

Security in the Sahara and Sahel: The growing threat posed by the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf

Evidence has become overwhelming that members from the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf, Algeria fought alongside al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for United and Jihad (MUJAO) in northern Mali, and continue to engage in drug and arms smuggling in the Sahara/Sahel. Recent reports confirm that the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf have become not only a recruiting ground for terrorists and traffickers operating in the region, but also a potential place of refuge for jihadists forced out of northern Mali by the actions of French and African forces.

Indeed, on May 22, the **Carnegie Endowment for International Peace** released a new book, "Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara," which reported that AQIM "has found an attractive base of supporters and recruits" in the Sahara/Sahel region. It cited increasing inroads by the group in Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and the Polisario-run refugee camps near Tindouf, which the book said represent "a tinderbox waiting to explode."¹

A week earlier, the **UN Security Council** warned that an "Arc of Instability" was stretching across the region, which, if left unchecked, "could transform the continent into a breeding ground for extremists and a launch pad for larger-scale terrorist attacks around the world."²

These warnings followed earlier reports about the extent of Polisario-member involvement in terrorism and trafficking in the region. On April 16, **Agence France Press** cited reports from an African soldier that jihadists in northern Mali were attempting to reorganize in neighboring countries, including in the Algerian camps of the Polisario Front.³ According to the soldier quoted by AFP, members of MUJAO had fled to the Algerian camps of the Polisario Front.



On March 15, the **Foreign Minister of Mali, Tieman Coulibaly**, confirmed that, "Polisario elements from the Tindouf camps have been identified with MUJAO fighters operating in northern Mali," adding that Polisario militia members were recruited and paid monthly "salaries ranging from 200 to 600 Euros" to fight for the AQIM-linked MUJAO. A member of the Polisario Front was likewise among seven militants taken prisoner in the battle that killed AQIM leader Abou Zeid on March 1.⁴

These developments and the region's descent into instability and terrorist violence have only increased the urgency to negotiate a solution to resolve the dispute over the Western Sahara – a long-standing conflict that has significantly inhibited regional cooperation to fight terrorism. This urgency has recently been acknowledged by **UN leader Ban-Ki Moon**, who on April 9 called for urgent international efforts to end the Western Sahara conflict because of fears the Mali war will spill over into the territory.

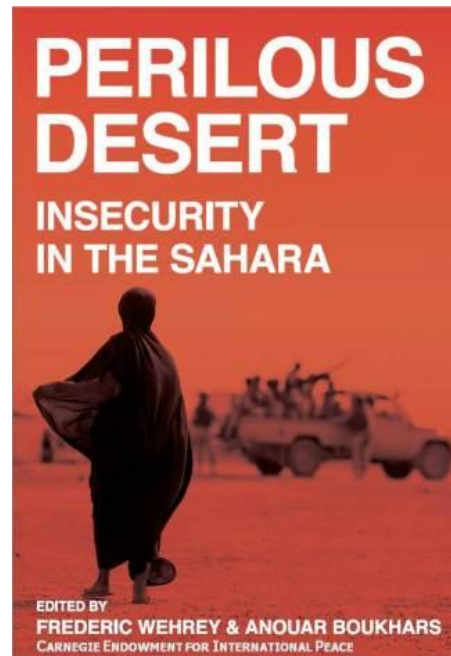
In a report to the 15-member Security Council, Ban argued, "The rise of instability and insecurity in and around the Sahel requires an urgent settlement of this long-standing dispute."⁵

The UN report added, "All governments consulted raised serious concerns over the risk that the fighting in Mali could spill over into neighboring countries and contribute to radicalizing the Western Saharan refugee camps," which one government leader in the region called "a ticking time bomb."

A review of documented incidents and expert reports confirms that the Polisario-run camps are becoming a recruiting ground for AQIM, a hub for opportunistic Polisario members trafficking arms across the Sahel and drugs into Europe, and a threat to the security of the region and reforms of the Arab Spring. The most significant of these recent developments includes:

- **Members of the Polisario fought alongside AQIM and MUJAO in northern Mali and are engaged in terrorist incidents throughout the region** – On February 4, 2013, Malian foreign minister Tiéman Coulibaly confirmed the presence of Polisario fighters among terrorist groups in Mali. He noted that Polisario militia members had been recruited to fight as mercenaries for MUJAO. His statement reaffirmed previous reports that as many as 300 members of the Polisario were fighting in northern Mali.⁶
- **Members of the Polisario have developed high-level links with al-Qaeda leaders operating in Mali** - On March 1, 2013, Le Figaro and France 24 reported that a fighter from the Polisario Front was among seven militants take prisoner after the battle which killed key al-Qaeda leaders Abou Zeid.⁷
- **The Polisario-run camps near Tindouf, Algeria have become a recruiting ground for traffickers and terrorists** – In December 2012, CNA Strategic Studies warned "there is evidence that AQIM has infiltrated the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, as well as indications that Sahrawi from these camps have jointed terrorist groups based in Mali."⁸

The CNA study cited the threat as posing "immediate concerns for the security of Western Sahara, Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria," not to mention US interests in the region.



According to the May 2013 book, "Perilous Desert," from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, growing numbers of disenchanted Polisario youth and fighters are being recruited by AQIM and a vast network of regional drug traffickers, adding that "there is growing evidence to suggest dangerous connections between criminal organizations, AQIM, and the Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf."⁹

- **Polisario-linked drug and arms smuggling rings are operating in the Sahel** – In the last two years, Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali have arrested dozens of Polisario members caught leading or operating major drug and arms trafficking rings in the region. These rings have been linked to AQIM and South American cartels engaged in trans-Atlantic drugs-for-arms trade with end markets in Europe and the Americas.

Recent estimates of the value of this trafficking amount to nearly \$1 billion US dollars annually.¹⁰

In September 2012, a [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) report detailed the extent of Polisario involvement, implicating Sahrawi networks with close ties to the Polisario in the drug and aid trafficking that accounts for much of the organized crime in the region. The report notes, “In the triangle between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, Sahrawi networks—often with the direct involvement of officials in the Polisario movement, which seeks independence for Western Sahara—trade subsidized Algerian goods and humanitarian aid southward and cigarettes northward to Algeria and Morocco.”¹¹

Further, a February 2013 study by the **IUCTS** cites intelligence reports that confirm al-Qaeda “has established links with Latin cartels for ‘drugs-for-arms’ smuggling through terrorist-trafficking networks that include members of the Polisario Front” in Algeria.¹²



- **Polisario recruits have carried out and assisted in AQIM kidnappings** – On October 23, 2011, Polisario insiders reportedly helped an offshoot of [AQIM kidnap three Western aid workers](#) from the Polisario-run refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria.¹³ The [Spanish aid workers were held for 9 months](#) and released for an alleged ransom of \$18.4 million. As a result of the insecurity in the camps, in July 2012 [Spain evacuated all of its aid workers](#), citing “well-founded evidence of a serious increase in insecurity in the region” and “the serious risk of new kidnappings.”¹⁴

¹ Wehrey, Frederic and Anouar Boukhars, eds. *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

² “‘Arc of Instability’ across Africa, If Left Unchecked, Could Turn Continent into Launch Pad for Larger-Scale Terrorist Attacks, Security Council Told.” *UN News Centre*, May 13, 2013, <<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2013/sc11004.doc.htm>>.

³ Daniel, Serge. “Defeated in Mali, Islamists begin to reorganize.” *Agence France Presse*, April 16, 2013, <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130416/defeated-mali-islamists-begin-reorganise>>.

⁴ “Ministre malien : Le Polisario livre des mercenaires au MUJAO contre des mensualités de 600 euros.” *LeMag*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.lemag.ma/Ministre-malien-Le-Polisario-livre-des-mercenaires-au-MUJAO-contre-des-mensualites-de-600-euros_a68461.html>.

“Le ministre malien des Affaires étrangères: ‘Le soutien et l’aide du Maroc au Mali sont déterminants pour nous’.” *AtlasInfo*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.atlasinfo.fr/Le-ministre-malien-des-Affaires-etrangees-Le-soutien-et-l-aide-du-Maroc-au-Mali-sont-determinants-pour-nous_a38888.html>.

“Mali : combattant d'Aqmi, il rapporte la mort d'Abou Zeid.” *Le Figaro*, March 1, 2013, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/03/01/01003-20130301ARTFIG00354-mali-combattant-d-aqmi-il-rapporte-la-mort-d-abou-zeid.php>>

⁵ Witcher, Tim. “Ban says W. Sahara risks being drawn into Mali war.” *Agence France Presse*, April 9, 2013, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iOnupKvBuc8l_WTR3J5BnNCFnmEw?docId=CNG.566cbe22180951c72bc8d9c6ad6fd9d1.d1>.

⁶ “Le ministre malien des Affaires étrangères: ‘Le soutien et l’aide du Maroc au Mali sont déterminants pour nous’.” *AtlasInfo*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.atlasinfo.fr/Le-ministre-malien-des-Affaires-etrangees-Le-soutien-et-l-aide-du-Maroc-au-Mali-sont-determinants-pour-nous_a38888.html>.

⁷ “Mali : combattant d'Aqmi, il rapporte la mort d'Abou Zeid.” *Le Figaro*, March 1, 2013, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/03/01/01003-20130301ARTFIG00354-mali-combattant-d-aqmi-il-rapporte-la-mort-d-abou-zeid.php>>.

⁸ Volger, Sarah. “Security Challenges in Libya and the Sahel.” *CNA Strategic Studies*, December 2012, <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/Libya_Sahel_Security_Workshop.pdf>.

⁹ Wehrey, Frederic and Anouar Boukhars, eds. *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013). April 2013. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹⁰ “Ban calls for boost in efforts to fight organized crime in West Africa and Sahel.” *UN Press Centre*, February 21, 2012, <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41314&Cr=organized+crime&Cr1=>>>.

¹¹ Lacher, Wolfram. “Organized Crime in the Sahel-Sahara Region.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf>.

¹² Alexander, Yonah. “Terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel in 2012: Global Reach and Implications.” *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies/International Law Institute*, February 2013, <<http://www.terrorismelectronicjournal.org/knowledge-base/selected-special-reports/>>.

¹³ “Three Qaeda hostages seized last week alive: mediator.” *Agence France Presse*, October 30, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gfsKPTlgBS_IQzBQK_R-Fdj_z0A?docId=CNG.fb5674e8c48dbb7ef3f59c256d4c3f07.531>.

¹⁴ “Spain evacuates aid workers.” *BBC*, July 28, 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19034164>>.

Chronology

Documented incidents and reports linking members from the Polisario-run camps with AQIM, trafficking, and other illicit activities in the region.

May 28, 2013

Washington Post's Jennifer Rubin interviewed N. Africa expert Anouar Boukhars, who cited the UN Secretary General's warning about terrorist reach into the Polisario-run camps in Algeria. "This is the first time that the UN chief acknowledged what many experts have been describing for years now as a 'ticking time bomb'...Even the Polisario have not ruled out terrorist infiltrations." Rubin wrote: "In a region awash with weapons, human and drug trafficking, and political unrest, al-Qaeda's local affiliates, especially AQIM, are flourishing. Throw into the mix the violent separatist Polisario Front, which seeks independence for the Western Sahara while maintaining squalid refugee camps in Algeria, and you have a breeding ground for new generations of terrorists."¹⁵



May 23, 2013

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who led the Jan. 16, 2013 attack at In Amenas in Algeria, joined Mali-based al-Qaeda splinter group Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) for two attacks in Niger that killed 20 people at a military base and uranium-mine site supplying France's nuclear power plants.¹⁶ MUJWA spokesman Abu Walid Sahraoui, identified as a former Polisario Front member by *Le Monde*,¹⁷ said the attacks targeted "the enemies of Islam in Niger... We attacked France, and Niger because of its co-operation with France, in the war against Sharia."

May 22, 2013

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace releases a new book, *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahel*, edited by N. Africa experts Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars. The book cites increasing inroads by AQIM and allies in terrorism and trafficking across the Sahara/Sahel region, including Libya, Mali, Mauritania, and Polisario-run refugee camps in Algeria. In a chapter on W. Sahara, Boukhars writes the unresolved conflict has "negatively impacted trans-Saharan security. The undergoverned areas abutting the W. Sahara, especially N. Mauritania and the Polisario-administered camps in SW Algeria, are becoming major hubs for drug trafficking, the smuggling of contraband, and the circulation of weapons." Boukhars further notes, "There is growing evidence to suggest dangerous connections between criminal organizations, AQIM, and the Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf."¹⁸

April 16, 2013

AFP reports that jihadists fleeing French and African forces are trying to seek refuge and reorganize in Mali and neighboring countries, including Algerian camps of the Polisario Front. According to an African soldier quoted by *AFP*, MUJWA members had fled to the Algerian camps of the Polisario. The source further noted, "Recently, when the highest UN authorities have expressed their concern and called for urgent settlement of the Western Sahara problem, it is because of the risk of terrorists turning the refugee camps into a new home for jihadists."¹⁹

April 9, 2013

UN leader Ban Ki-Moon calls for urgent international efforts to end the Western Sahara conflict because of fears the Mali war will spill over into the territory. In a report to the Security Council, Ban argued, "The rise of instability and insecurity in and around the Sahel requires an urgent settlement of this long-standing dispute." The report added, "All governments consulted raised serious concerns over the risk that the fighting in Mali could spill over into neighboring countries and contribute to radicalizing the Western Saharan refugee camps," with one government leader in the region calling the Western Sahara camps "a ticking time bomb," according to the report.²⁰

¹⁵ Rubin, Jennifer. "North Africa: Breeding Grounds for Terror." *Washington Post*, 28 May, 2013,

<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2013/05/28/north-africa-breeding-grounds-for-terror/>>

¹⁶ "Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'masterminded' Niger suicide bombs." *BBC World News*. 24 May, 2013, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-22654584>>

¹⁷ Bozonnet, Charlotte, Nathalie Guibert, and Christophe Châtelot. "Des djihadistes frappent le Niger et la France." *Le Monde*, 24 May, 2013.

<http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/05/24/des-djihadistes-frappent-le-niger-et-la-france_3416795_3210.html>

¹⁸ Wehrey, Frederic and Anouar Boukhars, eds. *Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013).

¹⁹ Daniel, Serge. "Defeated in Mali, Islamists begin to reorganize." *AFP*, April 16, 2013, <<http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130416/defeated-mali-islamists-begin-reorganise>>

²⁰ Witcher, Tim. "Ban says W. Sahara risks being drawn into Mali war." *Agence France Presse*, April 9, 2013,

March 16, 2013

The Foreign Minister of Mali, Tieman Coulibaly, confirms that Polisario fighters were among the al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups in his country. "Polisario elements from the Tindouf camps have been identified with MUJAO fighters operating in northern Mali," Coulibaly said, adding that Polisario militia members had been recruited to fight as mercenaries and paid monthly "salaries ranging from 200 to 600 Euros."²¹



March 1, 2013

Le Figaro reports that a fighter from the Polisario was among seven militants taken prisoner after a fierce battle between French/Chadian forces and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali. The battle in the mountains of northern Mali reportedly killed key al-Qaeda leader Abou Zeid and 42 other jihadists.²²

February 27, 2013

The *Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies* at the *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies* publishes a new report on terrorism, "Terrorism in North Africa & the Sahel in 2012: Global Reach & Implications," which notes that al-Qaeda has "established links with Latin cartels for 'drugs-for-arms' smuggling into Europe with terrorist-trafficking networks in the Sahel that include members of the Polisario Front." The report recommends that the international community take a "closer look at the refugee camps run by the Polisario near Tindouf, Algeria: in order to reduce the flow of recruits to terrorist and criminal groups."²³

February 4, 2013

Malian foreign minister Tiéman Coulibaly confirms the presence of Polisario fighters among terrorist groups in Mali. In an *AtlasInfo* interview he notes, "In the beginning, they were only 500 insurgents. Now they are between 5,500 to 7,000 terrorists in N. Mali who were joined by lost youths, including young Sahrawis from the camps."²⁴

January 29, 2013

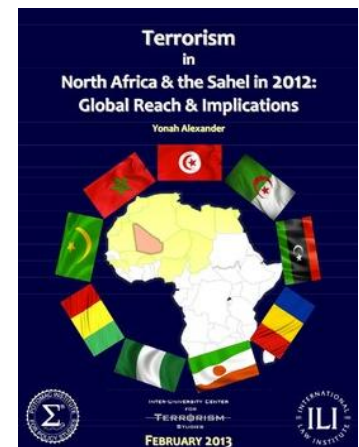
Al-Arabiya reports that 300 fighters from the Polisario are fighting as part of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in Northern Mali.²⁵

December 2012

A *CNA Strategic Studies*' report, "Security Challenges in Libya and the Sahel," warns "there is evidence that AQIM has infiltrated the Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria, as well as indications that Sahrawi from the camps have joined terrorist groups based in Mali." The report stresses that this development poses "immediate concerns for the security of Western Sahara, Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria."²⁶

November 11, 2012

Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin notes that jihadists have been flooding into Mali, arguing that "AQIM is on the rise throughout the Maghreb, opportunistically teaming up with other groups (like the violent, separatist Polisario) and setting up shop wherever the central government is in disarray."²⁷



<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iOnupKvBuc8l_WTR3J5BnNCFnmEw?docId=CNG.566cbe22180951c72bc8d9c6ad6fd9d1.d1>.

²¹ "Ministre malien : Le Polisario livre des mercenaires au MUJAO contre des mensualités de 600 euros." *LeMag*, March 16, 2013, <http://www.lemag.ma/Ministre-malien-Le-Polisario-livre-des-mercenaires-au-MUJAO-contre-des-mensualites-de-600-euros_a68461.html>.

²² "Mali : combattant d'Aqmi, il rapporte la mort d'Abou Zeid." *Le Figaro*, March 1, 2013, <<http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/03/01/01003-20130301ARTFIG00354-mali-combattant-d-aqmi-il-rapporte-la-mort-d-abou-zeid.php>>.

²³ Alexander, Yonah. "Terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel in 2012: Global Reach and Implications." *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies/International Law Institute*, February 2013, <<http://www.terrorisemelectronicjournal.org/knowledge-base/selected-special-reports/>>.

²⁴ "Le ministre malien des Affaires étrangères: 'Le soutien et l'aide du Maroc au Mali sont déterminants pour nous'." *AtlasInfo*, February 4, 2013, <http://www.atlasinfo.fr/Le-ministre-malien-des-Affaires-etrangeres-Le-soutien-et-l-aide-du-Maroc-au-Mali-sont-determinants-pour-nous_a38888.html>.

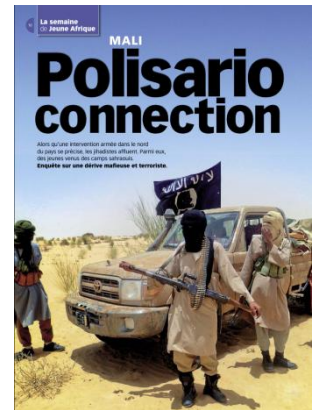
²⁵ Allani, Alaya. "Does Mali's War feed or devastate al-Qaeda ambitions?" *Al Arabiya*, January 29, 2013, <<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/01/29/263309.html>>.

²⁶ Volger, Sarah. "Security Challenges in Libya and the Sahel." *CNA Strategic Studies*, December 2012, <http://www.cna.org/sites/default/files/research/Libya_Sahel_Security_Workshop.pdf>.

²⁷ Rubin, Jennifer. "Al-Qaeda on the march." *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/al-qaeda-on-the-march/2012/11/10/5c5faaa6-2abc-11e2-96b6-8e6a7524553f_blog.html>.

October 28, 2012

Jeune Afrique publishes an article, “Mali: Polisario connection” on reports that recruits from the Polisario-run camps and Sahel have joined jihadists in N. Mali. It cites French intelligence reports that groups of 40-60 men, up to 300 volunteers, arrived in Timbuktu and Gao in October, “many of whom express themselves in Hassaniya, the Arabic dialect used by Moors and Sahrawis.” *Jeune Afrique* says Sahrawis with military training in the Polisario camps have been implicated in other terrorist incidents and notes neither the Polisario nor Algerians have been able to stop the “Salafist virus” in the Tindouf camps, and have been even less able to prevent “desperados” leaving the camps to join jihadist movements. While Algerian and Polisario security now police together, the extremist appeal remains strong and “no roadblock, no patrol, no minefield will prevent [them] from taking the path to Timbuktu.”²⁸



October 22, 2012

Agence France Presse reports that hundreds of jihadist fighters have poured into Mali to support the Islamists of AQIM and MUJAO that have controlled the northern part of the country for seven months. Quoting a Malian security official, the article notes, “in the Timbuktu region and around Gao, hundreds of jihadists, mostly Sudanese and Sahrawi, have arrived as reinforcements to face an offensive by Malian forces and their allies.” The article also cites one of MUJAO’s top leaders, Habib Ould Issouf, who said that recruits were coming from the camps of Tindouf Algeria, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, and elsewhere.²⁹

October 8, 2012

Jeune Afrique publishes an editorial citing reports by European/Maghreb intelligences sources that hundreds of recruits are joining al-Qaeda-linked extremist groups in northern Mali from the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf, Algeria and from across the region. The editorial argues that young Sahrawis have increasingly joined AQIM and MUJAO because of their lack of hope for a future – “trained in weapons, indoctrinated by Salafist imams who openly advocate in the camps for the creation of an Islamic State in the Western Sahara, these fighters are welcomed with open arms by their Algerian brothers.”³⁰

September 2012

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace publishes a report written by Wolfram Lacher, “Organized Crime in the Sahara-Sahel region” examining the growing impact of organized crime in the region and the involvement of both state and militant groups in such crime. Lacher implicates Sahrawi networks with close ties to the Polisario in the drug and aid trafficking that accounts for much of the organized crime in the region: “In the triangle between Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria, Sahrawi networks—often with the direct involvement of officials in the Polisario movement, which seeks independence for Western Sahara—trade subsidized Algerian goods and humanitarian aid southward and cigarettes northward to Algeria and Morocco.” Lacher further notes, “In some cases, Sahrawi cannabis resin smugglers with close ties to the Polisario have been known to take cocaine to Morocco on their way back from Mali.”³¹

August 9, 2012

Jeune Afrique reports dozens of youth from the refugee camps near Tindouf have joined MUJAO, the AQIM splinter group whose current spokesman, Abou Walid Saharoui, is a former member of the Polisario Front.³²

July 28, 2012

Spain evacuates all its aid workers, as well as three other foreign nationals, from camps in Tindouf, Algeria, citing “well-founded evidence of a serious increase in insecurity in the region” and “serious risks of new kidnappings.”³³

²⁸ Soudan, François. “Mali: Polisario Connection.” *Jeune Afrique*, October 28, 2012, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2703p010-013.xml0/>>.

²⁹ Daniel, Serge. “Foreign jihadists pour into northern Mali.” *Agence France Presse*, October 22, 2012, <<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iKv6nQ28GeXS3g6FlueGWHfzdzjw?docId=CNG.46aa49b0d9ec1aa0315758bc1eb223b5.221>>.

³⁰ Soudan, François. “Tempête de sable.” *Jeune Afrique*, October 8, 2012, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2700p006-007.xml0/>>.

³¹ Lacher, Wolfram. “Organized Crime in the Sahel-Sahara Region.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/sahel_sahara.pdf>.

³² “Sahara Occidental: le syndrome malien.” *Jeune Afrique*, August 9, 2012, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2691p006-007.xml0/>>.

July 20, 2012

The three Spanish aid workers kidnapped from a refugee camp near Tindouf, Algeria in October 2011 and held in northern Mali are released, allegedly for an \$18.4 million ransom.³⁴

June 27, 2012

Soufan Group issues an intelligence brief warning of fallout of the Libya conflict and unintended benefits for AQIM: “buoyed by the flow of arms and fighters out of Libya, the group initiated skirmishes with government forces in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger during the last months of 2011.” It notes, “More ominously, AQIM also increased its linkages with other rebel forces in the Sahel, including the Polisario Front... In late October, three aid workers—Italian & 2 Spaniards—were seized by AQIM militants (aided by Sahrawi sympathizers) inside a camp administered by the Polisario separatists near the Algerian town of Tindouf. The connection was not surprising given that the large numbers of idle young Polisario fighters with no prospects present the terrorist group with a ready pool of potential recruits, both for its military operations as well as the drug smuggling and other criminal activities.”³⁵

April 6, 2012

Malian separatists declare independence in N. Mali in what experts fear may be a “rogue state” in the Sahara.³⁶ National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad is backed by militant Islamic group Ansar Dine, AQIM, and the AQIM splinter, Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, in seizing Gao & Timbuktu, creating “a security nightmare.” Experts warn that along with AQIM, “the Polisario will gain more power” from the crisis in Mali.³⁷ Africa expert Dr. J. Peter Pham cites the importance of resolving the W. Sahara. “It is like before 9/11, when we might have asked ourselves: ‘Who cares about Afghanistan?’ But jihadists ultimately need a place to operate and what we are now seeing is the creation of a safe haven for terrorists and extremists who are being squeezed out elsewhere.”³⁸

March 12, 2012

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace publishes a paper citing the “disturbing reality” that rising numbers of disenchanted Polisario youth and fighters are recruited by AQIM and a “vast network” of traffickers. The paper, by Anouar Boukhars, cites the Oct. 23 kidnapping of Western aid workers in the Polisario camps as confirmation that “deteriorating social & political conditions in the camps in Tindouf represent a tinderbox waiting to explode.” It also notes that AQIM-Polisario member links pose “a major security threat to the Maghreb and the Sahel.”³⁹

February 21, 2012

Experts testify to UN Security Council that drug cartels and smugglers now traffic almost \$1 billion in cocaine a year from Latin America into Africa’s Sahel, and traffickers are forming alliances with AQIM and other militants, in a region flooded by Libyan weapons. Sec. General Ban Ki-moon warns leaders: “inaction could be catastrophic.”⁴⁰

February 2, 2012

ICTS releases a study reporting the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf, Algeria have become “a recruiting ground for terrorists, traffickers, and other criminal enterprises,” recommending Western refugee aid “prioritize permanent resettlement.” Noting expanding AQIM ties to Polisario members, S. American cartels, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, and Libyan weapons, the study cites a 500% rise in terrorism in the region since 9/11. It argues AQIM seeks to extend an “arc of instability” across Africa to exploit Arab Spring turbulence and destabilize the region.⁴¹

³³ “Spain evacuates aid workers.” *BBC*, July 28, 2012, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-19034164>>.

³⁴ “Mali Islamists rebels say \$18.4 million ransom paid, prisoners released to free 3 Europeans.” *Associated Press*, July 20, 2012, <<http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/Mali-Islamist-rebels-million-ransom-paid-prisoners-released-free/6964246/story.html>>.

³⁵ “Islamist Extremists Threaten Africa’s rise.” *The Soufan Group*, June 27, 2012, <http://soufangroup.com/briefs/details/?Article_Id=325>.

³⁶ “Analysis: Mali’s north feared new ‘rogue state’ in Sahara.” *Reuters*, April 4, 2012, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/04/us-mali-rogue-idUSBRE8330X220120404>>.

³⁷ Karray, Abdelaziz. “Mali coup strengthens rogue groups.” *Zaywa*, a service of *Magharebia*, April 4, 2012, http://zawaya.magharebia.com/en_GB/zawaya/opinion/627>.

³⁸ Pham, J. Peter. “J. Peter Pham Discusses Western Sahara at Council on Foreign Relations – ‘The Western Sahara Crisis: Why U.S. Leadership is Needed Now’.”

Atlantic Council, April 3, 2012, <<http://www.acus.org/news/j-peter-pham-discusses-western-sahara-council-foreign-relations>>.

³⁹ Boukhars, Anouar. “Simmering Discontent in Western Sahara.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2012, <<http://carnegeendowment.org/2012/03/12/simmering-discontent-in-western-sahara/a2ah>>.

⁴⁰ “Ban calls for boost in efforts to fight organized crime in West Africa and Sahel.” *UN Press Centre*, February 21, 2012,

<<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41314&Cr=organized+crime&Cr1=>>>.

⁴¹ Alexander, Yonah. “Terrorism in North, West, & Central Africa: From 9/11 to Arab Spring.” International Center for Terrorism Studies, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, (January 2012), <http://moroccoonthemove.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/2012-special-update-report-full-report-terrorism-in-africa-from-9-11-to-arab-spring-icts-potomac-2feb2012.pdf>.

January 11, 2012

Algerian and Mauritanian security agencies reportedly break up major trafficking and money laundering rings. Officials say the rings are believed linked with groups such as al-Qaeda, which is working with the Polisario to traffic arms and drugs from Mauritania to northern neighbors. Mali reportedly steps up efforts against AQIM and what is believed its latest offshoot, "Al Qaida in Polisario Camps."⁴²

January 3, 2012

Security expert Dr. J. Peter Pham, Atlantic Council, reports that economic and political reforms in Africa are "threatened by the spread of violent extremism" and "increasing links" between AQIM and other militants in the Sahel, recently "buoyed by the flow of arms and fighters" from Libya. "More ominously, AQIM has increased its linkages with the Polisario," evident in AQIM's October 23 kidnappings near Tindouf, which were "aided by Polisario sympathizers" inside the Polisario's camps. The camps offer "a ready pool of potential recruits" from "large numbers of idle young fighters."⁴³

December 27, 2011

Mali reportedly distances itself from the Polisario, accusing it of kidnapping, drug trafficking, and suspected collusion with a Sahrawi branch of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb. A source close to the government says Mali is "angry" with the Polisario, and Malian officials say the October 23 kidnapping was done in collusion with the 'Sahrawi link' of AQIM.⁴⁴

December 24, 2011

Mali refuses entry to "eight young Sahrawis" coming from Niger. "They had no papers. There are laws to be respected in Mali especially when it comes to dubious propaganda," said Malian police.⁴⁵

December 17, 2011

Mali warns the Polisario, "our country is not the Wild West where they can come to kill and kidnap people." Bamako will "no longer accept the violation of its territorial integrity by the Polisario Front," says a Malian Minister. A local official adds, "everybody here knows who AQIM's accomplices are, they even assisted in abducting the Europeans in Tindouf. His name is Omar al Sahraoui, but neither Mali, nor Algeria, nor the Polisario are doing anything to capture him." In 2010, al Sahraoui, reportedly a Polisario veteran, was sentenced to 12 years for kidnapping Spanish aid workers for AQIM, according to Mauritanian court papers. He was later released in a trade for the aid workers.⁴⁶

December 15, 2011

Members of the Polisario launch an armed incursion into northern Mali, killing one and abducting three others, ostensibly looking for the kidnappers of three Western aid workers taken October 23 from the Polisario-run camps near Tindouf, Algeria.⁴⁷

December 10, 2011

A splinter group of AQIM confirms it is holding three aid workers kidnapped October 23 near the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria. The group, linked by some to al Sahraoui, calls itself "Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa."⁴⁸

November 30, 2011

The US House Subcommittee on Counterterrorism & Intelligence hears testimony that AQIM is expanding its ties in the Sahel with the Polisario, as well as militant Nigerian group Boko Haram and Somalia-based al-Shabaab.⁴⁹

⁴² "N. African states take down major narco trafficking network." *World Tribune*, January 11, 2012, <<http://www.worldnewstribune.com/2012/01/11/n-african-states-take-down-major-narcoterror-drug-network/>>.

⁴³ Pham, J. Peter. "Islamist Threat to Africa's Rise in 2012." *Atlantic Council*, January 3, 2012, <http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/islamist-threat-africas-rise-2012>.

⁴⁴ De Serge, Daniel. "Mali distancing itself from the Polisario Front." *Agence France Presse*, December 27, 2011,

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i4CHA2HdwpCQ_XrfCkoFfM4eHBQ?docId=CNG.09c4b8e975cfc23c8718b820ade10fec.161&index=0>.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Bamako warns Polisario: 'Mali is not Wild West.' *Middle East Online*, December 17, 2011, <<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=49540>>.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ "Al-Qaeda splinter group' claims kidnap of Westerners." *Agence France Presse*, December 10, 2011,

<<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hJQYCSJBL5a0NCGiPMlyCS8SryfQ?docId=CNG.4df034a80725d0c44da18538105d6420.dd1>>.

⁴⁹ Madden, Christina L. "Western Sahara: Forgotten Corner of the Arab Spring." *World Politics Review*, December 15, 2011,

<<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/10947/western-sahara-forgotten-corner-of-the-arab-spring>>.

November 28, 2011

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague says AQIM's expanding terrorist ties to other militant groups in the Sahel could have a "profoundly destabilizing" effect on a region already rocked by the Arab Spring.⁵⁰

November 24, 2011

AQIM kidnaps two French tourists from their hotel at night in eastern Mali, claiming they are spies. Officials later report that the abductions were coordinated with the Polisario.⁵¹

November 7, 2011

Algerian Chief of Staff General Qaid Saleh reportedly reprimands Polisario chief Mohammed Abdul Aziz for allowing an al-Qaeda presence inside the Polisario-controlled camps in Tindouf.⁵²

November 6, 2011

Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin cites alarm at AQIM kidnappings in the Polisario camps. "This is a catastrophe waiting to happen. The need to empty the camps, deprive AQIM of a supply of victims and accomplices, and restore order has never been greater."⁵³

October 26, 2011

Spanish daily *El Pais* reports on the Tindouf abductions, noting that, "to cross the checkpoints of the Algerian army and Polisario, kidnapers benefited from support of Polisario's military."⁵⁴

October 25, 2011

Spain requests a UN security mission to the Polisario-run camps. "We've asked the UN to send a mission to Algeria to assess the security situation in the camps of Tindouf" – Foreign Minister Trinidad Jimenez.⁵⁵

October 23, 2011

An AQIM splinter group kidnaps three Western aid workers from the Polisario-run camps in Algeria, reportedly with Polisario-insider help. "Unarmed AQIM militants entered the Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf, western Algeria, where sympathizers of the Polisario Front gave them weapons and helped them seek out the hostages."⁵⁶

September 29, 2011

Mauritanian President reports that AQIM has acquired Libyan arms, including surface-to-air missiles.⁵⁷

September 20, 2011

US terrorism expert Yonah Alexander, *International Center for Terrorism Studies*, says the "Polisario is intensifying activities to transport and smuggle illegal drugs in both North Africa and Europe. The Polisario is working with Al Qaeda in both the drug and weapons trade."⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Croft, Adrian. "EU police, experts to counter al Qaeda in Africa – UK." *Reuters*, November 28, 2011, <<http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE7AR29020111128?sp=true>>.

⁵¹ "N. African states take down major narco trafficking network." *World Tribune*, January 11, 2012, <<http://www.worldnewstribune.com/2012/01/11/n-african-states-take-down-major-narcoterror-drug-network/>>.

"Report: Al-Qaeda denies Algeria kidnappings." *Associated Press*, November 28, 2011, <<http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2011-12-09/al-qaeda-kidnappings/51766924/1>>.

⁵² "Algeria said to discipline Polisario commander over ties to Al Qaeda." *World Tribune*, November 7, 2011, <<http://www.worldnewstribune.com/2011/11/07/algeria-said-to-discipline-polisario-commander-over-ties-to-al-qaeda/>>.

⁵³ Rubin, Jennifer. "Al-Qaeda affiliate flexing its muscles in the Maghreb." *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/al-qaeda-affiliate-flexing-its-muscles-in-the-maghreb/2011/11/05/gIqANMbDqM_blog.html>.

⁵⁴ Kidnappers of three European aid workers benefited from polisario security apparatus' support: Spanish paper says." *Morocco World News*, October 26, 2011, <<http://morocoworldnews.com/2011/10/kidnappers-of-three-european-aid-workers-benefited-from-polisario-security-apparatus-support-spanish-paper-says/12992>>.

"Hard Blow to pro-independence Sahrawis and their Host Algeria." *El Pais*, October 24, 2011, <http://politica.elpais.com/politica/2011/10/24/actualidad/1319409584_827405.html>.

⁵⁵ Ajbaili, Mustapha. "Has Spain switched gear on the Western Sahara?" *Al Arabiya*, October 25, 2011, <<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/10/25/173691.html>>.

⁵⁶ "Three Qaeda hostages seized last week alive: mediator." *Agence France Presse*, October 30, 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gfsKPTlgBS_IQzBQK_R-Fdj_-z0A?docId=CNG.fb5674e8c48dbb7ef3f59c256d4c3f07.531>.

⁵⁷ Stearns, Scott. "Gadhafi Collapse Raises Concerns Over Arms for Africa al-Qaida." *Voice of America*, September 29, 2011, <<http://www.voanews.com/content/article--gadhafi-collapse-raises-concerns-over-arms-for-africa-al-qaeda-130788458/145923.html>>.

⁵⁸ "Report: Polisario working with Al Qaeda in drug, weapons trafficking." *World Tribune*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2011/ss_terror1178_09_20.asp>.

September 15, 2011

Malian security forces hunt for rival gangs of drug smugglers from Mali, Niger, and the Polisario, after a desert gun battle over ton of cocaine and hashish leaves four dead, according to a Malian army official.⁵⁹

September 10, 2011

Analysts say that Libyan dictator Qaddafi's fall seriously weakens the Polisario in its dispute with Morocco on the Western Sahara, after widespread reports that Polisario mercenaries sided with Qaddafi.⁶⁰

May 29, 2011

US Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart urges colleagues in Congress to give "serious attention" to evidence that Polisario members are "participating as mercenaries in Colonel Qaddafi's murderous campaign."⁶¹

May 20, 2011

The US Administration expresses concern to Algeria that "credible sources report" that Polisario mercenaries are being paid by Qaddafi "to fight NATO-led forces and kill Libyan protesters and rebels."⁶²

April 21, 2011

The London *Telegraph* reports that senior NATO officials have received information that Col. Qaddafi is hiring 450 Polisario mercenaries for \$10,000 each to fight Libyan rebels and prop up his regime.⁶³

January 16, 2011

Former Polisario Chief Police Inspector, Mustapha Salma Ould Sidi Mouloud says "the situation is grave for the youth who are marginalized" in Polisario-run camps in Algeria. "The camps are fertile grounds for Islamic fundamentalist groups and drug traffickers."⁶⁴

January 6, 2011

Terrorism cell and arms cache broken up in W. Sahara suggest "links between AQIM and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front."⁶⁵ *Washington Post* columnist J. Rubin writes, "there is ample evidence the Polisario Front... is in league with al-Qaeda."⁶⁶

January 3, 2011

US DEA former Director of Operations, Michael Braun, calls conditions 'dismal for Saharans living in the Polisario-run camps,' which have become a "breeding-ground for potential future AQIM recruits."⁶⁷

December 21, 2010

Leaders arrested in one of the Sahel's largest drug-smuggling rings are purported to have close ties to the Polisario Front. Nigerien officials call it, "one of the major drug trafficking networks" in the Sahara. It is known as "Polisario" because 90% of its members come from camps of the Polisario Front.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ "Mali security forces hunt desert drug traffickers." *Agence France Presse*, September 14, 2011,

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g8CmJx_rAUtLYFtRp39MbQmV_bzw?docId=CNG.84013840d691548b4d501bfc5f665885.51>.

⁶⁰ "Kadhafi's fall strengthens Morocco over Western Sahara." *Agence France Presse*, September 10, 2011, <<http://moroccoworldnews.com/2011/09/9233/gaddafis-fall-strengthens-morocco-over-western-sahara/>>.

⁶¹ Francheska, Alyangka. "U.S. wants probe on Gadhafi's alleged recruitment of mercenaries from Algeria-backed Polisario to fight NATO, rebels." *International Business Times*, May 30, 2011, <<http://au.ibtimes.com/articles/154113/20110530/gade-redafi-libya-rebels-morocco-algeria-u-s-congress.htm>>.

⁶² "Sources: Gadhafi paying Polisario mercenaries \$10,000 each to fight for him." *World Tribune*, May 20, 2011,

<http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2011/me_libya0607_05_20.asp>.

⁶³ Coughlin, Con. "Libya: Col Gaddafi 'has spent £2.1m on mercenaries'." *The Telegraph*, April 21, 2011,

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8464254/Libya-Col-Gaddafi-has-spent-2.1m-on-mercenaries.html>>.

⁶⁴ Rubin, Jennifer. "Exclusive: Ex-Polisario Front police chief tells his story." *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2011, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/01/exclusive_ex-polisario_front_p.html>.

⁶⁵ "Arrests of Terrorism Suspects Announced." *The Washington Post*, January 6, 2011, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/05/AR2011010506468.html>>.

⁶⁶ Rubin, Jennifer. "Morocco: A Different Kind of Muslim Country." *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2011, <<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/right-turn/2011/01/morocco-a-different-kind-of-muslim-country.html>>.

⁶⁷ Lake, Alison. "Unlikely bedfellows: Are some Saharan Marxists joining Al-Qaida operations in North Africa?" *Foreign Policy*, January 3, 2011, <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/03/unlikely_bedfellows_are_some_saharan_marxists_joining_al_qaida_operations_in_north>.

⁶⁸ "Key members of Sahara drug ring captured are from Polisario." *Middle East Online*, December 21, 2010, <<http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=43149>>.

December 9, 2010

Experts cite growing concern about violence instigated by pro-Polisario militants in Laayoune, W. Sahara. "Situation is becoming more dangerous, because of the violence and because al-Qaeda is now present." – Analyst T. Tarik.⁶⁹

November 10, 2010

Algeria reports "Cocaine that comes from Brazil, Peru, and Colombia supports the nucleus of al-Qaeda in the region" – Algerian head of the National Office for Combating Drugs & Addiction, Abdelmalek Sayeh.⁷⁰

October 18, 2010

Drug ring linked to AQIM is dismantled in Morocco. VOA cites experts, evidence from Mauritania, Mali indicating AQIM has worked in the last two years "to recruit Sahrawis who are trained fighters to carry out their operations."⁷¹

August 23, 2010

AQIM frees three Spanish kidnapping victims after Mauritania agrees to release the perpetrator, Omar Sahraoui, who is "believed to have been a senior commander of the Polisario Front in Western Sahara."⁷²

July 2010

Mauritania sentences reported Polisario veteran, Omar al Sahraoui, to 12 years for the 2009 kidnapping of Spanish aid workers. Mauritanian court papers document that he was paid by AQIM along with at least three other Polisario veterans to organize and carry out the crime.⁷³

April 12, 2010

Security expert calls the Western Sahara conflict a "vicious cycle" that terrorists can exploit; cites "evidence that members of the military arm of the Polisario Front have been involved in illicit activities."⁷⁴

February 2010

Polisario veteran Omar le Sahraoui arrested in Mali, extradited to Mauritania for kidnapping Spanish aid workers.⁷⁵

December 30, 2009

Armed assailants from AQIM katibat Tarek Ibn Zaid attacked Telemeses, Niger, killing one civilian and three soldiers. The Tarek Ibn Zaid katibat is largely comprised of Sahrawis.⁷⁶

November 29, 2009

AQIM claims responsibility for kidnapping three Spanish aid workers in Mauritania. Mauritanian security services later discover that AQIM had hired Omar al Sahraoui—who was reportedly a member of the Polisario's hierarchy—and at least three other Polisario veterans to organize and carry out the abductions.⁷⁷

June 4, 2005

Two GSPC katibas, including the katibat Tarek Ibn Ziad, comprised primarily of Sahrawis, attack an army base in Lemgheity, Mauritania, killing 15 Mauritanian soldiers and injuring 17.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Worth, Robert F. and Souad Mekhennet. "Desert Land in Limbo is Torn Apart." *The New York Times*, December 9, 2010, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/09/world/africa/09morocco.html?pagewanted=all>>.

⁷⁰ "Al-Qaeda looks to Sahel for new funding sources." *Magharebia*, November 10, 2010, <http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2010/11/10/feature-01>.

⁷¹ Look, Anne. "Morocco says dismantled drug ring linked to terrorists." *Voice of America*, October 18, 2010, <<http://www.voanews.com/english/news/africa/north/Morocco-says-Dismantled-International-Drug-Trafficking-Ring-Linked-to-Terrorists-105188824.html>>.

⁷² "Spanish hostages freed by al-Qaida arrive in Spain." *Associated Press*, August 23, 2010,

<http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/nationworld/2012699123_apafmalispanishhostages.html>.

⁷³ Pham, J. Peter. "When Crime Does Pay: The Threat of an Emboldened al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." *World Defense Review*, 23 September, 2010, <<http://worlddefensereview.com/pham092310.shtml>>.

⁷⁴ Pham, J. Peter. "Not Another Failed States: Toward a Realistic Solution in the Western Sahara." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 1 (2010): 1-24.

⁷⁵ "Three Qaeda hostages seized last week alive: mediator." *Agence France Presse*, October 30, 2011,

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⁷⁶ Soudan, François. "Mali: Polisario Connection." *Jeune Afrique*, October 28, 2012, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2703p010-013.xml0/>>.

« Incident Summary. » *Global Terrorism Database*, December 30, 2009, <<http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/IncidentSummary.aspx?gtid=200912300005>>.

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⁷⁸ Soudan, François. "Mali: Polisario Connection." *Jeune Afrique*, October 28, 2012, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2703p010-013.xml0/>>.

"Al-Qaeda 'behind' Mauritania raid." *BBC*, June 6, 2005, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4613107.stm>>.