

Spillover of insurgency in Algeria to France

In 1992, an offshoot of the Islamic Salvation Front, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), pursued an insurgency against the Algerian government. Tens of thousands died in a war of terrorism and counterterrorism. France provided military and economic support to the Algerian government, which led to the extension of GIA operations to French soil. A network of militants waged a bombing campaign, principally in the Paris region in 1995, before being dismantled. Some French journalists and scholars believed that the GIA had been penetrated by Algerian agents who then manipulated GIA militants into attacking targets in France in order to bolster French support for the Algerian government (Aggoun and Rivoire, 2004).

French authorities undertook numerous steps to prevent bombings and to capture the bombers. Persons of North African appearance were routinely subjected to identity checks. Most French citizens and resident aliens of North African background accepted such checks as a necessary inconvenience. Indeed, information supplied by such individuals greatly aided in the neutralization of the terrorist group, several of whom were killed in shootouts with French police. Nevertheless, French police rounded up scores of suspected GIA sympathizers on several occasions as nervousness over attacks remained high.

Such fears appeared warranted in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. Scores of GIA and Al-Qaida-linked individuals, mainly of North African background, were detained for involvement in various plots, including one to attack the US embassy in Paris. Several of those arrested were French citizens of North African background, like Zacarias Moussaoui, who was accused of plotting with the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Algerians and other individuals of North African Muslim background with links to the GIA figured prominently in the hundreds of arrests in the transatlantic area. The anti-Western resentment of some of those arrested was linked to perceived injustices endured by migrants and their families. Despite increased vigilance, several French citizens were involved in a series of suicide bombings of Western targets in Casablanca in 2003. Several of the bombers had been recruited into a fundamentalist network in the Parisian suburbs and their involvement was deeply disturbing to the French population, including most of the Islamic community.

Despite an amnesty offer from the Algerian government to Islamic militants who laid down their arms in 2006, some continued to fight. In 2007, these militants renamed themselves Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and launched a murderous bombing campaign in Algiers. French and other European intelligence officials continue to worry about the potential for spillovers to Europe (see also Chapter 1). The meagre participation in the 2012 national elections in Algeria reflected widespread disaffection and alienation. Yet, as attested by the Arab Spring of 2011 in nearby states, aspirations for reforms and democratic governance suggest that Al-Qaida-style politics holds scant appeal among the Arab masses.