

"Algeria 'Safe Haven' for 'Al-Qa'ida' Members Following 'Taliban's' Downfall"

Unlike other Maghreb countries where armed groups do not exist the ceaseless military strife in Algeria since the early 1990s provided a suitable cover for Algerian men -- who received training in Afghan camps during the "Taliban" era -- to return to their country and join armed groups there. The issue, however, has not been confined to Algerian "Afghans" -- whose number is roughly estimated at a few hundred -- but it involved other Arab members who most probably found a "safe" haven in Algeria following the downfall of the Taliban regime in Kabul.

The operation carried out by Algerian security forces on 12 September 2002 against the "Salafi Group for Da'wa and Jihad", led by Hassan Hattab, revealed that Yemeni-born Imad Abd-al-Wahid Ahmad Alwan, alias Abu-Muhammad, top "al-Qa'ida" official in the Arab Maghreb and African Coast, came to Algeria. Alwan was killed in an ambush against the group in Marwanah area in Batna Governorate 500 kilometers east of the capital, Algiers. His death was not announced until last November due to what Algerian security sources said were "difficulties to identify his body." Alwan, who was originally from Ta'iz, used to provide shelter for Maghreb and Egyptian "Afghans" in Yemen following their return from Peshawar. Alwan arrived in North Africa from Ethiopia in June 2001. He came to Algeria via Sudan and Niger.

"Al-Qa'ida" apparently entrusted Alwan with two major tasks. The first was uniting armed Algerian groups under Hassan Hattab and solving disputes among them and the second was securing the redeployment of "al-Qa'ida" in countries on the African Coast and seeking to find a logistic base for the network there. Alwan reportedly visited Mali last spring and went on a tour of Mauritania, Niger, Chad, and Nigeria that lasted until the end of the summer. Despite Alwan's death relations between "al-Qa'ida" and the "Salafi Group for Da'wa and Jihad" remained likely strong since "al-Qa'ida" leadership withdrew its recognition of the Armed Islamic Group [GIA] many years ago and viewed the "Salafi Group" as the foundation of Islamic organizations in Algeria.