



## BOUCHAOUI ATTACK: QUESTIONS AND LESSONS

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### Summary

- **The Bouchaoui attack demonstrates the reality that the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) is rallying behind al-Qaeda.**
- **For the first time in years, western interests are once again being targeted in Algeria.**
- **The GSPC seems to have recovered some of its strike force and, in any event, is present in Algiers.**
- **Other attacks are feared, in Algeria and perhaps elsewhere in the region; they will be directed mainly against French and US interests.**

### A) Preliminaries

Late last Sunday, an attack carried out in Bouchaoui (15 kilometres from Algiers), targeted two buses transporting employees of the US company **Brown Roots and Condor** (BRC). In short, one person was killed, and nine were wounded (*see our analysis brief issued on 11<sup>th</sup> December at 7 :12 p.m.*).

At first glance, this would seem to be a commonplace event in a country where a type of terrorism that the Algerian government is desperately trying to describe as “*residual*” kills at least several hundred people each year. And, of course, this cannot be compared with the daily massacres that are taking place in Iraq. Yet this “*minor*” attack – inasmuch as that term can be used when people have been killed and mutilated – deserves to be pondered since **it could very well be highly**

**significant for three reasons: the location of the attack, the target, and the modus operandi.**

### **B) The location of the attack**

**First of all, the location of the attack:** it took place in a large suburb of Algiers, in **an extremely well-protected neighbourhood where several top government officials live and where a number of foreign companies and an international luxury hotel, the *Sheraton*, are located.** This neighbourhood has been specifically developed over the past decade precisely because it was a spot not far from the capital where people could live and work away from any terrorist activity. **The *Sheraton* serves as a home for expatriates who live there throughout the year and is where official government guests stay.** We stayed there several years ago when we attended an international conference, and we can thus confirm that the location is **particularly well-covered by security.**

**And yet, a heavily armed commando (*see below*) managed to get past the security, prepare an attack in the neighbourhood, carry it out, and apparently *slip away* afterwards without incident.**

Moreover, we observe that, over the last several years, most of the violent acts involving terrorists have generally been skirmishes in mountainous or wooded regions and have, for the most part, taken place very far from the capital. For several years, no attacks had taken place in the city. Then, on 29<sup>th</sup> October, attacks on police stations in Reghaia and Dergana (neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Algiers) had left three dead and 24 wounded. **The latest attack this past weekend is thus the third attack to take place not only in the Algiers metropolitan area, but also, moreover, the third to be perpetrated in the immediate vicinity of the capital.** This act leaves little room to doubt that at least one active terrorist cell (and, undoubtedly, given its *modi operandorum*, a rather large and highly structured cell) exists in or around Algiers. This is the *first* such cell since the dawn of the new millennium and, in any event, is bad news for a government that has put so much emphasis on its policy of “national reconciliation” as it has attempted to put the country’s dark years behind it once and for all.

### **C) The target**

The **selected target is particularly symbolic** because it involved employees of a US company. At first sight, two observations come to mind: first, foreigners had not been targeted by terrorism in Algeria for several years and, second, never before, not even at the height of the crisis of the 1990s, had US nationals or interests been attacked. **By striking out at foreigners working for a US company, the terrorists have consequently taken two conclusive steps at the same time.**

Moreover, the **GSPC**, which claimed responsibility last night for the Bouchaoui attack, **warned against new attacks against US interests**, advising Algerians to keep “*away from the infidels’ interests so that you can avoid any harm that may come to you if you happen to be associating with them when they are targeted.*”

We emphasise that the **GSPC, which, for a long time, had demonstrated a wait-and-see attitude regarding the global jihad's sphere of influence and had focused on the local jihad, officially joined the cause of al-Qaeda in 2006.**

The official announcement of this turn of events was made on 11<sup>th</sup> September, five years to the day after the attacks on New York and Washington, by **Ayman al-Zawahiri**, number two in the **al-Qaeda** network, who, in a videotaped statement, claimed that the GSPC had pledged its allegiance to **Osama Bin Laden** and had joined the **al-Qaeda** network. Al-Zawahiri did not hide his desire that the Algerian organisation should become the spearhead of future attacks against France and against Americans. Indeed, **he urged the GSPC to become “a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders.”**

A number of long divergent interests have thus come together. **The GSPC, which had been considerably weakened in Algeria, - down to no more than a few hundred active members – could hope to enjoy a resurgence by becoming part of an international terrorist movement. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda, could hope that the organisation would enable it to strike France on one hand and, on the other hand, to establish a lasting presence in North Africa.**

As the GSPC, boosted by this alliance, now has regional ambitions, over the last few months a number of Moroccan and Tunisian nationals have been arrested while trying to travel to Algeria in order to train with the GSPC's underground forces.

#### **D) The modus operandi**

To carry out Sunday's attack, the **GSPC had to have spent several days staking out the area in order to check the schedules of the buses that were attacked. The GSPC also placed explosives along the road and was even able to develop enough fire power to wound several people while dealing with the police officers who were escorting the convoy. And afterwards, the terrorists seem to have left the scene without suffering any losses** despite the scope of combing operations carried out by the police (it's a good bet that, after such an act, the authorities would have certainly reported that some of the assailants had been killed or captured if that had been the case...)

It was more than just luck, as **this sequence of actions seems to indicate strong information-gathering capabilities, real tactical know-how, the ability to make solid decisions concerning actions, and the possession of effective, skilfully used military means, not to mention a great deal of discipline when approaching, striking, and withdrawing.** The operation was, moreover, aided by **seemingly flawless logistics** concerning the supply of arms, the availability of means of transport, and the selection and management of hideouts that the terrorists probably used when they made their getaway.

In short, here as well, there is a new qualitative aspect: **the GSPC that carried out the Bouchaoui attack no longer seems to have much in common with the organisation in dire straits to which we had been accustomed for several years.**

## **E) BRC's mistakes**

The ones who are most responsible for the security of employees of large western companies and the expatriates associated with these firms are obviously the people who assign them to live and work on site.

**From this perspective, it is amazing that, more than four years after the Karachi attack that killed several French technicians specifically while they were travelling by bus, BRC's security officials would have still favoured this means of transport for company employees. Bus transport has the double disadvantage of being particularly visible and of allowing terrorists to wait until they can get "full marks" by maximising the number of potential attack victims.**

The more or less massive presence of police officers around these convoys only offers an illusion of protection while perhaps, conversely, acting as a magnet to terrorists since, moreover, these security forces affirm the importance of the convoy.

There is, however, a known solution to this threat: the use of individual (and possibly armoured) cars that only carry a few people at a time. These cars should be covered by a light security system that, nonetheless, exhibits considerable fire power. **In addition to the fact that the entire arrangement is more discreet and clearly more mobile, in the event of a tragedy, the scope of such an event would obviously be limited.**

## **By way of a conclusion**

We would like to be wrong, but the facts are loud and clear. Failing an appropriate response from Algeria's security services and flawless co-operation between Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, and between these countries and their allies outside the region, **we are perhaps looking at a new wave of terrorist violence, not only in Algeria, but perhaps also elsewhere in North Africa and in France.**

If this grim possibility becomes a reality, **we could see a more or less close succession of attacks targeting not only local populations, as was the case during the 1990s, but also authorities and foreign interests. The image of corruption amongst authorities and the anti-western sentiment that has been prevalent in much of the Arab world since 2001 would enable the GSPC and the organisations that join forces with it to recruit large numbers of people and would subsequently offer the global jihad's sphere of influence the prospect of opening up a "new front" that is clearly closer than the Iraqi front to Europe and its Crusaders.**