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Articles

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadi Loyalty

by Jean-Pierre Filiu

Abstract

In a decade-long of activities, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has nurtured a unique mix of global and local jihadism. It has kept a distinctively Algerian leadership through all its various evolutions. But the Algerian field commanders in the Sahara region, far beyond the Algerian borders, have taken over the global dimension of jihadi projection from the AQIM leadership still holed up in Kabylia. The feud between the two main Sahara commanders aggravated the complexity of those shifting loyalties, first, inside AQIM, and second, with their regional partners and, third, in relation with Al-Qaida Senior Leadership. The short-lived “Islamic Emirate” of Northern Mali (2012-2013) and the recent coalition of a “Group for the support of Islam and Muslims” have shown AQIM enter alliances on its own initiative, while pledging unconditional allegiance to Zawahiri.

Keywords: Al-Qaida, Algeria, Sahel, AQIM

Introduction

The jihadi landscape in North Africa and the Sahel region represents a fascinating case study of shifting transnational loyalties. The jihadi insurgency waged during the nineties in Algeria by the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) [1] was far more powerful and murderous than the struggle waged at the same time in Egypt by several jihadi groups, the most important of them being the Gamaa Islamiyya.[2] But some of these Egyptian militants nurtured significant relations with Al-Qaida senior leadership (AQSL), first in Sudan, then in Afghanistan, through the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, who acted de facto as the deputy leader of the organization. On the contrary, Algerian jihadis turned down various offers of integration into AQSL after 1994 and opposed the “Algerianity” (*jaz’ara*) of their struggle in Algeria proper to the “global jihad” advocated by Usama Bin Laden and Zawahiri.[3]

It would take more than a decade of ferocious power struggles, low-intensity guerrilla and international realignment to eventually bring the Algerian jihadis into the Al-Qaida networks: in September 1998, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) [4] split away from the GIA, condemning the spiral of terror that was consuming the very organization and refocusing its violence against the Algerian security forces. In June 2004, Abdel Malik Drukdal became the leader (*amir* [5]) of the GSPC and enhanced his cooperation with Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi’s group in Iraq, soon to be recognized by Bin Laden as the local branch of Al-Qaida. In July 2005, Al-Qaida in Iraq abducted two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad and executed them as a gesture of solidarity with the GSPC. In September 2006, Zawahiri celebrated the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks by announcing the GSPC’s affiliation, before Drukdal pledged public allegiance to Bin Laden. In January 2007, the GSPC became officially Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

What should have been the end of a “globalizing” process, with AQIM as an affiliate of Al-Qaida for the whole of North Africa, would prove to have opened a vast set of new interrogations for the Algerian jihadi militants. Even the road to the establishment of an “Islamic Emirate”, five years later in Northern Mali, therefore far away from the targeted “Maghreb”, was paved with serious internal feuds and unexpected local alliances. This process is to be studied thoroughly in its successive stages, now that AQIM has completed a full decade of activities and that the collapse of the Malian “Islamic Emirate” has allowed access to some AQIM’s internal documents.

The Challenges of Turning Global

AQSL had clearly assigned an “Islamic Maghreb” mission to the former GSPC, after fifteen years of Algeria-centred jihadi activities. This regional horizon was also made more accessible by an unprecedented wave of recruitment and training of Tunisian, Libyan and Moroccan militants by the GSPC, before sending them to Iraq, along with Algerian activists. But Drukdal kept the GSPC Algerian leadership structure in place and did not try to diversify it with the incorporation of other North African cadres. Even in distant Sahel, Drukdal relied on two Algerian local commanders: in the West, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, nicknamed Belaouar, “the one-eyed man”, since he was believed to have lost an eye while fighting the Afghan army in Khost in 1991; in the East, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, whose smuggling networks with Libya and Niger had become increasingly prosperous. The veteran Belmokhtar claimed to control a full-fledged “brigade” (*katiba* [6]) he had called pompously “Al-Moulathamoun”, the “Veiled-ones”, in a direct echo of the “veiled” tribesmen that spread Islam in the past through the Sahara.

AQIM struck Algiers twice with murderous suicide attacks on April 11 and December 11, 2007. It lived up to its “global” credentials by claiming it had mixed “global” and local targets, while using the Al-Qaida style suicide commandos. Despite the horrendous toll of the “black decade” of the nineties, Algeria had never experienced the trauma of suicide attacks, especially of such magnitude, with strings of simultaneous explosions: the three coordinated blasts in April targeted the government palace and two police stations and left 30 dead, all of them Algerian (even though AQIM claimed to have struck the “Interpol headquarters”); the two suicide attacks in December targeted the Constitutional Court and the UN local headquarters, with 17 out of the 47 persons killed actually working for the UN. Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his “national reconciliation” policy were directly challenged in the heart of the capital city. So the regime and its security apparatus reacted swiftly and forcefully: the jihadi cells were dismantled in Greater Algiers and AQIM commandos were rolled back into their historical stronghold in the mountainous range of Kabylia.[7]

Drukdal and his supporters were now largely cornered in what was certainly a safe haven, but with very limited capacity of projection. Their “global” aspirations were even more jeopardized by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) announcing its own merger with Al-Qaida, at the very end of 2007, without rallying AQIM and its “Islamic Maghreb”. Drukdal, in order to keep the credibility of his “global” agenda, had to depend more and more on its two Saharan affiliates. Belmokhtar, who had previously launched murderous attacks against the Mauritanian security, ordered the killing of four French tourists in the last days of 2007. The jihadi threat on the Paris-Dakar land race reached such intensity that this international car competition was cancelled (it has since been transferred to Latin America). In March 2008, Abou Zeid joined the fray and had two Austrian tourists abducted in Southern Tunisia.

The competition between the two jihadi commanders led to an escalation in the kidnapping of Western hostages by both Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid. Those protracted crises delivered them significant media coverage and, eventually, hefty ransoms. Drukdal kept only nominal control over those operations, even though Abou Zeid, contrary to Belmokhtar, never missed an opportunity to praise Drukdal’s leadership. The Mauritanian army, after months of mop-up campaign, succeeded in expelling Belmokhtar’s supporters from its territory. But the Malian army failed in July 2009 to restore its authority over the Northern part of the country, keeping only garrisons in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. Belmokhtar and Abou Zeid could now operate freely from their respective bases in Northern Mali. Belmokhtar negotiated the hostage releases through one of the advisers of the president of Burkina Faso, while Abou Zeid favoured the mediation of Iyad Ag Ghali, a former guerrilla leader of the Tuareg insurgency, who had recently returned from being Malian consul in the Saudi city of Djedda. The jihadi wealth was so abundant that a new group, distinct from AQIM, was formed under the name of Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique l’Ouest, which translates as “Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa,” (MUJAO) [8], with strong connections with drug smugglers (cocaine was now routinely transported through the Sahel to Europe).

The First Jihadistan

The killing of Bin Laden in Pakistan, in May 2011, and his succession by Zawahiri impacted AQIM less than the revolutionary wave that shook Tunisia and Libya. Seifallah Ben Hassine, the founder of the Tunisian Islamic Fighting Group [9], a close associate to Al-Qaida, had been jailed in Tunisia since 2003 and was released shortly after Ben Ali's fall, in the framework of a general amnesty. He did not lose time to organize a vibrant salafi group, Ansar al-Sharia (AS/the Supporters of Sharia). And he missioned the French-Tunisian Boubaker al-Hakim, recently released from French jails, to establish AS' clandestine military branch. Hakim had fought in 2003-2004 in the Iraqi city of Fallouja, then a jihadi stronghold, and his own brother had been killed there in a US bombing.[10] While Hakim started to recruit fighters for AS, AQIM progressively expanded from Algeria into Tunisia, with a new base in the Chambi mountain range, close to the shared border of the two countries.

But the consequences of the Libyan revolution were even more important: thousands of Tuareg militants, often former guerrillas in Mali, had joined the mercenary ranks of what Moammar Gaddafi had labelled "the Islamic Legion". When the Libyan regime collapsed in the fall of 2011, the so-called "Legion" disbanded and disgruntled militants moved back to Mali, where many of them rallied behind Iyad Ag Ghali and his newly formed Ansar Eddine (Supporters of Religion). The fact that Gaddafi's loyalists had planted arms caches all over the desert, now accessible to any roaming gang, only contributed to the volatility of the situation and to the unprecedented dissemination of war weaponry. In January 2012, Ansar Eddine joined forces with the Tuareg separatist guerrillas to take over the garrisons of Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao in only a few weeks. A military coup in Bamako only aggravated the governmental rout in Northern Mali.

The separatists proclaimed, in March 2012, the independence of "Azawad", the Tuareg name for Northern Mali. But Iyad Ag Ghali had a totally different agenda. With the active support of AQIM and MUJAO, Ansar Eddine soon overran its former Tuareg allies, establishing a full-fledged Jihadistan (or "Islamic Emirate") on the ruins of the short-lived Azawad. Each component of the jihadi coalition had its own city to rule: Ansar Eddine in Kidal, AQIM in Timbuktu and MUJAO in Gao, even though each group was present in the others' fiefdoms. This was the first time an Al-Qaida branch could claim such vast territory, while Al-Qaida had always been subordinated to the Taliban in Afghanistan and had only achieved pockets of territorial control in Iraq or Yemen. Of course, AQIM was the minor partner in the relations with Ansar Eddine and MUJAO, who had strong roots respectively in the Tuareg and sub-Saharan populations. But this was a substantial achievement that Drukdal credited mainly to Abou Zeid, who was consolidated in his leading position as commander of the Tariq Ibn Ziyad Brigade, proudly named after the Muslim conqueror of Spain in the eight century.

The "Timbuktu Papers"

The showdown between Abou Zeid and his now arch-rival Belmokhtar was inevitable. Iyad Ag Ghali tried briefly to mediate in Timbuktu between the two Algerian warlords, but Drukdal and AQIM now saw only problems in keeping Belmokhtar inside of the organization. A privileged insight into this controversy was provided through the so-called "Timbuktu papers", seized in this Malian city after its liberation from jihadi rule in 2013. Particularly revealing is the scathing letter sent by the AQIM leadership ("Advisory Board") to Belmokhtar, dated November 3, 2012. First, Belmokhtar was accused of having miserably failed in his management of the December 2008 kidnapping of two senior Canadian diplomats, including the UN special envoy for Niger, released after four months of detention for a relatively small ransom: "Who is incompetent? We, who wanted to consult and stressed the need for coordination in this type of case, or someone who acted alone, in his corner?"[11]

On top of that, Belmokhtar was bitterly blamed in the same letter for conducting his military operations on his own, without truly cooperating with other field commanders: "Unlike other Sahel emirs contributing to weapons procurement efficiently and in large quantities, his contribution is virtually non-existent." [12] But the worst attack stemmed from Belmokhtar's numerous attempts to establish a direct line of communication

with Zawahiri, now supreme leader of Al-Qaida worldwide: “You delude yourself if you imagine that communications with the Central Command of Al-Qaida will be faster and easier than exchanges with the regional command that is in your close vicinity.”[13] The “close vicinity” between Drukdal’s stronghold in Algeria and Belmokhtar’s base in Mali, separated by more than three thousand kilometres, was pure rhetoric. But AQIM’s resolve to smash any attempt by Belmokhtar to emancipate himself and reach on his own an official AQ status was adamant. The defiant commander was excluded from AQIM, while he pretended to have himself left the organisation to found his own group, “The Signers in Blood”.

Six years after Drukdal’s pledge of allegiance to Bin Laden, AQIM strongly believed it had secured the regional monopoly over the operational contacts with Zawahiri and Al-Qaida senior leadership (AQSL). Drukdal’s local power base in Algerian Kabylia might appear dwarfed by the large territory patrolled by his supporters’ brigade in Northern Mali, but Abou Zeid had nevertheless displayed over the years all the gestures and rites of loyalty to his “regional commander”. Timbuktu served as a beacon for all the potential recruits in the Sahel region who could be more attracted by AQIM’s “global” jihad than by the local/regional approaches of Ansar Eddine and MUJAO. Belmokhtar’s exclusion had solidified AQIM chain of command. But this jihadi delusion of grandeur was to crumble very soon.

The 2013 Shock and its Aftershocks

In January 2013, the tripartite alliance between Ansar Eddine, AQIM and MUJAO started to move forcibly towards Southern Mali. The authorities in Bamako called for an immediate French intervention to stop the jihadi offensive. The Algerian army and security were incensed by what they considered as a betrayal by Iyad Ag Ghali, since they had invested a lot of time and energy, all through the second half of 2012, to mediate between Bamako and Ansar Eddine. Algiers therefore cooperated significantly with the French operation codenamed “Serval” by opening its airspace to French warplanes and sealing the border between Mali and Algeria. Before the end of January, the jihadi columns, brutally crushed by massive air strikes, had to roll back and evacuate Gao, then Timbuktu, in front of a few thousands French special forces.

While his former jihadi partners were falling in Mali under this Paris-led campaign, Belmokhtar launched an unprecedented attack on an Algerian oil complex at In-Amenas, some 1,500 kilometres south-east of Algiers, close to the Libyan border. The plant was run by the Norwegian Statoil and British Petroleum in a joint venture with the Algerian SONATRACH. Never had hydrocarbon-related installations been attacked in two decades of Algerian terrorism. The Algerian military assaulted the facilities with helicopters and air-to-ground missiles. The battle ended with the killing of 29 terrorists and of 40 civilians of ten different nationalities they had taken hostage.[14] Belmokhtar claimed, in a rare video message online, responsibility for the disaster on behalf of Al-Qaida.[15] His exclusion from AQIM proved inconsequential as he asserted his claims to be Zawahiri’s representative for the whole region in the most spectacular way.

In Mali, the French offensive had received significant reinforcements from the Chadian army and, after taking over Kidal, was closing on the jihadi natural redoubt of Amettetaï, in the core of the Ifoghas range. This last stronghold was eradicated in February 2013, a fall followed by systematic clean-up operations. The French sources estimated some 700 jihadis had been killed and 200 captured out of a total force of 2,000 fighters in Mali.[16] It was soon confirmed that Abou Zeid had been killed while trying to escape the trap. Yahya Abou al-Hammam, the most senior AQIM cadre to have survived “Serval”, became de facto Drukdal’s new appointee for the Sahara. Interestingly, even through the Malian debacle, AQIM had remained incapable of delegating local power to non-Algerian jihadis (Abou al-Hammam, whose real name is Djamel Okacha, is also an Algerian, like Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar).

While AQIM was slowly recovering from its historical defeat, Belmokhtar went back on the offensive, this time in Niger, claiming with MUJAO, in May 2013, the joint responsibility of two coordinated suicide attacks (with at least 20 killed) in Agadez and Arlit, the first one against the regular army, the second one against a French-run mining facility. In August 2013, the two organizations officialised their merging in a new outfit branded “Al-Mourabitoun”. This was a direct reference to the prestigious dynasty of the Almoravids, that had expanded

in the Sahara through Sijilmasa in the year 1053, before ruling during one century over Morocco and Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus).

An Unprecedented Jihadi Polarisation

This profound restructuring of the regional jihadi map occurred while the confrontation between Zawahiri and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi intensified in the Middle East: Baghdadi had proclaimed an “Islamic State in Iraq and Levant”, known under its Arab acronym as Daesh, in the Syrian city of Raqqa, in April 2013. This move had forced the Nusra Front to reassert its claims as the one and only Al-Qaida branch in Syria. Fully endorsed by Zawahiri, Al-Nusra resisted then the “global” plans uncovered by Baghdadi in Mosul in July 2014, while posing as “caliph Ibrahim”. In Tunisia and Libya, the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) seemed to keep the upper hand, with Boubaker al-Hakim switching from the Tunisian AS (Ansar al-Sharia) to the global IS [17], before Baghdadi sent an Iraqi representative to organise Libya into three jihadi “provinces.”[18]

Baghdadi’s Libyan manoeuvres did not prevent Belmokhtar to have well-protected safe-havens on Libyan territory and to use these as his main operational base from which to strike Sahel, the way he used Malian territory against neighbouring Mauritania in the 2000s. Belmokhtar swiftly moved to crush the pro-IS dissent of Abou Walid al-Sahraoui, a minor MUJAO commander of Sahraoui origin, who pledged allegiance to Baghdadi in May 2015. Only a few days later, Belmokhtar confirmed his undisputed leadership over Al-Mourabitoun and its firm allegiance to Zawahiri. He even added to the name of his group “Al-Qaida for West Africa”, then shortened it to “Al-Qaida for Africa.”[19] Belmokhtar could not be satisfied with the sole Sahel, he now craved openly for the whole continent.

Al-Mourabitoun had already struck in the very heart of Bamako, killing 5 people on March 7, 2015, in the random shooting of a restaurant popular among the expatriate community. This attack was followed by a raid in Central Mali against an hotel in Sévaré hosting foreign UN contractors, on August 7, 2015: four terrorists, four Malian soldiers and five contractors were killed (two Ukrainians, one South African, one Nepalese and their Malian driver). Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Eddine claimed the joint responsibility for this attack, demonstrating Iyad Ag Ghali’s endorsement of Belmokhtar’s ambitions. The highest casualties occurred on November 20, 2015, when 20 people were killed in the Bamako Radisson Blu hotel. The two Al-Mourabitoun gunmen perished in the assault. This time, Belmokhtar’s supporters claimed they had acted in cooperation with AQIM. Al-Mourabitoun was shrewdly using those various attacks to nurture operational, propaganda and symbolic links with Belmokhtar’s former jihadi partners.

Shortly after the Radisson Blu tragedy, Drukdal officially accepted Belmokhtar and his group back into the realm of AQIM. In an audio message broadcast on December 4, 2015, Drukdal declared “two martyrs signed this unity in their blood by attacking the hotel Radisson.”[20] The AQIM leader was paying a significant lip service to the “Signers in Blood”, the name of the splinter group Belmokhtar had founded when he was excluded from AQIM in November 2012. Three years after this humiliation, Belmokhtar had fully restored his position as the central figure in the globalization of jihad in the Sahel region. While Abou al-Hamman could nurture the fiction of the inclusion of Belmokhtar in the AQIM chain of command, Al-Mourabitoun operated *de facto* as an independent outfit.[21] AQIM probably considered such operational autonomy as a small price to pay to benefit from the multi-faceted impact of Al-Mourabitoun’s high-profile attacks and to keep IS supporters at bay.

The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims

Al-Mourabitoun have recently managed to perpetrate a string of attacks that were unprecedented in their reach and/or their death toll: on January 15, 2016, three Al-Mourabitoun gunmen killed 30 persons (including 22 foreigners) in an hotel in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, before being killed themselves; on March 13, 2016, three Al-Mourabitoun kamikaze gunned down 19 people at the Grand Bassam tourist resort, some 40 kilometres south of Abidjan (as in Ouagadougou, AQIM soon claimed the responsibility for the first such terror attack on the Ivory Coast); on January 18, 2017, five suicide attackers killed some 80 people in an

attack on a military facility in Gao, a city that had been retaken from the jihadis (and mainly MUJAO) four years before, in the “Serval Operation”. Such a terrorist record was daunting for Belmokhtar, especially since US sources claimed he had been targeted in an F-15 air raid in Libya, back in July 2015.

The Pentagon never confirmed Belmokhtar’s death and those persisting rumours only enhanced the jihadi leader’s clout and prestige, especially after AQIM disseminated online, on May 19, 2016, three messages attributed to its “commander.”[22] It is most probably for security reasons that Belmokhtar did not attend the jihadi “summit” whose video recording was broadcast on March 2, 2017. But his deputy Hassan al-Ansari was present, close to Iyad Ag Ghali, who announced the formation of a “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims”. This group pledged allegiance to Al-Qaida, with the endorsement of two AQIM commanders (including Abou al-Hammam), next to Belmokhtar’s deputy. Iyad Ag Ghali threw in the new coalition the weight of Ansar Eddine, along with its affiliate for Central and Southern Mali, the “Liberation Front of Mescina [23]” (this “front” is led by the Malian preacher Amadou Koufa, with one of his disciples now heading in Burkina Faso the jihadi group Ansaroul Islam).

The decade running from the establishment of AQIM to the founding of the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims” offers a fascinating sequence of shifting jihadi loyalties. Drukda and AQIM’s top leadership have remained isolated in their stronghold in Kabylia, but they never lost touch with the jihadi networks roaming in the Sahara thousands of kilometres further south. They even maintained the fiction of their controlling them on behalf of Al-Qaida’s supreme commander, Bin Laden until 2011, and Zawahiri ever since. Through this delicate and paradoxical structure, they succeeded in thwarting most of IS’ infiltrations West of Libya and North of Nigeria. But, in order to achieve such a record, they had to abdicate their actual authority over the various groups operating in the Sahel region.

The main actors and beneficiaries of this decentralization process were, and remain to be, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Iyad Ag Ghali. The Algerian veteran emerged from the post-2013 jihadi rout as the main contender in a regional escalation of jihadi attacks that run from Senegal in the West to Burkina Faso and Niger in the east. The Tuareg chief is more concentrated on Mali, with his power base in the northern desert, and his Mescina branch granting him loyalties in the rest of the country. The question remains however open about the eventual absorption of AQIM into the “Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims”. Yet there are numerous precedents in the jihadi underworld of accommodation between the formal structure and the operational dimensions. In that regard, the relations between AQIM, Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Eddine constitute indeed a multi-faceted case study.

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Notes

[1] Groupe islamique armé means Islamic armed group.

[2] Gamaa Islamiyya means in Arabic Islamic Group (or Collective).

[3] Jean-Pierre Filiu, “Local and global jihad: Al-Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghrib”, *The Middle East Journal*, vol.63, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp.218-219.

[4] Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat means Salafist group for preaching and combat.

[5] Amīr means literally commander.

[6] Katiba can also be translated by “battalion”, in that case this is more appropriate.

[7] The expression “triangle of death” came to describe the jihadi implantation between the three provinces of Boumerdes, Tizi Ouzou and Bejaïa.

[8] “Oneness and jihad” (Al-Tawhid wal-jihad) was the initial name of Zarqawi’s group, before it became the Iraqi branch of Al-

Qaida. MUJAO emphasis on “Western Africa” is also a challenge to the Algerian-led AQIM.

[9] Known by its French acronym GICT (Groupe islamique combattant Tunisien).

[10] Jean-Pierre Filiu, ‘Ansar al-Fatah and the French “Iraqi” network’; in: Bruce Hoffmann and Fernando Reinares (Eds.), *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, pp. 362-263.

[11] Mathieu Guidère, “The Timbuktu Letters: New Insights about AQIM”, *Res Militaris*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2014, pp.25 URL: <hal-01081769> .

[12] *Ibid.* In the whole letter, Mokhtar Belmokhtar is called “Khaled Abou al-Abbas”, one of his war monikers.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] The investigation report commissioned by Statoil was highly critical of the Algerian army, of its incapacity ‘to detect and prevent the attackers’ and of its ‘lack of imagination’: ‘an attack on In-Amenas should not have been entirely inconceivable’, especially since ‘there were strong economic incentives for the Algerian military to protect this critical national infrastructure’ (‘The In-Amenas attack’, presented to Statoil Board of Directors on September 2013, 11, pp. 4 and 70).

[15] “Nous, Al-Qaida, revendiquons cette opération bénie”, AFP, Nouakchott, January 20 2013.

[16] Alexandra Geneste et Nathalie Guibert, “La France organise aux Nations-Unies son retrait militaire du Mali”, *Le Monde*, April 27, 2013.

[17] Jean-Pierre Filiu, “The French ‘Iraqi networks’ of the 2000s : Matrix of the 2015 terror attacks ?”, *Perspectives on terrorism*, Vol.10, No. 6, 2016.

[18] Ironically for an organization that claims in the Middle East to erase “colonial” boundaries, IS has rejuvenated in its own Libyan chart the colonial division between Tripolitana, Cyrenaica and Fezzan.

[19] The literal translation from Arabic is “Base for jihad in (Western) Africa”, Al-Qaida meaning “base”.

[20] Marc Mémier, “AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: Le djihad sahélien unifié ?”, Paris, Institut français de Relations Internationales (IFRI), January 2017, p.37.

[21] *Ibid.*, p.39.

[22] Like in the “Timbuktu papers”, Belmokhtar is designated as “Khaled Abou al-Abbas”.

[23] In the nineteenth century, Sékou Amadou reigned over a theocratic “Mecina kingdom”, strongly rooted in the peul (or halpulaar speaking) population, that included parts of today’s Mali and Burkina Faso.