



**COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER**

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# ***Mokhtar Belmokhtar: One-Eyed Firebrand of North Africa and the Sahel***

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**Jihadi Bios Project**

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# **Mokhtar Belmokhtar: One-Eyed Firebrand of North Africa and the Sahel**

By Andrew Wojtanik

*The views expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Combating Terrorism Center, the US Military Academy, the Department of Defense or the US government.*

We vow to all those who planned and participated in the aggression against the right of our Muslim people to be ruled by Islamic Shari'a on our land, we will respond with all available force and you will hear from us on the battlefield. It is our promise to you that we will fight you in your own homes, you will experience the heat of wounds in your own countries and we will threaten your interests.

—Mokhtar Belmokhtar, 6 December 2012<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

For more than two decades, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (alias Khaled Abu al-'Abbas), an Algerian jihadi leader and financier, has been a central player in the West African jihad. Yet it was not until two dramatic terrorist attacks in 2013—a sophisticated assault on a multinational gas facility in Algeria, and twin attacks in northern Niger—that this one-eyed ex-commander of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was propelled into the global spotlight. Belmokhtar, defying countless rumors of his death or surrender, has since merged his battalion with Mali's most potent jihadist group to form al-Mourabitoun, a coalition of fighters that the U.S. State Department now considers to be "the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and Western interests in the Sahel."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Andrew Bellisari, Maya Gebeily and Hannah Wheeler for their assistance with translation. This quotation comes from a video by Khaled Abu al-'Abbas, "Introduction to Our Shar'ia: Fulfillment and Steadfastness until Victory," 5 December 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdnsZHDjwqc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdnsZHDjwqc).

<sup>2</sup> "Terrorist Designation of the al-Mulathamun Battalion," Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, 18 December 2013, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm).

Belmokhtar's story as an intrepid al-Qa'ida freelancer—essential to both AQIM's expansion and its eventual partition—serves as a useful case study for understanding the increasingly diffuse yet dangerous and unpredictable jihadist threat. This article draws on a wide array of primary sources to trace Belmokhtar's background, ideology, activities and objectives, and to situate his role in AQIM, the regional jihad and the global jihad at large. It finds that even as Belmokhtar's ties to AQIM have waned, his increasing audacity, determined opportunism and strategic alliances with like-minded Islamist groups in the Sahel have helped secure his status as the face of jihad in North Africa and the Sahel. French-led counterterrorism operations in Mali, however, have exposed Belmokhtar's limits, having disrupted his ability to find sanctuary in his traditional area of operations. The advent of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has also drawn potential recruits away from the region, and Belmokhtar's attempts to garner support from other parts of the Muslim world may suffer from backing al-Qa'ida chief Ayman al-Zawahiri in the group's ongoing dispute with ISIS.

## **Afghan and Algerian Jihad**

Born in 1972 in the central Algerian city of Ghardaïa, Belmokhtar claims to have joined the Afghan jihad in 1991 in part to avenge the death two years earlier of 'Abdullah 'Azzam, the mentor of Usama bin Ladin and the so-called father of the global jihad. In Afghanistan, Belmokhtar reportedly trained at al-Qa'ida camps in Khowst and

Jalalabad, fought the communist regime of Mohammad Najibullah and met a number of influential jihadi ideologues.<sup>3</sup> It was on the Afghan battlefield that an incident involving stray shrapnel earned Belmokhtar one of his many nicknames—“Laaouar,” or “One-Eyed.”<sup>4</sup>

Following the outbreak of civil war in Algeria, Belmokhtar, like many other Algerians fighting in Afghanistan, returned to his native country in 1993. He quickly established a local militia, exultantly dubbed the Martyr’s Brigade, in his hometown of Ghardaïa. Eventually absorbed by the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), the main umbrella organization of the Algerian jihad, Belmokhtar’s unit was tasked with overseeing operations across the Sahara.<sup>5</sup> Belmokhtar would later boast that during this period his band of fighters “aimed not only for Algerian targets but also foreigners.” On one occasion, he has proudly claimed, his fighters killed “five Europeans working on behalf of an American oil company” in Algeria.<sup>6</sup>

By 1998, however, GIA’s notorious record of brutality had cost the group considerable public support. Hassan Hattab, the emir of GIA’s Zone 2 (Kabylia, east of Algiers),

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<sup>3</sup> Salima Tlemçani, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar vante son allégeance à Al Qaïda,” *El-Watan*, 13 September 2006, reprinted by *Algeria-Watch* (blog), [www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/mil/sale\\_guerre/caserne\\_mauritanie.htm](http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/mil/sale_guerre/caserne_mauritanie.htm).

<sup>4</sup> Steven Erlanger and Adam Nossiter, “Jihad ‘Prince,’ a Kidnapper, Is Tied to Raid,” *New York Times*, 17 January 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/01/18/world/africa/mokhtar-belmokhtar-thought-to-be-kidnappings-mastermind.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/18/world/africa/mokhtar-belmokhtar-thought-to-be-kidnappings-mastermind.html).

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Black, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad’s Southern Amir,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 12 (8 May 2009): 8–11, [www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM\\_007\\_15.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/TM_007_15.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Tlemçani, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar vante son allegiance à Al Qaïda.”

broke with GIA, continuing the jihad as leader of a splinter group calling itself the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).<sup>7</sup> Within a year, Hattab persuaded Belmokhtar, who had also quit the crumbling GIA, to join GSPC.<sup>8</sup>

As the head of GSPC's "Saharan Emirate," Belmokhtar was given control over operations across a wide swath of the Algerian desert, from the eastern borders with Tunisia and Libya to the southwestern frontiers with Mauritania and Mali.

Belmokhtar's only significant GSPC rival at the time, Amari Saifi (better known as "El Para"), was arrested in nearby Chad in March 2004.<sup>9</sup> But the Saharan emir did not restrict his activities to Algeria. Belmokhtar rapidly expanded GSPC's field of operations into northern Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad, aggressively pursuing strategic alliances with the leaders of many Malian Tuareg and Arab communities.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of the cleavages that facilitated GIA's demise, see Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Philippe Migaux, "The Roots of Islamic Radicalism," in *The History of Terrorism: From Antiquity to Al Qaeda*, ed. Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 311–12. One can infer from later statements that Belmokhtar respected Hattab and may even have had a close relationship with him. For example, Belmokhtar defended Hattab after the ex-emir criticized the group's twin suicide bombings in Algiers on 11 April 2007. Belmokhtar nostalgically recalled the "friendship that binds" him with Hattab "since the time they were collecting weapons, with El Para, in Morocco, Mali, Niger, and Chad." See Mohamed Mouloudj, "El-Qaida Maghreb s'étoile," *La Dépêche de Kabylie*, 15 June 2007, [www.depechedekabylie.com/evenement/41412-el-qaida-maghreb-setiole.html](http://www.depechedekabylie.com/evenement/41412-el-qaida-maghreb-setiole.html).

<sup>9</sup> El Para is best known for coordinating the kidnapping of thirty-two European tourists in 2003. Their eventual release, negotiated in part by Belmokhtar, came at the estimated price of a \$6.5 million ransom. See Nasser Weddady, "How Europe Bankrolls Terror," *New York Times*, 16 February 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/how-european-ransoms-bankroll-islamist-terrorists.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/how-european-ransoms-bankroll-islamist-terrorists.html). After his arrest, El Para apologized for his activities and publically endorsed Algerian reconciliation efforts. See Nazim Fethi, "Abderrezak El Para Joins Movement for Algerian Reconciliation," *Magharebia*, 12 May 2009, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2009/05/12/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2009/05/12/feature-01).

Belmokhtar is even thought to have married at least one local Berabiche Arab woman.<sup>10</sup>

National governments, unable to secure their borders and effectively police the remote Sahara, offered little sustained resistance. The southward expansion by Belmokhtar's operational unit—known as Katibat al-Mulathamini, or the Masked Brigade—served GSPC's goal of delivering fresh recruits, but it also netted an additional tactical advantage: the establishment of rear bases from which GSPC could safely run training camps and plot attacks against Algeria and neighboring countries.

On 4 June 2005, Belmokhtar's men stormed a Mauritanian military outpost at Lemgheity, killing fifteen soldiers and injuring seventeen more.<sup>11</sup> The Saharan emir justified the group's first significant attack outside Algeria on the basis that the regime of Mauritanian president Maaouya Ould Taya had actively suppressed Islam, hosted "secret CIA prisons" and permitted diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>12</sup> The soldiers at Lemgheity were specifically targeted for having conducted joint military exercises with the United States.<sup>13</sup> The raid, Belmokhtar claims, facilitated the coup d'état that ousted Ould Taya in August 2005.

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<sup>10</sup> A number of sources report that Belmokhtar married the niece of his then-lieutenant Oumar Ould Hamaha. For example, see Lemine Ould M. Salem, "Portrait. On l'appelle 'Barbe rousse,'" *Telquel*, 17 January 2013, [www.telquel-online.com/Actualite/Monde/Portrait-On-l-appelle-Barbe-rousse/553](http://www.telquel-online.com/Actualite/Monde/Portrait-On-l-appelle-Barbe-rousse/553).

<sup>11</sup> Black, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 8.

<sup>12</sup> Aboul Maaly, "Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias 'Belaouar': 'L'armée de Ould Abdel Aziz au Mali n'a jamais été un obstacle devant nous pour arriver à nos objectifs en Mauritanie,'" Agence Nouakchott d'Information, 9 November 2011, [www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=15829](http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=15829).

<sup>13</sup> Tlemçani, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar vante son allegiance à Al Qaïda."

## Belmokhtar's Role in GSPC's Transformation

GSPC's founding charter focused first and foremost on "fighting the Algerian regime which has rejected [the application of] Shar'ia."<sup>14</sup> But GSPC's focus shifted after Hassan Hattab, derided by other members as too moderate and Algeria-centric, was dismissed as the group's emir in 2003.<sup>15</sup> As GSPC's capacity for sustaining an insurgency against Algerian security forces waned, the group's subsequent leadership—commanded first by Nabil Sahraoui, then Abdelmalik Droukdel—gravitated, at least in principle, toward Usama bin Ladin's vision of attacks on Western and Jewish targets in the Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> Droukdel (alias Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud), who sought to transform GSPC into a transnational organization, forged contact with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq, in 2004, and later established a pipeline for funneling fighters from the Maghreb and West Africa to join the Iraqi jihad.<sup>17</sup> But GSPC also set its sights on connecting with al-Qa'ida's core command in Pakistan. To mark the fifth anniversary of 9/11, GSPC entered into a "blessed union" with al-Qa'ida in September

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<sup>14</sup> Mathieu Guidère, *Al-Qaida à la Conquête du Maghreb* (Monaco: Rocher, 2007), 62–63.

<sup>15</sup> As GSPC's finances and recruitment efforts declined, a growing faction of GSPC's leadership (perhaps excepting Belmokhtar, because of his close relationship with Hattab) blamed Hattab for the group's stagnation. See Abdel Bari Atwan, *After Bin Laden: Al Qaeda, the Next Generation* (New York: New Press, 2012), 179; Hattab eventually surrendered to Algerian authorities in September 2007. The Algerian government has eagerly broadcasted his calls for AQIM to embrace the peace process. *Al-Hayat* journalist Camille Tawil conducted a lengthy interview with Hattab in March 2009, which can be found at <http://camilletawil.blogspot.com/2009/03/hassan-hattab-speaks-to-camille-tawil.html>; Hattab was released from prison in 2011. "Algeria Frees GSPC Founder Hassan Hattab," *Magharebia*, 26 December 2011, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/12/26/newsbrief-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2011/12/26/newsbrief-01).

<sup>16</sup> Sahraoui was killed by Algerian security forces in June 2004, after serving less than a year as GSPC's emir. See Craig Smith, "Militant Slain in Algeria; Ties to Qaeda Are Reported," *New York Times*, 21 June 2004, [www.nytimes.com/2004/06/21/world/militant-slain-in-algeria-ties-to-qaeda-are-reported.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/21/world/militant-slain-in-algeria-ties-to-qaeda-are-reported.html).

<sup>17</sup> See "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *New York Times*, 1 July 2008, [www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/world/africa/01transcript-droukdal.html) and Atwan, *After Bin Laden*.

2006.<sup>18</sup> Four months later, the group officially changed its name to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>19</sup>

Belmokhtar, although later rumored to have had reservations about the merger, played a critical role in its development. For one, al-Qa'ida lauded the Lemgheity attacks, with Usama bin Ladin himself thereafter praising the "Algerian mujahidin."<sup>20</sup> In a 2006 interview, Belmokhtar claimed that he was once tasked by GIA to initiate communications with al-Qa'ida in Sudan, and his brigade reportedly hosted an al-Qa'ida emissary named Abu Mohamed al-Yemeni shortly after 9/11.<sup>21</sup> According to one report, al-Yemeni accompanied Belmokhtar and Amari Saifi on "a trip to northern Mali, Niger, and Mauritania . . . with the goal of establishing contacts with arms dealers and leaders of local tribes."<sup>22</sup> Following al-Yemeni's death, Belmokhtar related that "we sent

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<sup>18</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the merger in an interview with al-Sahab media in September 2006. See "Hot Issues: The Second as Sahab Interview with Ayman al Zawahiri," Al-Sahab, 10 September 2006, <https://archive.org/details/The-all-Interviewes-with-Dr-Ayman-al-Zawahiri>. For Droukdel's pledge of allegiance on behalf of GSPC, see "Bayan wa-Bushra," Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad, [www.tawhed.ws/r?i=xu4qtamo](http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=xu4qtamo) (accessed 24 June 2014). See also John Leicester and Omar Sinan, "al-Qaida Joins Algerians Against France," Associated Press, 15 September 2006, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/15/AR2006091500109.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/15/AR2006091500109.html).

<sup>19</sup> Abu Mus'ab 'Abd al-Wadud, "Ish'ar bi-Taghyir al-Tasmiya," Shabakat ana al-Muslim (Web forum), 26 January 2007, [www.muslim.org/vb/archive/index.php/t-203437.html](http://www.muslim.org/vb/archive/index.php/t-203437.html).

<sup>20</sup> Atwan, *After Bin Laden*, 182.

<sup>21</sup> Tlemçani, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar vante son allegiance à Al Qaïda"; Maaly, "Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias 'Belaouar.'"

<sup>22</sup> Salima Tlemçani, "Révélations sur le parcours d'un chef terroriste," *El-Watan*, reprinted by *Algeria-Watch* (blog), 10 April 2006, [www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/mil/groupes\\_armes/cas\\_enigmatique.htm](http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/mil/groupes_armes/cas_enigmatique.htm).

our brother Younis al-Mauritani” to talk to al-Qa’ida.<sup>23</sup> Al-Mauritani had participated in the Lemgheity attack and may have directly negotiated the 2006 merger.<sup>24</sup>

## **Belmokhtar’s Ideology and Strategic Objectives**

Belmokhtar has in recent years become increasingly vocal in asserting his conception of a regional and global jihad. In a 2011 interview, Belmokhtar portrayed his jihad as part of a universal Islamic struggle against the West, saying, “How do you expect us to give up the fight against the West when they are the ones who inflict the worst punishment on our Muslim brothers in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and in usurped Palestine and displace women and children?”<sup>25</sup> But his growing interest in global jihad did not cause him to lose sight of the “near enemy,” as he described the governments of Mauritania, Algeria, Mali and Niger as Western pawns carrying out a “proxy war” in West Africa. After “direct confrontation” with jihadis “failed” in Iraq, Belmokhtar argues, the West now employs a strategy of sowing and exploiting *fitna*, or discord, among jihadi groups in the Muslim world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Maaly, “Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias ‘Belaouar.’”

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury press release, “Treasury Targets Three Senior Al-Qa’ida Leaders” (7 September 2011), [www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1289.aspx](http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1289.aspx). A “Shaykh Yunis,” thought to be al-Mauritani, appears in one of the Abbottabad documents, where he is referred to as al-Qa’ida’s “official responsible for external work in Africa and west Asia.” See Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, page 31, available at [www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Translation.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Translation.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Maaly, “Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias ‘Belaouar.’”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Belmokhtar's suggested response to Western encroachment takes on two flavors. In the near term, "the primary objective of our operations is to reach Western and Jewish interests, both economic and military, because they plunder the wealth of our nation."<sup>27</sup> In the longer term, Belmokhtar aims to achieve "unity of Muslims, from the Nile to the Atlantic," under the banner of Shar'ia.<sup>28</sup> This sequence mirrors bin Ladin's objectives of expelling America and the West from the *dar-al-Islam* (Muslim world) before establishing a unified Islamic caliphate.

One notable point of divergence with al-Qa'ida, however, is Belmokhtar's view that negotiations offer a viable avenue for achieving or supplementing his objectives. On a number of occasions, Belmokhtar has directly negotiated prisoner swaps or ransom payments with government representatives. When asked whether he would halt operations in Mauritania if certain demands were met, Belmokhtar replied, "This can be studied and we, on principle, do not refuse it . . . we are always ready to meet no matter what delegation of scholars, regardless of our differences in point of view."<sup>29</sup> This reflects a departure from GIA's motto—"no dialogue, no truce, no reconciliation"—which more closely reflects the approach of al-Qa'ida at large.<sup>30</sup> Belmokhtar's history of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. However, Belmokhtar added that "anyone who tries to stop us becomes for us a legitimate target."

<sup>28</sup> Ely Ould Maghlah, "Urgent: Fusion entre les 'Moulathamounes' et le MUJAO," Agence Nouakchott d'Information, 22 August 2013, [www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=22617](http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=22617).

<sup>29</sup> Maaly, "Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias 'Belaouar.'"

<sup>30</sup> Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990–98* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 209.

negotiating with his adversaries suggests he could be more easily co-opted than other jihadi leaders.

## **Activities in the Sahara**

Belmokhtar's lofty ideology and boastful rhetoric, however, provide only a partial picture. Despite his displays of piety and sympathies for al-Qa'ida, Belmokhtar is often dismissed by analysts and AQIM's senior leadership alike as little more than a glorified kidnapper and smuggler. In a brusque letter to Belmokhtar in 2012, AQIM's leadership noted that "there are plenty of mujahedeen, funding is available, weapons are widespread, and strategic targets are within reach . . . Despite all that, your brigade did not achieve a single spectacular operation targeting the crusader alliance."<sup>31</sup> Instead, Belmokhtar is more closely associated with criminal activities, such as abducting Western tourists, aid workers and diplomats; looting and stealing money; and trafficking drugs, weapons and illegal immigrants across the Sahara.

Indeed, there is ample evidence to suggest that Belmokhtar has engaged in these activities. His close association with cigarette smuggling has earned him the moniker "Mr. Marlboro," and hostage operations are often so lucrative that some analysts have

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from AQIM's Shura Council to the Masked Brigade's Shura Council, 3 October 2012, document discovered in Timbuktu and released by the Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department," 28 May 2013, [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf).

characterized AQIM's kidnapping racket as an end in itself.<sup>32</sup> But this characterization does not account for a considerable number of exceptions—including Belmokhtar's involvement in the bloody Lemgheity attack and a 2011 plot to blow up the French Embassy in Mauritania—as well as an escalation of hostilities in the past two years, which will be described in more detail later in this study.<sup>33</sup> Today, the commander of the Masked Brigade has considerably more clout in jihadist circles as a hardened insurgent.

## **An Opportunity in Mali**

It is worth noting that the success of Belmokhtar's activities is closely tied to his ability to find sanctuary from external pressure. Notwithstanding its weak infrastructure and intense climatic conditions, the vast and remote Sahara desert has offered jihadis refuge from security forces. Yet this sanctuary has not been foolproof: for example, Mauritania's and Algeria's cross-border operations in northern and western Mali in

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<sup>32</sup> Belmokhtar's brigade is credited with snatching at least ten Westerners, including Robert Fowler, the UN special envoy to Niger, between 2008 and 2011. Belmokhtar has also helped negotiate the release of many others, including the thirty-two Europeans captured in 2003. According to one estimate, AQIM has received around \$125 million in ransom payments since 2008. See Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, 30 July 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>.

<sup>33</sup> It is also worth noting that Belmokhtar's demands in hostage negotiations often involve more than money alone. On one occasion, AQIM tied the release of five French hostages to Usama bin Ladin's demand that France withdraw its forces from Afghanistan. See Leela Jacinto, "'Withdraw Your Forces,' al Qaeda Warns France," *France 24*, 19 November 2010, [www.france24.com/en/20101119-al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim-bin-laden-french-hostages-afghanistan-droukdel/](http://www.france24.com/en/20101119-al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-aqim-bin-laden-french-hostages-afghanistan-droukdel/).

2010 may have had at least a temporary effect on limiting the mobility of Belmokhtar's brigade.

Efforts to restrict AQIM's sanctuary suffered a blow in early 2012, however, when an unprecedented opportunity arose for jihadis to exert control over much of northern Mali. Accelerated by a military coup d'état in March 2012, a creeping Tuareg-led rebellion, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), delivered a chunk of territory the size of Texas to a milieu of Malian separatists, Islamists and criminal syndicates. It is reported that, within days, an opportunistic Belmokhtar arrived in Timbuktu, where he met with two Saharan AQIM commanders and Iyad Ag Ghaly, the leader of the local Islamist group Ansar Dine.<sup>34</sup> Here the three commanders are said to have tasked Belmokhtar with fostering an alliance with an AQIM splinter group based in Mali called the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).<sup>35</sup>

Establishing an Islamic state in "Azawad" — the local term for northern Mali — had never been a strategic priority for AQIM. Rather, the opportunity arose largely by

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<sup>34</sup> "Al-Qaeda Leaders Meet in Timbuktu," *Magharebia*, 4 April 2012, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2012/04/04/newsbrief-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2012/04/04/newsbrief-01).

<sup>35</sup> Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department."

chance.<sup>36</sup> But Belmokhtar's longstanding ties with Mali's Tuareg and Arab communities helped give AQIM considerable sway over the administration of Azawad. The tripartite alliance that emerged—AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJWA—quickly displaced the rival MNLA as guarantors of the de facto independent state. In a post to jihadist websites on 1 July 2012, Belmokhtar emphasized that the Masked Brigade was “forced, in a limited time and space, to use force” against MNLA militants in Gao, suggesting that he remained open to accommodating the MNLA.<sup>37</sup> However, in the days that followed, Ansar Dine, MUJWA and AQIM fighters expelled the MNLA from northern Mali's three most important cities (Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu) and began to implement Shar'ia law across much of northern Mali. Belmokhtar, a wanted terrorist across the region, was spotted walking freely in the streets of Gao.

Publically, AQIM's emir, Abdelmalik Droukdel, dared foreign troops to intervene in Azawad, threatening to turn the Sahara into a “graveyard for your soldiers and a disaster for your interests.”<sup>38</sup> Privately, however, Droukdel was coy, warning in a letter to AQIM fighters in Mali that “we must not go too far or take risks in our decisions or imagine that this project is a stable Islamic state” because “it is very probable, perhaps

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<sup>36</sup> See Andrew Wojtanik, “Al Qaeda's Gamble in Mali,” *Notes on the Periphery* (blog), 30 March 2013, <http://noteontheperiphery.wordpress.com/2013/03/30/al-qaedas-gamble-in-mali/>.

<sup>37</sup> Ely Ould Maghlah, “Bellawar raconte sa version des affrontements de Gao et appelle au calme et à la concertation,” Agence Nouakchott d'Information, 1 July 2012, [www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=18760](http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=18760).

<sup>38</sup> Jemel Oumar, “Droukdel Threatens Sahel States,” *Magharebia*, 5 December 2012, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/12/05/feature-02](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2012/12/05/feature-02).

certain, that a military intervention will occur.”<sup>39</sup> Droukdel’s note was prescient. In January 2013, after Ansar Dine captured the central city of Konna, the Malian government called on France to intervene to halt a potential advance on Bamako, the country’s capital. Within days, French forces came to Mali’s aid, launching Operation Serval—an air and ground assault that forced Mali’s jihadis, including Belmokhtar, to find refuge in the mountains of northern Mali or to escape to neighboring countries. AQIM had withstood previous foreign interventions, but the strength of Operation Serval exceeded anything that the group had previously faced. The Islamist alliance’s territorial gains quickly evaporated at the hands of the much larger, well-trained and better-equipped French-led force.

### **Belmokhtar Breaks with AQIM**

By the time of the French intervention, Belmokhtar’s longtime de facto independence from AQIM had become de jure. In a video released in December 2012, the ambitious commander proclaimed the formation of a “new brigade” — al-Muwaqqi`un Bi-al-Dima’, or the Signed-in-Blood Battalion.<sup>40</sup> His lieutenant, Oumar Ould Hamaha, explained that Signed-in-Blood (often still referred to as the Masked Brigade) had split with AQIM “so that we can better operate in the field . . . We want to enlarge our zone

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<sup>39</sup> “Al-Qaeda’s Sahara Playbook,” document discovered in Timbuktu and published by the Associated Press, 14 February 2013, [http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/\\_international/\\_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf](http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Khaled Abu al-‘Abbas, “Introduction to Our Shar’ia: Fulfillment and Steadfastness Until Victory.”

of operation throughout the entire Sahara, going from Niger through to Chad and Burkina Faso.”<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, while firmly distancing itself from AQIM, Belmokhtar’s unit reaffirmed its loyalty to al-Qa’ida’s emir, Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>42</sup>

Belmokhtar’s departure was years in the making. Several instances may be identified over the course of nearly a decade in which AQIM’s leadership in Kabylia sought to either sidestep or to contain Belmokhtar and the Masked Brigade. First, in 2004, Belmokhtar was a leading candidate to succeed the recently killed emir Nabil Sahraoui as the leader of GSPC. But after the shura council chose Droukdel over Belmokhtar, the latter began to distance himself from his counterparts in the Maghreb, seeking sanctuary instead in and around northern Mali, where he was well-received.<sup>43</sup>

Second, in 2007, AQIM announced a structural reorganization that aimed to give the leadership in Kabylia greater oversight of Saharan operations. During this transition, AQIM dismissed Belmokhtar as the leader of the Saharan command, installing Yahya Djouadi in his place.<sup>44</sup> In public, Belmokhtar defended the shakeup as “a change in our

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<sup>41</sup> Baba Ahmed, “Leader of Al-Qaida Unit in Mali Quits AQIM,” Associated Press, 3 December 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/leader-al-qaida-unit-mali-quits-aqim>. Hamaha was killed by French Special Forces in Mali in March 2014. See Adam Nossiter, “Leading Militant Killed in Mali, Military Officials Say,” *New York Times*, 14 March 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/world/africa/leading-militant-killed-in-mali-military-officials-say.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/15/world/africa/leading-militant-killed-in-mali-military-officials-say.html).

<sup>42</sup> Ahmed, “Leader of Al-Qaida Unit in Mali Quits AQIM.”

<sup>43</sup> Guidère, *Al-Qaida à la Conquête du Maghreb*, 85.

<sup>44</sup> Belmokhtar considered Djouadi “an official lacking in skill or experience.” See Associated Press, “A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida’s HR Department.”

strategy dictated by the need to prepare practical conditions, morals and necessary awareness for the start of a new phase.”<sup>45</sup> Privately, however, Belmokhtar derided the move as “a centralization that killed and hamstrung activity in Algeria.”<sup>46</sup> After this transition, as the dejected commander would later tell his supervisors, “the region entered a period of neglect and waste.”<sup>47</sup>

The dispute over centralization reveals a key strategic difference between Droukdel and Belmokhtar. Likely cognizant of the *fitna* that tore apart GIA in the 1990s, the AQIM emir seeks to maintain as much control as possible over the conduct of the organization’s members. Conversely, Belmokhtar tried unendingly to maximize his own freedom of decision making, consulting with the AQIM’s shura council only when the need arose. In hostage negotiations, for example, Belmokhtar demonstrated an affinity for improvisation, earning the ire of his superiors for closing deals without their consent.<sup>48</sup> By seeking to rein in his one-eyed commander (Belmokhtar was passed over for the position of Saharan emir in 2011 and 2012), Droukdel ultimately accelerated Belmokhtar’s exit.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Maaly, “Entretien exclusif avec Khaled Abou Al-Abass, alias ‘Belaouar.’”

<sup>46</sup> Associated Press, “A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida’s HR Department.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Droukdel nominated Nabil Makhloufi, who had deep Libyan connections, in 2011. After Makhloufi’s death in Mali in 2012, he was replaced by Djamel Okacha, who hails from Reghaia, in northern Algeria.

An additional irritant arose around the same time as AQIM's reorganization, when the leadership promoted Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, a longtime Algerian militant, as the head of the group's Tarek bin Ziyad Brigade.<sup>50</sup> Abu Zeid was given responsibility for activities in eastern Algeria, Libya, Niger and, importantly, much of Mali, an area that overlapped with Belmokhtar's zone of operations. The rivalry that emerged was more intense than that of Belmokhtar's previous conflict with Amari Saifi. In July 2009, the Masked Brigade and the Tarek bin Ziyad Brigade engaged in brief but violent hostilities; by late 2009, Belmokhtar and Abu Zeid had kidnapped a number of Western tourists in what was likely a tit-for-tat competition between the two commanders.<sup>51</sup> Abu Zeid berated Belmokhtar as the head of a band of "ignorant outlaws," while Belmokhtar dismissed Abu Zeid as a local smuggler lacking jihadist credentials (for one, he did not fight in Afghanistan), and he criticized Abu Zeid's poor treatment of Western hostages.<sup>52</sup>

Belmokhtar's poor opinion of Abu Zeid is corroborated by the account of Robert Fowler, a Canadian diplomat and a hostage of Belmokhtar's brigade in the Sahara for 130 days in 2008 and 2009. Fowler, the UN special envoy to Niger at the time, considers

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<sup>50</sup> For a backgrounder on Abu Zeid, see Dario Cristiani, "For Profit Jihad: An In-Depth Profile of AQIM's Abou Zeid," *Militant Leadership Monitor*, December 2012, 12–14, [www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Mali--Militant\\_Leadership\\_Monitor\\_Special\\_Report\\_December\\_2012\\_01.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/Mali--Militant_Leadership_Monitor_Special_Report_December_2012_01.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> This hypothesis is advanced by Jean-Pierre Filiu, "A Case Study in the Opportunism of Global Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 4, (April 2010): 14–15, [www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss4.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss4.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Jemel Oumar, "Sahel terror alliances start to fray," *Magharebia*, 16 November 2012, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2012/11/16/reportage-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/reportage/2012/11/16/reportage-01).

himself to have been treated relatively fairly during his captivity. In contrast, he recalls meeting two European women held by Abu Zeid's brigade who were in far more "abominable shape":

Belmokhtar's troops were aghast . . . One of [the women]—old, frail, and confused—had clearly been horribly treated even though she had chosen to become their Muslim sister. It was evident in [Belmokhtar's] face that he found Abu Zeid's handling of these women unconscionable.<sup>53</sup>

In this case, Belmokhtar secured the freedom of Fowler, Fowler's colleague and the two female hostages without Abu Zeid's final approval (or the approval of AQIM's leadership).<sup>54</sup> On another occasion, Belmokhtar released two Spanish aid workers in August 2010, reportedly overriding Abu Zeid's preference to kill the hostages.<sup>55</sup>

The group's good fortune in Mali in 2012 may have plastered over some of Belmokhtar's disagreements with Abu Zeid. But by this time Belmokhtar's ego was bruised and his relationship with AQIM's senior leadership deeply damaged.

Documents discovered by the Associated Press in Timbuktu reveal Belmokhtar's long list of grievances, as well as AQIM's vindictive response. In one exchange, Belmokhtar portrays the AQIM leadership in Kabylia as impotent and out of touch. He accuses the

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Fowler, *A Season in Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al Qaeda* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2011) 264–65.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 264–66; Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department."

<sup>55</sup> "Spanish Hostages Freed by al Qaeda Return Home," Agency France-Presse, 24 August 2010, [www.france24.com/en/20100824-spanish-hostages-freed-al-qaeda-return-home-mali-mauritania-aqmi/](http://www.france24.com/en/20100824-spanish-hostages-freed-al-qaeda-return-home-mali-mauritania-aqmi/).

shura council of privileging jihadis from Algeria's north, at the expense of those who, like him, grew up south of the Atlas Mountains.<sup>56</sup> In another instance, he criticizes AQIM for fracturing the jihad: "What there's plenty of is speaking ill of each other, deceiving each other and spreading of rumors, and that has nothing to do with unity." In sum, "the basic problem," Belmokhtar notes, "is the top-down nature of decision-making in [the Sahara] region in particular, and the presence of the Emirate in Algeria, its failure to follow the needs of the work and its actual details."<sup>57</sup>

The shura council's response is even more severe. It accuses Belmokhtar of "back-biting, name-calling, and sneering" and reproaches him for routinely missing meetings, silencing his phone and failing to submit expense reports.<sup>58</sup> The letter describes Belmokhtar's independence as a "dangerous attempt to secede from the community, fragment the being of the organization, and tear it apart limb from limb." The stinging reprimand continues:

[Belmokhtar], based on the loftiness of his ability, his precedence in jihad and his prowess, remained for more than a decade independent in opinion and autonomous in decision-making, linked to the organization's leadership only by

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<sup>56</sup> Belmokhtar accuses AQIM of seeking to curtail activities in the Sahara, despite having "no members who know this region or have ever lived in it." Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Belmokhtar is also thought to have opposed AQIM's decision to use suicide bombers beginning in 2007, after the merger with Al Qaeda, although this is not mentioned in the missive. See Mohamed Mouloudj, "El-Qaida Maghreb s'étoile," *Dépêche de Kabylie*, 16 June 2007, [www.depechedekabylie.com/evenement/41412-el-qaida-maghreb-setiole.html](http://www.depechedekabylie.com/evenement/41412-el-qaida-maghreb-setiole.html).

<sup>58</sup> Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department."

slogan. He paid no mind, gave no consideration, did not abide by and did not adhere to the principle of “hear and obey,” nor did he stick to the directives or work by the orders coming from the Emirate . . . [Belmokhtar] is not willing to follow anyone, and . . . he is satisfied only when followed and obeyed.<sup>59</sup>

AQIM then indicts Belmokhtar for botching several kidnapping operations (including the Fowler case), shopping for weapons in Libya without permission, obstructing “unity” with like-minded Islamist groups and attempting to drag the leadership into his personal quarrel with Abu Zeid.

Just before the shura council’s response was written, Droukdel sent his close associate Necib Tayeb to Mali to patch up relations with Belmokhtar, but Algerian authorities captured the envoy en route.<sup>60</sup> Whether AQIM then expelled Belmokhtar or Belmokhtar voluntarily left the organization remains ambiguous, but by late 2012, the separation was complete.

## **In Amenas, Arlit and Agadez**

Just three months after AQIM criticized Belmokhtar’s failure “to carry out spectacular operations,” the newly autonomous Masked Brigade undertook arguably the most

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Pascale Combelles Siegel, “AQIM’s Playbook in Mali,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 3 (March 2013): 9–11, [www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss3.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss3.pdf).

ambitious and destructive terrorist attack in the region to date.<sup>61</sup> Belmokhtar's plot, as it was conceived, was for around three dozen fighters to storm a multinational gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria, fill several trucks with foreign nationals, transport the hostages across the border to Mali and destroy the facility on the way out.<sup>62</sup> The militants who swept through the plant on 16 January 2013 ultimately failed to complete the operation as planned, but they successfully cut the power to the plant and held dozens of hostages at the site for more than seventy-two hours. At least thirty-seven foreign employees were killed in the assault.<sup>63</sup>

Belmokhtar claimed responsibility for the attack in a video released the day after the assault began. He justified the episode at In Amenas as a response to the French intervention in Mali, which had begun only four days prior.<sup>64</sup> Though willing to consider the captives' release, Belmokhtar's demands were lofty.

We are ready to negotiate with the Western countries and the Algerian regime on the condition that they end the aggression and the bombing of the Muslim

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<sup>61</sup> Associated Press, "A Disciplinary Letter from Al-Qaida's HR Department."

<sup>62</sup> Belmokhtar contracted much of the casing for the attack to a group of local militants calling itself the "Sons of the Sahara for Islamic Justice." See Hannah Armstrong, "The In Amenas Attack in the Context of Southern Algeria's Growing Social Unrest," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (February 2014): 14–16, [www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss2.pdf](http://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss2.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> Amir Ahmed, "At Least 37 Hostages Killed in Algeria," CNN, 23 January 2013, [www.cnn.com/2013/01/21/world/africa/algeria-hostage-crisis/](http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/21/world/africa/algeria-hostage-crisis/).

<sup>64</sup> The In Amenas operation likely required weeks or months of planning, which suggests that the Masked Brigade either intended to attack regardless of the situation in neighboring Mali or held the operation in reserve until after the French intervention provided an ideological cover.

Malian people, especially in the Azawad territory, and respect their choice in establishing the rule of Islamic Shar'ia on their land.<sup>65</sup>

To the United States, Belmokhtar offered to release all American hostages at the plant (seven, by his count) in exchange for the freedom of Omar Abdul Rahman (Egypt's "Blind Sheikh") and Aafia Siddiqui, an alleged Pakistani al-Qa'ida associate.<sup>66</sup> Although this proposal was a nonstarter for France and the United States, it again reflects Belmokhtar's desire to situate his operations as part of a broader global jihad.

Belmokhtar's leverage quickly dissipated, however: by 19 January, Algerian security forces had either killed or arrested all the militants involved, obviating the need for negotiations.

Yet the Masked Brigade struck again in May 2013 in neighboring Niger. In a joint operation with MUJWA, Belmokhtar's fighters killed at least twenty-four soldiers and one civilian at a French-owned uranium mine in Arlit and a military base in nearby Agadez. The Masked Brigade claimed responsibility for the operation in an online message, extolling the attack as "the first of our responses to the statement made by the

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<sup>65</sup> Khalid Abu al-'Abbas, "Claiming Responsibility for the In Amenas Operation," video released to Sahara Media, 21 January 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxN5-Xi9uCA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxN5-Xi9uCA).

<sup>66</sup> The estimate of seven Americans comes from a January 16 statement by the Signed-in-Blood Battalion. Translation posted by Aaron Zelin, "New statement from Katibat al-Muwaqa'un Bi-l-Dima': 'Claiming the In Amenas Hostage Operation,'" *Jihadology* (website), 16 January 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2013/01/16/new-statement-from-katibat-al-muwaqaun-bi-l-dima-claiming-the-in-amenas-hostage-operation/>.

Nigerien president — who is controlled by Paris — that jihad and the mujahidin had been eliminated.”<sup>67</sup>

However dramatic the hostage-taking at In Amenas, it is possible to interpret the attack as a continuation of, rather than a radical departure from, Belmokhtar’s modus operandi. The objective very well could have been simply to negotiate a hefty ransom for the Western hostages. But eyewitness reports corroborate the hypothesis that the militants had more ambitious plans, namely to demolish the entire facility.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the Niger operation was significant in that it marked the first known instance in which Belmokhtar endorsed deadly suicide bombing operations. While the sample size remains too small to discern a trend, these two events may suggest that Belmokhtar has become increasingly willing to employ new and more violent tactics to achieve his aims.

## **Belmokhtar on the Defensive?**

In breaking with AQIM, Belmokhtar wagered that he would be better off without the institutional support of the Algerian leadership. If using global prestige as a yardstick, he succeeded in drawing the world’s attention after the In Amenas and Niger attacks,

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<sup>67</sup> Statement from the Masked Brigade, posted by Aaron Zelin, *Jihadology* (website), 24 May 2014, <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/khc481lid-abc5ab-al-abb481s-mukhtc481r-bin-mue1b8a5ammad-bilmukhtc481r-22mujc481hidc4abn-operations-in-niger-raid-of-the-commander-shaykh-abd-al-e1b8a5amc4abd-abc5ab.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Adam Nossiter and Nicholas Kulish, “Militants’ Goal in Algeria Gas Plant Siege: Giant Fireball,” *New York Times*, 2 February 2013, [www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/world/africa/hostage-accounts-detail-events-at-saharan-gas-plant.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/world/africa/hostage-accounts-detail-events-at-saharan-gas-plant.html).

but his star has gradually fallen over time. Chatter on jihadi web forums has pivoted toward ISIS and its self-appointed “caliph,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Thousands of potential recruits for the North African jihad, including as many as 3,000 from Tunisia and 1,500 from Morocco, have instead travelled to Syria and Iraq to join ISIS.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, after al-Qa’ida expelled ISIS from its fold in February 2014, Belmokhtar’s statement of support in favor of al-Zawahiri’s decision may have had the effect of tarnishing his image among a global jihadi community captivated by ISIS’ recent territorial gains.<sup>70</sup> Despite his attempts to curry favor with al-Qa’ida, the one-eyed jihadi has failed to receive even a public acknowledgement from al-Zawahiri of his new brigade’s efforts.

On an operational level, Belmokhtar undoubtedly sought, in leaving AQIM, to free himself from an organization he sees as controlling and prejudiced. This does not mean, however, that he will only act alone. In August 2013, the Masked Brigade announced a merger with MUJWA to form a new group calling itself al-Mourabitoun—a tribute to an 11th-century Berber dynasty that, at its height, extended from southern Spain to modern-day Mauritania.<sup>71</sup> Beyond the name, little is known about the structure, strength and composition of al-Mourabitoun. The group has not even announced the

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<sup>69</sup> Richard Barrett, “Foreign Fighters in Syria,” Soufan Group report, 2 June 2014, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> See statement from al-Mourabitoun, “Support and advice,” 18 April 2014, <http://www.gulfup.com/?7Fqmb0>.

<sup>71</sup> See Maghlah, “Urgent: Fusion entre les ‘Moulathamounes’ et le MUJAO,” Agence Nouakchott d’Information, 2013.

name of its emir, although one anonymous source told a Mauritanian news agency that the leader is a veteran non-Algerian jihadist who fought both the Soviets and the Americans in Afghanistan.<sup>72</sup>

The group's objective is less opaque: to secure the freedom of the people of northern Mali, who have been "long subjected to the injustice and imperialism marking their region under the influence of the Malian government supported by France."<sup>73</sup> Al-Mourabitoun boasts that France "will suffer the consequences of [its] aggression . . . as was the case of the Soviet Union defeated by the mujahidin."<sup>74</sup> In pursuit of this ambitious aim, al-Mourabitoun has married Belmokhtar's small but seasoned brigade with a larger group of mostly Sahel-based fighters with a history of recruiting suicide bombers. Its first prominent attack came on 14 July 2014, when a suicide bombing killed a French soldier north of Gao.<sup>75</sup> (Al-Mourabitoun has since largely focused on small-scale assaults on Mali's 9,000-strong UN peacekeeping force, but Belmokhtar's group is

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ely Ould Maghlah, "Terrorisme: les 'Mourabitoune' de l'Azawad menacent de s'en prendre à la France et ses alliés," Agence Nouakchott d'Information, 4 January 2014, [www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=23433](http://www.ani.mr/?menuLink=9bf31c7ff062936a96d3c8bd1f8f2ff3&idNews=23433).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> See "Nord Mali: El-Mourabitoune revendique l'attentat suicide contre l'armée française," *Alakbhar*, 22 July 2014, <http://fr.alakbhar.info/9253-0-Nord-Mali-El-Mourabitoune-revendique-lattentat-suicide-contre-larmee-francaise.html>.

also suspected to be behind more ambitious attacks on a Nigerien prison and refugee camp near the Malian border that killed twelve Nigerien soldiers and civilians.<sup>76)</sup>

Although the new alliance affords new opportunities for Belmokhtar, one could also read the merger as embattled jihadi reaching for a lifeline after a series of setbacks.

Operation Serval and the subsequent deployment of African peacekeepers have severely restricted Belmokhtar's freedom of movement in northern Mali. Several of the one-eyed commander's closest associates—including Hacene Ould Khalil, his deputy and chief propagandist, and Oumar Ould Hamaha, his longtime lieutenant—have been killed, and since In Amenas, Belmokhtar has become arguably the most prominent high-value target in the region.<sup>77</sup>

Yet the one known as “Uncatchable” has been pronounced dead at least four times since 1999 only to reemerge later with a new video, interview or statement. Most recently, he resurfaced in a video in September 2013, six months after Chadian forces announced with near certainty that he had been killed.<sup>78</sup> Although Belmokhtar has not

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<sup>76</sup> Jemal Oumar, “Niger reels from deadly attacks,” *Magharebia*, 4 November 2014, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/11/04/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/11/04/feature-01).

<sup>77</sup> See Adama Diarra, “French Troops Kill Deputy to Veteran Islamist Belmokhtar,” Reuters, 21 November 2013, [www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/21/us-mali-france-islamists-idUSBRE9AK0Q520131121](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/21/us-mali-france-islamists-idUSBRE9AK0Q520131121); and Nossiter, “Leading Militant Killed in Mali.”

<sup>78</sup> For the video, see Katibat al-Mulathamun, “Epic Battles of the Fathers: The Battle of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hamid Abu Zayd,” *Jihadology* (website), 9 September 2013, <http://jihadology.net/2013/09/09/new-video-message-from-katibat-al-mulathamun-epic-battles-of-the-fathers-the-battle-of-shaykh-abd-al-%E1%B8%A5amid-abu-zayd/>. For

appeared publicly since, Malian security sources believe that he is alive and may have found refuge in neighboring Libya (or potentially even as far as Tunisia).<sup>79</sup> An intentionally low profile may indicate that Belmokhtar plans to wait out Western counterterrorism operations in the region, focusing in the interim on collecting weapons and allies and recruiting returnees from the jihad in Syria and Iraq. Belmokhtar's adeptness at forging ties with local communities in Mali suggests he could build a similar support structure in Libya.

Encroaching French, American and regional pressure, however, may not afford Belmokhtar this chance. More than two decades after Belmokhtar began his jihad, the FBI filed a criminal complaint against the forty-year-old commander in February 2013, and the U.S. Department of State officially labeled the Masked Brigade a Foreign Terrorist Organization in December 2013 (MUJWA was blacklisted a year prior).<sup>80</sup> As General David Rodriguez, the head of U.S. Africa Command, told reporters in January 2014, "We still believe [Belmokhtar] has the capability" to conduct another attack on the

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reports of Belmokhtar's death, see Madjiasra Nako, "Chad Says Kills Algeria Hostage Mastermind in Mali," Reuters, 2 March 2013, [www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/02/us-mali-belmokhtar-idUSBRE9210B920130302](http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/02/us-mali-belmokhtar-idUSBRE9210B920130302).

<sup>79</sup> Bakari Gueye, "Belmokhtar Threatens Sahel from New Libya Base," *Magharebia*, 16 April 2014, [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/04/16/feature-01](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/04/16/feature-01).

<sup>80</sup> *United States of America v. Mokhtar Belmokhtar*, amended complaint, 26 February 2013, released by *New York Times*, "Amended Complaint Against Mokhtar Belmokhtar," 19 July 2013, [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/20/nyregion/complaint-against-Mokhtar-Belmokhtar.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/07/20/nyregion/complaint-against-Mokhtar-Belmokhtar.html) (see page 16); "Terrorist Designation of the al-Mulathamun Battalion," U.S. Department of State.

scale of In Amenas.<sup>81</sup> As French, American and other intelligence sources scour the Sahara for Belmokhtar, it remains to be seen whether the “Uncatchable” will get another opportunity to do so.

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<sup>81</sup> “Algerian jihadist remains serious threat: US general,” Agence France-Presse, 9 January 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/91242/World/Region/Algerian-jihadist-remains-serious-threat-US-genera.aspx>.

