specialised news portal Kalima DZ notes that Gen. Kherfi “did not know how to, or could not, prevent the spread of riots, strikes, rallies and the media and the return of radical opposition” and suggests that Gen. Tartag will respond more swiftly, and more harshly, to events such as the food price riots that shook Algerian cities a year ago; thus “the Algerian generals have decided to raise a dam against the tide of history”. Another specialised website, Maghreb Intelligence, for its part, places the change at the head of the DSI in the context of a struggle for Lt-Gen. Mohamed 'Tewfik' Médiène's succession at the head of the DRS itself, suggesting that Tartag is Tewfik's preferred *dauphin*.

A source close to Tewfik to whom we spoke puts the removal of Kherfi down to a “business dispute of some sort” and insists that the change has nothing to do with the Tewfik's succession – notwithstanding occasional press speculation about his health, the DRS chief “isn't going anywhere” in the foreseeable future, insists the source. Even so, the choice of such a controversial figure as Tartag – who would certainly be the target of law suits from Algerian exile opposition groups for past human rights abuses should he ever have to travel to Europe – is by no means anodyne, and merits some consideration.

The change at the head of the DRS' domestic security arm comes at a sensitive time. Although there may be some sense that the Algerian regime has managed to ride out the worst of the turbulence of the Arab Spring, the coming parliamentary elections – due to be held in the first half of May – are likely to be a delicate moment. Conditions may not be in place for completely free and fair elections (amongst other things, the deeply flawed electoral registers have not been revised, leaving the door open to instances of multiple voting and other abuse), but the signs so far are that the regime is preparing for a poll that will be considerably more transparent than previous elections, in which rigging has on occasion been quite egregious – sizeable numbers of international observers are to

be invited this time, it would seem, and clear perspex ballot boxes are supposed to replace the eminently stuffable receptacles used in the past. Islamist parties – with considerable support in Algerian society at large, and buoyed by Islamist electoral victories in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt – are likely to fare the best in any reasonably free election, and indeed an Islamist parliamentary majority could by no means be ruled out. Indeed, it would seem to be in anticipation of this that the “house-trained” Islamist MSP announced on Jan. 1 that it was leaving the Presidential Alliance, in which it has been partnered with the FLN and the RND for the past eight years, and striking out on its own (albeit without giving up its ministerial portfolios for the time being). An *'alternance à la marocaine'* – a carefully prepared and managed handover to an Islamist-dominated coalition government – would appear to be the regime's chosen path, or at least an option that it is prepared to consider. Objectively, a government with an Islamist orientation is by no means incompatible with the interests of the regime's main stakeholders, as long as guarantees are given with regard to their power and privileges (immunity from prosecution for human rights abuses, respect for property rights including for those whose wealth was acquired through their proximity to the state apparatus, etc.) – after all, successive Presidential Alliance governments, under the influence of the MSP and the “Islamist-conservative” wing of the FLN led by Abdelaziz Belkhadem, have already done much for the re-Islamisation of social mores and, arguably, of the law. But subjectively the regime is encumbered with the legacy of the civil war of the 1990s and 2000s, during which it relied heavily on anti-Islamist discourse, expounded most consistently and persistently by the secular-modernists not only in the media and political class but also within the regime's own ranks, including in the Army and security services. These secular-modernist elements will certainly be alarmed by the slide towards an openly Islamist government, potentially provoking tensions within the regime's own organs. Against this background, the appointment of an officer with a reputation as an unflinching, indeed brutal, enemy of the Islamists to head the DSI may be designed to allay such misgivings.

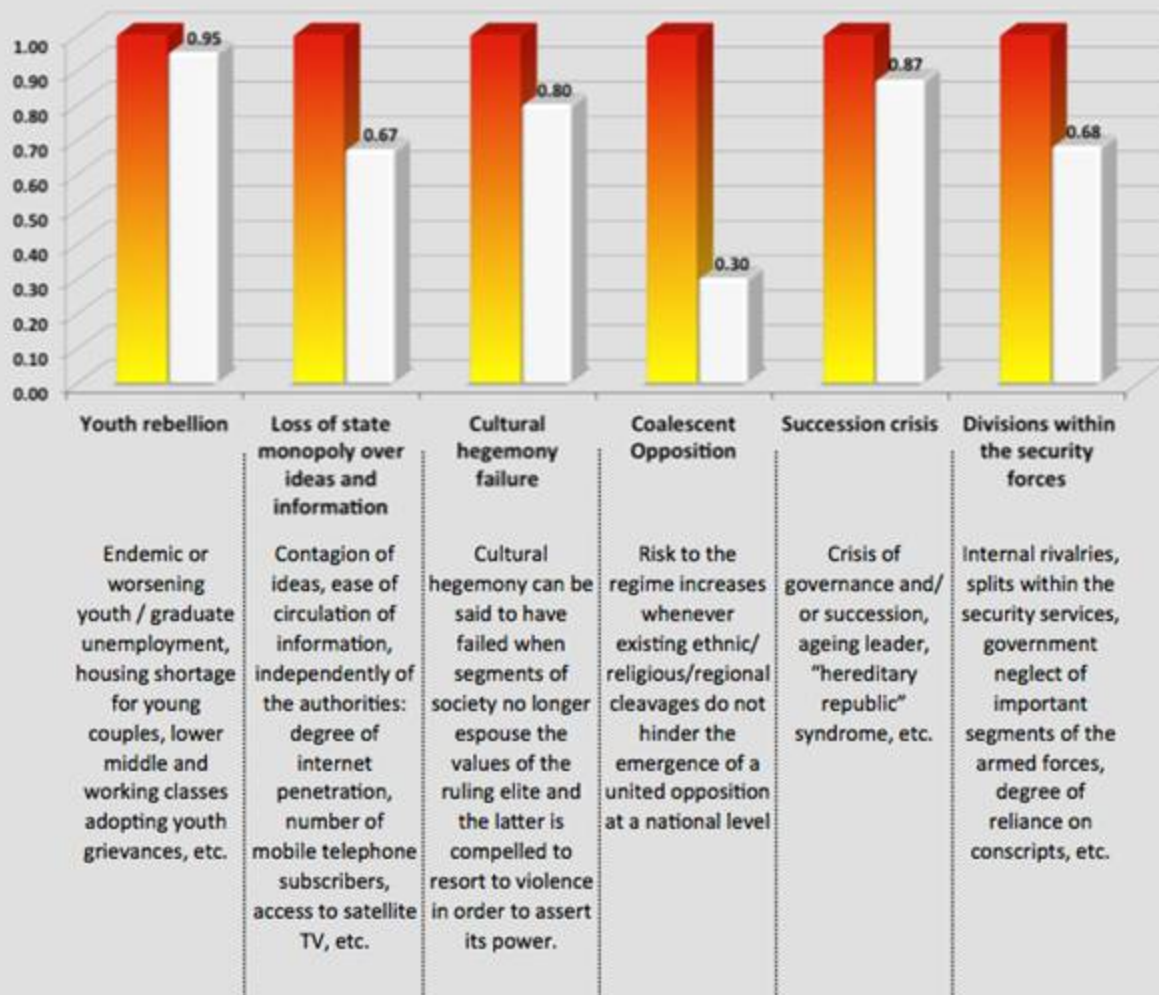
In the meantime, in preparing its tactics for the forthcoming election, the government appears to be doing all it can to balkanise the political landscape, so that no single political force can obtain a majority. In an apparent reversal of past practice, Interior Minister Daho Ould Kablia has given the go-ahead for at least ten new parties to hold their constituent assemblies and intimated that full authorisation to operate can be delivered within as little as a month – in plenty of time for the parliamentary elections. Among these are at least three Islamist parties: Abdelmajid Menasra's Front National pour le Changement (a split-off from the MSP), Ahmed Djaballah's Front pour la Justice et le Développement and Mohamed Saïd's Parti pour la Liberté et la Justice. While the Moroccan experience suggests that such a tactic can be very effective, it is worth considering that the multiplication of political groups is likely to increase the workload of the DRS, and more particularly the DSI, which has historically made a point not only of monitoring all political formations but also of maintaining agents of influence within them. Be it by accident or design, both the strategy and the tactics currently adopted by the Algerian regime seem to be guaranteed to enhance still further the specific weight of the DRS in general, and the DSI in particular.

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## Algeria risk factor levels

up to January 27

Score:  
0.00 (yellow): low.  
1.00 (red): high.



### Youth rebellion

Endemic or worsening youth / graduate unemployment, housing shortage for young couples, lower middle and working classes adopting youth grievances, etc.

### Loss of state monopoly over ideas and information

Contagion of ideas, ease of circulation of information, independently of the authorities: degree of internet penetration, number of mobile telephone subscribers, access to satellite TV, etc.

### Cultural hegemony failure

Cultural hegemony can be said to have failed when segments of society no longer espouse the values of the ruling elite and the latter is compelled to resort to violence in order to assert its power.

### Coalescent Opposition

Risk to the regime increases whenever existing ethnic/religious/regional cleavages do not hinder the emergence of a united opposition at a national level

### Succession crisis

Crisis of governance and/or succession, ageing leader, "hereditary republic" syndrome, etc.

### Divisions within the security forces

Internal rivalries, splits within the security services, government neglect of important segments of the armed forces, degree of reliance on conscripts, etc.

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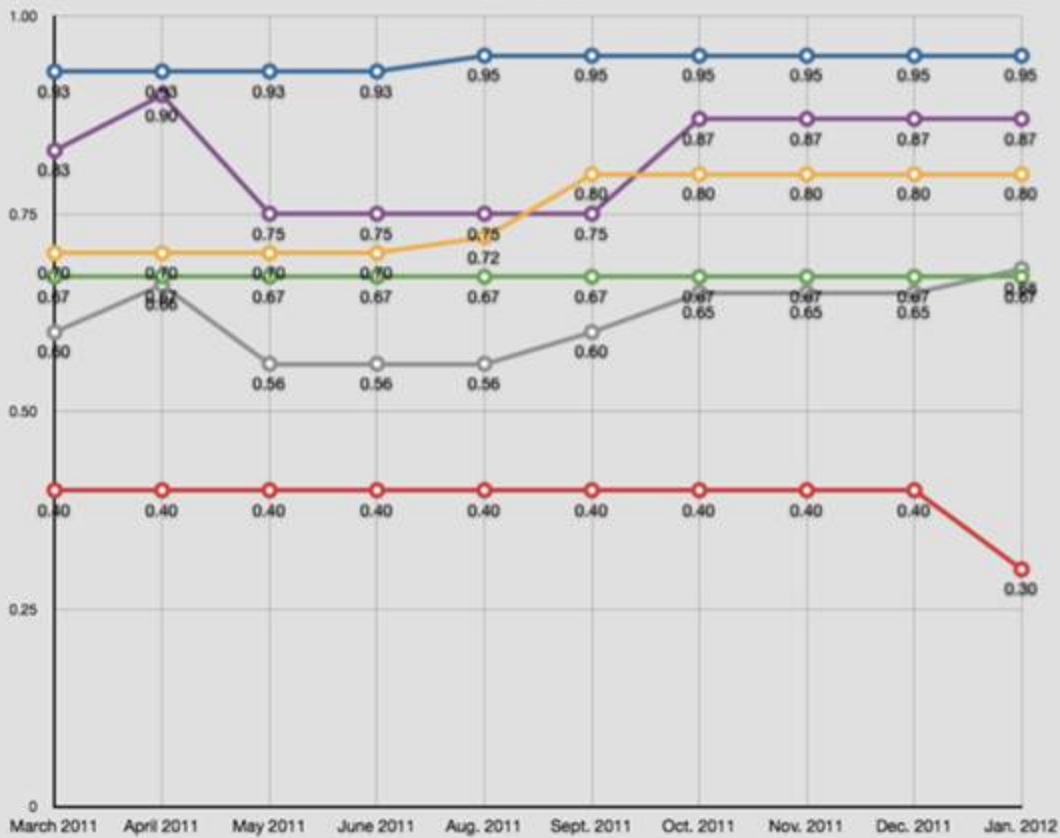
## Algeria risk factor levels

Changes between February 2011 and January 2012

- Youth rebellion
- Loss of state monopoly over ideas and information
- Cultural hegemony failure
- Coalescent Opposition
- Succession crisis
- Divisions within the security forces

Score:  
0.00: low.  
1.00: high.

Change over time



## Foreign Relations

Several months ago, it will be recalled, Algerian sources began to suggest that, with the old regional certainties crumbling around them, Algeria's leaders might envisage mending bridges with Morocco, in the hope of securing at least one stable relationship with a neighbouring country. More recently, shortly after Morocco's parliamentary elections last November in which the moderate Islamist PJD emerged as the largest single party, one of the party's top leaders intimated to us that one of the central points of its programme for government was a “re-examination” of Morocco's relations with Algeria and a creative re-think of all the disputes between the two countries (see AMSR #109). With the visit to Algiers this week by Morocco's new Foreign Minister Saadedine El Othmani (one of the PJD's main leaders), these trends towards rapprochement seemed at last to be coming together – an impression that was strengthened all the more by Algerian media reports that Morocco would henceforth be taking part in meetings of the so-called *pays du champ* group<sup>[2]</sup> devoted to security in the Sahara-Sahel region, from which it has so far been pointedly excluded.

El Othmani has made a point of choosing Algiers as the destination for his very first trip abroad as Foreign Minister, but it would no doubt be a mistake to see it as a revolution in relations between the two countries, or even the beginning of one. The PJD may be sincerely committed to reorienting Moroccan foreign policy towards ties with Arab and Muslim countries, beginning by clearing the air with Algeria, but in this as in other domains its hands are not entirely free. The elected, PJD-dominated government is effectively shadowed by what amounts to a parallel government of royal advisors at the Palace – among them El Othmani's predecessor Taïeb Fassi-Fihri, a long-time friend and associate of the King, who was given a position in the Palace team as soon as he had handed over the Foreign Ministry – and there is little or no realistic chance of El Othmani and his colleagues overstepping the boundaries set by the Palace.

To be sure, as Foreign Minister Fassi-Fihri himself had over the preceding months been making positive-sounding noises about normalisation of relations with Algeria (see AMSR #109). But there can be no prospect of qualitative change in relations between the two countries as long as each continues to insist on the other's total surrender on the two key bones of contention between them, to wit the question of the border and the fate of Western Sahara, and there is as yet no sign that either

Algiers or Rabat is really prepared to grasp those nettles<sup>[3]</sup>. Indeed, El Othmani was unable to discuss either the border or the Western Sahara question while in Algiers. El Othmani and his Algerian counterpart Mourad Medelci did promise one another that they would meet for “political talks” every six months, and it was announced that an Algerian-Moroccan High Joint Committee will meet in Rabat on February 17, but these steps are altogether in continuity with the policy followed by Fassi-Fihri. Arguably the most striking innovation of El Othmani's trip to Algiers was his one-on-one meeting with Boudjerra Soltani – the leader of the moderate Islamist MSP, who holds no government position – at the MSP headquarters on Jan. 24, after the completion of his official two-day visit.

The day after El Othmani left Algiers, Algerian Foreign Ministry spokesman Amar Belani poured cold water on reports that Morocco was to be invited to join the *pays du champ*. Morocco was not being inducted into the Algerian-led group, he explained, but simply invited along with numerous other countries to attend a far broader meeting on counter-terrorism in the Sahara to be held in the Malian capital Bamako in February. “The central core will remain exclusively limited to four countries – Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania – with the probable addition of Libya, when the Libyans request it,” Belani told news portal TSA, whereas Morocco is “an extra-regional partner which is not concerned by the meetings of the *pays du champ*, such as the one that was just held in Nouakchott.” In other words, what Morocco is being invited to is the follow-up to the Ministerial Conference on Security in the Sahel that was held in Algiers last September (with participation from the United States, other UN Security Council members and the countries of the European Union).

This is a long way short of full-blown security cooperation. But the invitation extended to Morocco to attend the second Ministerial Conference is a breakthrough of sorts – despite pressure from



France, Algiers is understood to have refused to invite the Moroccans to the first edition back in September (see AMSR #107). A staffer at the Algerian presidency tells us that the decision to invite Morocco – along with Libya, Tunisia<sup>[4]</sup> and Egypt – this time round is dictated by one simple necessity: the need to do something about the proliferation of Libyan weaponry across the Sahara-Sahel region, up to and including Morocco, where the authorities have seized weapons that have been smuggled in from Libya<sup>[5]</sup>. A Mauritanian political source, believed to be close to President Ould Abdelaziz<sup>[6]</sup>, goes further, arguing that Algiers has been “compelled to review its strategy” with regard to counter-terrorism cooperation, in large part because it is “genuinely terrified about the possibility of proliferation of Libyan weapons” on its own territory. The Algerians have been pushed in this direction by a number of warning signs, according to the Mauritanian source: the revival of the Tuareg insurrection in northern Mali (where Algeria was supposed to be the guarantor of peace and national reconciliation), led by Tuareg fighters who have returned from Libya with abundant supplies of arms<sup>[7]</sup>; an increasingly active presence in southern Algeria itself of AQMI units answering to the organisation's Sahel leaders Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abou Zeid; and intelligence the source claims was supplied by the Mauritanian security services relating to an alleged AQMI plan for the destabilisation of southern Algeria. These factors, combined with prodding from the United States, France and (the source claims) Mauritania, are said to have prompted Algiers to begin moving away from the “rigid conception of sovereignty” underpinning its security doctrine, which had been a hindrance to effective cooperation in the fight against transnational terrorism.

According to the Mauritanian political source, the toughest task the Mauritians faced in persuading the Algerians to be more accommodating was to convince them that drawing Morocco into the fight against transnational terrorism need not affect Polisario's situation in any way. For his part, the source at the Algerian presidency made only the briefest of allusions to Polisario, noting that questions had been raised in Algerian political circles as to why the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic had not been invited to the Ministerial Conference in Bamako and arguing that, although Polisario was of course concerned by the struggle against terrorism, it “lacks the necessary means to participate effectively”. This rather terse evaluation may reflect a degree of dissatisfaction and frustration on the part of the Algerian leadership with Polisario's ham-fisted performance in the wake of the kidnapping of Western aid workers from Rabouni camp near Tindouf, on which we commented in our last report.

## Security

Following an exceptionally quiet period in the first three weeks of December 2011 (see previous report), AQMI stepped up its activity in the final days of 2011<sup>[8]</sup>. The month of January saw a further acceleration, with 23 operations recorded up to January 26.

As usual, the great majority of AQMI operations took place in Kabylia (out of 34 incidents recorded for the period December 20-January 26, 18 were at the initiative of AQMI, and of these no fewer than 14, most of them roadside bombs, occurred in Kabylia). In the **ALGIERS** area the security forces on January 8 ambushed and shot dead two jihadists on the road from Khemis el-Khechna to Hammadi, between the wilayas of Boumerdès and Algiers, about 10km south of Houari Boumedienne International Airport. One soldier was wounded and died in hospital four days later.

Elsewhere, the most remarkable incident came on January 16 when a group of armed men kidnapped the governor of Illizi, Mohamed Laïd Khelfi, near Deb Deb and took him across the border into Libya. He was liberated by Libyan fighters the next day and returned to Algeria on January 18, suffering a broken shoulder. The three kidnappers were locals protesting against heavy prison sentences received by their relatives in a terror-related case in early January.<sup>[9]</sup> The town of Deb



Deb had seen several demonstrations and sit-ins the previous week, prompting the governor to visit the town hoping to calm the situation, only to be abducted on the way back. AQMI issued a statement dated Jan. 18 “saluting the intifada of our people in Deb Deb” and declaring its support for the locals’ “fight for justice”. It also warned the new Libyan authorities not to hand over the kidnappers to Algeria. Despite its quick denouement, this affair is deeply embarrassing to the Algerian government. The fact that a regional governor was kidnapped<sup>[10]</sup> so easily by “amateurs” in what should be a high-security zone near the Libyan border seriously dents the credibility of Algeria’s security services at a time when the situation around Algeria’s frontiers remains dangerously volatile.

To the east, Libya remains chaotic. In addition to weapons smuggling, Algerian authorities now have to face the threat of regular incursions by unruly Libyan fighters, while on at least two occasions in January, Libyan fighters detained Algerian citizens who they claimed had crossed into Libyan territory. It cannot be excluded that such incursions could lead to isolated clashes between Libyan militias and Algerian forces.

Across Algeria's southern borders, while the revival of the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali (see above) adds another dimension to Algiers' difficulties, AQMI itself has been comparatively quiet<sup>[11]</sup>. On January 12, however, AQMI sent a statement to a Mauritanian news agency saying it has “reliable information” that France, “with backing from Algeria and Mauritania,” is preparing a military operation to liberate Western hostages detained by the group. The statement goes on to warn European countries that such a move “would mean you are signing the death sentence of your citizens”. France was also the target of threats from *Jamat Tawhid wal Jihad fi Gharbi Afriqqiya* (Unicity and Jihad in West Africa), the previously-unknown group which on December 10 claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Western aid workers from Rabouni camp near Tindouf (see AMSR #108). On January 3 the group, which describes its members as AQMI dissidents, sent a statement to AFP “declaring war on France, the enemy of Islam”, accompanied by a video of the three hostages it captured at Rabouni in October. **END**

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- [1] From 1990 to 2001 – a decade which comprised the worst years of Algeria's 'dirty war' – Tartag, then a colonel, headed the Centre Principal Militaire d'Investigation at Ben Aknoun, Algiers, a unit of the DRS which had a sombre reputation as a torture centre and home base for death squads.
- [2] “Countries of the field”. To date, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Mauritania, who, on paper at least, participate in the joint military command (CEMOC) for the Sahara formally established at a summit in Algiers in 2010.
- [3] Algerian news website TSA has, it is true, reported that the Algerian police is undertaking “technical preparations” for the opening of the land border, suggesting that the border could be opened to traffic as soon as early May, but this claim – which is by no means without precedent – remains for the time being unconfirmed.
- [4] The exact date of the second Ministerial Conference has not yet been set, it would seem, in part because the organisers are still waiting for Libya and Tunisia to confirm that they will send representatives.
- [5] This is coherent with what we had heard from Moroccan sources last autumn. One non-governmental source told us in mid-November: “The security forces — police, Border Guard, the Gendarmerie and Auxiliary Forces — are on maximum alert, with specific instructions to take all measures necessary to prevent shipments of weapons, which are supposed to be on their way from Libya, from reaching Moroccan territory. Border areas adjacent to Algeria and Mauritania are subject to exceptional surveillance measures. ... Over the past few weeks, vehicles transporting foreigners have [also] been stopped and checked from the area north of Laayoune, and at the entry points to every Sahrawi town and village. The police freely admit they are looking for weapons coming from Libya.”
- [6] Who visited Algiers for talks on security with President Bouteflika in mid-December, it will be recalled.

[7] On Jan. 16 and 17, the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad, a new group formed out of a merger of Malian Tuareg rebel factions, launched an offensive with attacks on the towns of Menaka, near the border with Niger, Aguelhok and Tessalit, near the border with Algeria. A number of Algerian soldiers were reportedly evacuated from Tessalit. On Jan. 26, the rebels are reported to have taken control of the town of Aguelhoc near the border with Niger and an abandoned Malian army camp at Léré, close to the border with Mauritania. A Malian government communiqué claimed that “AQMI fighters” took part in the raids alongside MNLA fighters, but this seems unlikely insofar as one of the Tuareg rebels' complaints against the central government is that it has effectively given carte blanche to AQMI to establish a safe haven in the Tuareg lands of northern Mali.

[8] As a result, the level of jihadist activity in December was on balance comparable with what was seen in the previous months (21 operations all told, down from 23 in November and 22 in October).

[9] On January 2, a court in Algiers sentenced Abdelhamid Abou-Zeid, one of the chiefs of AQMI in Sahel and a native of Deb Deb, to life in prison and five members of his family to ten years in prison each on charges of “forming an international armed group”.

[10] The first time a regional governor has been kidnapped since the troubles began.

[11] The group's only reported action being the abduction of a Mauritanian gendarme on December 20, after which it issued a communiqué calling on the “Mauritanian regime” to free two of its prisoners in exchange for the soldier's release.