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AL-QAʿIDA AND THE JIHADI DYNAMICS IN THE SAHEL

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Introduction

Al-Qaʿida in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM) was launched in 2007 as the last offshoot of Osama bin Laden's organization. It has therefore attracted significant international interest, especially after murderous suicide attacks in Algiers and repeated abductions of Western nationals in the Sahara. But AQIM media exposure could not mask its failure to live up to its commitment to strike Europe from North Africa. Hence AQIM increasingly bet on its commandos operating in the Sahel region to upgrade its jihadi profile.

Context and Connections

In order to understand the complexity of the jihadi dynamics in the Sahel region, one must take into full consideration four specific and interlinked dimensions of those groups and networks:

- They are led by veterans from the "black decade" of the 1990s in Algeria, who escaped both repression and purges, therefore developing a strong resilience in an extremely inhospitable environment.

- Those "survivors" were initially smugglers who were in charge of the logistical needs of the jihadi hierarchy in northern Algeria before reaching a militant capacity of their own, enhanced by the extreme mobility of their commandos.

- This trans-Sahara mobility nurtured increased cooperation with criminal networks active in the region, with repeated exchanges of favors and services, blurring the lines between gangsterism and jihadism.

- After one generation of activity, Algerian "veterans" and "survivors" are still firmly in command, fueling the popular feeling of a "foreign" occupation in Mali that paved the way for the recent French rollback in Timbuktu and Gao.

The Sahel region became only recently a focus for jihadi escalation. During the 1990s, the jihadi insurgency of the Islamic Armed Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, or GIA) focused on the main cities of coastal Algeria, with the support of activist cells in the countryside and the mountain ranges. The Sahara *katiba* (battalion) of the GIA was led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed "the one-eyed" (Belaouar) because of the wound he claimed to have suffered fighting in Afghanistan from 1991 to 1993 (suspiciously two years after the Soviet withdrawal). But this *katiba* was not involved in active combat; its priority was the channeling of weapons and funds to the GIA heartland.

After 1997, the GIA engaged in mass slaughters of civilians and collapsed under the combined pressure of army operations, internal quarrels, and popular rejection. A splinter group emerged in 1998, called the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, or GSPC), that claimed to refocus its violence against security forces. Belmokhtar left the declining GIA for the nascent GSPC.

In 2003, a GSPC *katiba* that was independent from that of Belmokhtar managed to kidnap 32 European tourists in southern Algeria. After many months of detention, they were eventually released in northern Mali, with the exception of a German national who died in captivity from sunstroke. Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, the deputy leader of this *katiba*, became the local commander after the capture of his own superior by Chadian militants. His success led to a growing rivalry with Belmokhtar; their brutal competition is still at the core of jihadi dynamics in the Sahel.

Abdelmalek Drukdal, one of the field commanders in northern Algeria, rose in 2004 to the top leadership of the GSPC and holed up in the Kabylia mountains east of Algiers. He pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden on the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks, and the GSPC dramatically changed its name, in January 2007, to al-Qaʿida in the Islamic Maghrib (AQIM). But the upgraded outfit proved unable to strike the northern shore of the Mediterranean on behalf of al-Qaʿida.

To live up to its jihadi credentials, AQIM then struck "global" targets in its "local" environment. Belmokhtar commenced this murderous cycle by ordering the assassination of four French tourists in eastern Mauritania in December 2007. Nicknamed "Mister Marlboro" because of his smuggling activities, Belmokhtar made a clear distinction between Mauritania, target of his jihadi terror, and Mali, safe haven for his various illegal trades.

In 2008-2009, the rivalry between Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid led to a string of abductions of Western expatriates from coastal Mauritania to eastern Mali and from southern Tunisia to the suburbs of Niamey, the Nigerian capital. Each AQIM *katiba* leader had his own facilitator to negotiate the release of hostages. Abou Zeid favored a former Tuareg guerrilla leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, who had just returned from Jeddah, where he served as the Malian Consul General; Belmokhtar privileged a Mauritanian dissident, Mustapha Ould Chafi, now advisor to the president of Burkina Faso.

In 2010, Mauritania, blaming Bamako for its passivity, secured its own territory from jihadi infiltration and mounted unprecedented raids against AQIM on Malian territory. Neighboring Niger was equally critical of the fact that the Malian army had virtually abandoned the vast desert of northern Mali to an unholy alliance of gangsters and jihadi forces. The situation only deteriorated after the fall of Colonel Qaddafi's regime, in the fall of 2011, when thousands of former mercenaries were disbanded and came back to Mali.

Many of those "Libyan" veterans were Tuareg, and they joined either the nationalist guerrilla group (MNLA, which stands for the National Liberation Movement of the Azawad, the Tuareg designation of northern Mali) or a newly established group, Ansar Eddine (Supporters of Religion). As a leader of the latter, Iyad Ag Ghali enhanced his profile by pushing for the "purification" of the whole of Mali, far beyond the separatist agenda of his MNLA confederates. AQIM strongly supported this expansionist program, as did a jihadi splinter group, MUJAO (Movement for Unicity and Jihad in Western Africa), which was heavily influenced by its African recruitment and its connections with drug smugglers.

During the winter and spring of 2012, the coalition of Tuareg and jihadi groups managed to expel the Malian army from the northern half of the

country. MNLA went as far as proclaiming the "independence" of Azawad, but it was soon ousted from the main cities by its former jihadi allies. Ansar Eddine built its urban base at Kidal, AQIM controlled Timbuktu, and MUJAO took Gao. Abou Zeid banked on his special relationship with Iyad Ag Ghali to isolate his archrival, Belmokhtar, who ended up expelled from AQIM.

The jihadi dynamics, while splintered, nevertheless led only to more escalation. In the first days of 2013, Ansar Eddine, AQIM, and MUJAO moved forcefully toward the south, which would have threatened Mopti and even Bamako itself. This led to a vigorous French counter-offensive, at the request of the Malian president, and with the unanimous support of the UN Security Council. Soon, the jihadi commandos were contained before being expelled from Timbuktu and Gao. In Kidal, MNLA and Ansar Eddine dissidents patrolled the city, along with French and Chadian troops.

AQIM has not fully returned to its pre-2012 status. The rivalry between Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar is still raging, while Drukdal and the AQIM leadership, in northern Algeria, stay silent. The French intervention has clearly broken a trend of "Talibanization" of the Tuareg that would have been extremely destabilizing for the whole region, but a political process has yet to be actively pursued with the necessary involvement of Algeria, the traditional mediator in northern Mali.

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