

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Who's Who? Who is Behind the Terrorists?

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Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)
Theme: [Terrorism](#)

Who is behind the terrorist group which attacked the BP -Statoil-Sonatrach In Amenas Gas Field Complex located on the Libyan border in South Eastern Algeria? (see map below)

The operation was coordinated by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, leader of the Al Qaeda affiliated Islamist al-Mulathameen (Masked) Brigade, or "Those who Sign with Blood."

Belmokhtar's organization has been involved in the drug trade, smuggling as well kidnapping operations of foreigners in North Africa. While his whereabouts are known, French intelligence has dubbed Belmokhtar "the uncatchable".

Belmokhtar took responsibility on behalf of Al Qaeda for the kidnapping of 41 Western hostages including 7 Americans at the BP In Amenas Gas Field Complex.

Belmokhtar, however, was not directly involved in the actual attack. The field commander of the operation was Abdul Rahman al-Nigeri, a veteran jihadist fighter from Niger, who joined Algeria's Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 2005. ([Albawaba](#), January 17, 2013)



The In Amenas kidnapping operation was carried out five days after the conduct of air strikes by France directed against Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) militants in northern Mali.

French special forces and Malian troops regained control of Diabaly and Konna, two small towns North of Mopti. The town of Diabaly had apparently been taken over a few days earlier by fighters led by one of the leading AQIM commanders Abdelhamid Abou Zeid.

While the terrorist attack and kidnapping directed against the In Amenas Gas plant was described as an act of revenge, it was not in any way improvised, Confirmed by analysts, the operation had in all likelihood been planned well in advance:

“European and U.S. officials say the raid was almost certainly too elaborate to have been planned in so short a time, although the French campaign could have been one trigger for fighters to launch an assault they had already prepared.”

According to recent reports (January 20, 2012) there are some 80 casualties, including hostages and jihadist fighters. There were several hundred workers at the gas plant, most of whom were Algerian. “Of those rescued, only 107 out of 792 workers were foreign”, according to the Algerian Ministry of Interior.

The British and French governments laid the blame on the jihadists. In the words of Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron:

“Of course people will ask questions about the Algerian response to these events, but I would just say that the responsibility for these deaths lies squarely with the terrorists who launched this vicious and cowardly attack. ([Reuters](#), January 20, 2013).

News reports confirm, however, that a large number of the deaths of both the hostages and the Islamic fighters was the result of the bombing raids led by Algerian forces.

Negotiations with the captors, which could have saved lives, had not been seriously contemplated by either the Algerian or Western governments. The militants had demanded an end to France’s attacks in northern Mali in return for the safety of the hostages. Al Qaeda leader Belmokhtar had stated:

“We are ready to negotiate with the West and the Algerian government provided they stop their bombing of Mali’s Muslims” ([Reuters](#), January 20, 2013)

Within the ranks of the jihadists were mercenaries from a number of Muslim countries including Libya (yet to be confirmed) as well as fighters from Western countries.



Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Who's Who?

There are a number of affiliated groups which are actively involved in northern Mali:

- Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) led by Abdelmalek Droukdel, "the emir of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb",
- Ansar Ed-Dine led by Iyad Ag Ghaly,
- the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).

The Armed Islamic Group, or *Groupe islamique armé* (GIA) which was prominent in the 1990s is largely defunct. Its members have joined AQIM.

The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) is a Tuareg secular nationalist and independence movement.

Historical Background

In September 2006, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) joined forces with Al Qaeda. The GSPC was founded by Hassan Hattab a former GIA commander.

In January 2007, the group officially changed its name to the Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Also in early 2007, the newly formed AQIM established a close relationship with the Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).

The commanders of the GSPC had been inspired by the religious teaching of Salafism in Saudi Arabia, which historically played an important role in the training of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan.

The history of AQIM jihadist commanders is of significance in addressing the broader issue:

- Who is behind the various Al Qaeda affiliated factions?
- Who is supporting the terrorists?
- What political and economic interests are being served?

The Washington based Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) traces the origins of AQIM back to the Soviet-Afghan war:

Most of AQIM's major leaders are believed to have trained in Afghanistan during the 1979-1989 war against the Soviets as part of a group of North African volunteers known as "Afghan Arabs" that returned to the region and radicalized Islamist movements in the years that followed. The group is divided into "katibas" or brigades, which are clustered into different and often independent cells.

The group's top leader, or emir, since 2004 has been Abdelmalek Droukdel, also known as Abou Mossab Abdelwadoud, a trained engineer and explosives expert who has fought in Afghanistan and has roots with the GIA in Algeria. It is under Droukdel's leadership that AQIM declared France as its main target. One of the "most violent and radical" AQIM leaders is Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, according to counterterrorism experts. Abou Zied is linked to several kidnappings and executions of Europeans in the region. ([Council on Foreign Relations, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, cfr.org](#), undated)

What the CFR report fails to mention is that the Islamic jihad in Afghanistan was a CIA initiative, initially launched in 1979 during the Carter administration. It was actively supported by president Ronald Reagan throughout the 1980s.

In 1979 the largest covert operation in the history of the CIA was launched in Afghanistan. Wahabi missionaries from Saudi Arabia set up the Coranic schools (madrassahs) in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Islamic textbooks used in the madrassahs were printed and published in Nebraska. Covert funding was channeled to the Mujahideen with the support of the CIA:

"With the active encouragement of the CIA and Pakistan's ISI, who wanted to turn the Afghan Jihad into a global war waged by all Muslim states against the Soviet Union, some 35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries joined Afghanistan's fight between 1982 and 1992. Tens of thousands more came to study in Pakistani madrasahs. Eventually, more than 100,000 foreign Muslim radicals were directly influenced by the Afghan jihad." (Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism", Foreign Affairs, November-December 1999).

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), using Pakistan's military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), played a key role in training the Mujahideen. In turn, the CIA-sponsored guerrilla training was integrated with the teachings of Islam:

In March 1985, President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 166,...[which] authorize[d] stepped-up covert military aid to the Mujahideen, and it made clear that the secret Afghan war had a new goal: to defeat Soviet troops in Afghanistan through covert action and encourage a Soviet withdrawal. The new covert U.S. assistance began with a dramatic increase in arms supplies — a steady rise to 65,000 tons annually by 1987... as well as a

“ceaseless stream” of CIA and Pentagon specialists who traveled to the secret headquarters of Pakistan’s ISI on the main road near Rawalpindi, Pakistan. There the CIA specialists met with Pakistani intelligence officers to help plan operations for the Afghan rebels.” (Steve Coll, Washington Post, July 19, 1992)

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, mastermind behind the terrorist attack by the Islamist al-Mulathameen (Masked) Brigade on the In Amenas Gas complex is one of the founding members of AQIM.

He was trained and recruited by the CIA in Afghanistan. Belmokhtar was a North African volunteers, an “Afghan Arab” enlisted at age 19 as a Mujahideen to fight within the ranks of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, at a time when the CIA and its Pakistani affiliate –the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI)– were actively supporting the jihadists in both recruitment and training.



Mokhtar Belmokhtar fought in the Afghan “civil war”.

He returned to Algeria in 1993 and joined the GSPC.

Belmokhtar’s history and involvement in Afghanistan suggests that he was a US sponsored “intelligence asset”.

The Role of America’s Allies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from the outset in 2007 had established a close relationship to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), whose leaders had also been trained and recruited in Afghanistan by the CIA. The LIFG is supported covertly by the CIA and Britain’s MI6.

The LIFG was directly supported by NATO during the 2011 war on Libya, “providing weapons, training, special forces and even aircraft to support them in the overthrow of Libya’s government.” (Tony Cartalucci, [The Geopolitical Reordering of Africa: US Covert Support to Al Qaeda in Northern Mali, France “Comes to the Rescue”](#), Global Research, January 2013)

. British SAS Special Forces had been brought into Libya prior to onset of the insurrection, acting as military advisers to the LIFG.

More recently, reports confirm that AQIM has received weapons from the Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). LIFG mercenaries have integrated AQIM brigades. According to commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who coordinated the In Amenas kidnapping operation:

“We have been one of the main beneficiaries of the revolutions in the Arab world. As for our benefiting from the (Libyan) weapons, this is a natural thing in these kinds of circumstances.” http://www.hanford.gov/c.cfm/oci/ci_terrorist.cfm?dossier=174

The BP In Amenas plant is located directly on the Libyan border. One suspects that there was a contingent of Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) combatants involved in the operation.

AQIM also has ties to the Al Nusra Front in Syria which is supported covertly by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is indelibly tied into a Western intelligence agenda. It is described as "one of the region's wealthiest, best-armed militant groups", financed covertly by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

France's *Canard enchaîné* revealed (June 2012) that Qatar (a staunch ally of the United States) has been funding various terrorist entities in Mali including the Salafist Ansar Ed-Dine:

Both the Tuareg rebels of the MNLA (independence and laity), Ansar Ed Dine, AQIM (Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb) and Mujao ([Jihad](#) in West Africa) were assisted with dollars from Qatar, according to one report ([The Examiner](#))

The satirical French paper Canard Enchaîné reported [June 2012] that [Qatar has allegedly been funding armed groups in northern Mali](#) made their way into Algerian and west African outlets.

Suspicion that Ansar Ed-Dine, the main pro-shari'ah armed group in the region, has been receiving funding from Qatar has circulated in Mali for several months.

Reports (as yet unconfirmed) that a 'Qatari' aircraft landed at Gao, full of weapons, money and drugs, for example, emerged near the beginning of the conflict.

The original report cites a French military intelligence report as indicating that Qatar has provided financial support to all three of the main armed groups in northern Mali: Iyad Ag Ghali's Ansar Ed-Dine, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).

The amount of funding given to each of the groups is not mentioned but it mentions repeated reports from the French DGSE to the Defense Ministry have mentioned Qatar's support for 'terrorism' in northern Mali. (emphasis added)

The role of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as an intelligence asset must be carefully assessed. The Islamic insurgency creates conditions which favor the political destabilization of Mali as a nation state. What geopolitical interests have been served?



Concluding Remarks: “The American Sudan”

In a bitter irony, the kidnapping operation in Southern Algeria and the tragedy resulting from the Algerian led military “rescue” operation provide a humanitarian justification for Western military intervention led by US AFRICOM. The latter not only pertains to Mali and Algeria. It could also include the broader region extending across the sub-Saharan Sahelian belt, from Mauritania to the Western border of Sudan.

This process of escalation is part of a US military and strategic “road-map”, a subsequent stage in the militarization of the African continent, “a followup” to the US-NATO 2011 war on Libya.

It is a project of neo-colonial conquest by the US over a vast area.

While France is the former colonial power, intervening on behalf of Washington, the end-game is to eventually exclude France from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. This displacement of France as a colonial power has been ongoing since the war of Indochina in the 1950s.

While the US is prepared in the short-run to share the spoils of war with France, Washington’s ultimate objective is to “redraw the map of the African continent”, and eventually, to transform francophone Africa into an American sphere of influence. The latter would extend across the continent from Mauritania on the Atlantic to the Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.

A similar process of *excluding France from francophone Africa* has been ongoing since the 1990s in Rwanda, Burundi and the Republic of the Congo.

In turn, French as an official language in francophone Africa is being encroached upon. Today in Rwanda, English is an official language, alongside Kinyarwanda and French. Starting with the RPF government in 1994, secondary education was offered in either French or English. Since 2009 it is offered solely in English. The University since 1994, no longer operates in French. (The president of Rwanda Paul Kagame does not read or speak French). In 2009, Rwanda joined the Commonwealth.

What is at stake is a vast territory which during the colonial period included French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa (See map left as well as maps below)

Mali during the French period was referred to as *Le Soudan français* (the French Sudan).



Ironically, this process of weakening and *eventually excluding France from francophone Africa* has been carried out with the tacit endorsement of both (former) president Nicolas Sarkozy and president François Hollande, both of whom are serving US geopolitical interests to the detriment of the French Republic.

The militarization of the African continent is part of the mandate of US Africom.

The longer term goal is to exert geopolitical as well military control over a vast area, which historically has been within France's sphere of influence. This area is an rich in oil, natural gas, gold, uranium and strategic minerals. (See [R. Teichman, The War on Mali. What you Should Know: An Eldorado of Uranium, Gold, Petroleum, Strategic Minerals ...](#), Global Research, January 15, 2013)

The colonial re-division of Africa decided at the 1884-85 at the Berlin Conference (right). For the maps of French colonial Africa, see below.



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