

ACSRT/Incident-Preliminary-Analysis-002-2013

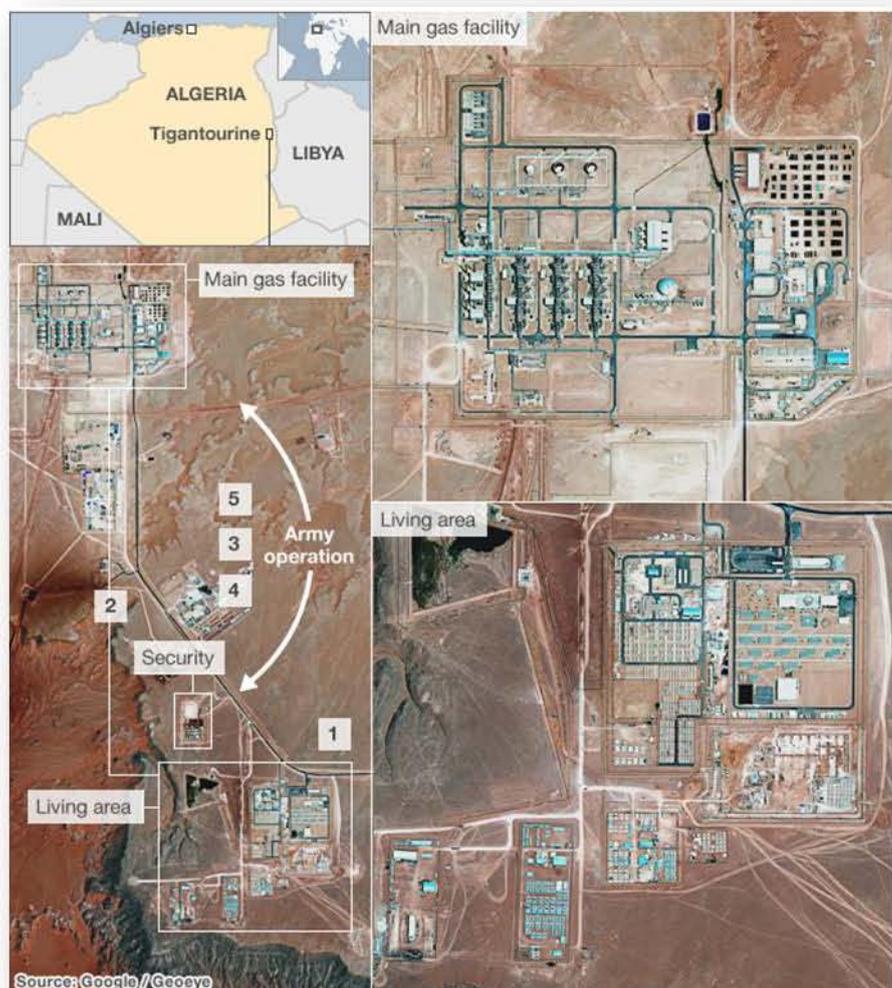
Updated Incident Preliminary Analysis The In-Amenas Terrorist Attack, in Algeria

16-19 January 2013

I. THE INCIDENT

Wednesday 16

January: Heavily armed terrorists attacked a bus transporting employees (locals and expatriates) to the gas facility operated jointly by Sonatrach (Algeria), BP (UK), and Statoil (Norway), in Tiguentourine, In-Amenas, Algeria, 40 km from the Libyan borders (1300 km southeast of Algiers). British and Algerian civilians were killed.



Thursday 17

January: 30 Algerian hostages managed to flee following the neutralization of two terrorists by the Algerian military. In addition 15 expatriates, including a French couple, also managed to flee. At Midday, the Algerian Special Forces started the military intervention on the

gas facility. The intervention allowed the freeing of hundreds of workers both national and foreign. In the evening it was reported that the military intervention had managed to totally secure the living quarters located about 5 km from the gas facility, and that the operations on the gas facility were ongoing.

Friday 18 January: reports indicated that 18 terrorists were eliminated by the security forces and 12 hostages executed by the terrorists while more than 100 foreign hostages among 132 in addition to 573 Algerian were liberated. The terrorists claimed to still hold seven hostages among which three Belgians, two Americans, a Japanese and a British.

Saturday 19 January: the Algerian Special Forces launched the final assault on the terrorists who had cold bloodedly already executed the seven hostages. 11 terrorists were eliminated during the final assault. The Algerian authorities confirmed that 792 hostages including 136 expatriates were liberated, 29 terrorists eliminated and 3 arrested. In total thirty-seven (37) hostages perished.

The Algerian interior ministry reported the recovery of:

- six machine-guns
- 21 rifles
- two shotguns
- two 60mm mortars with shells
- six 60mm missiles with launchers
- two rocket-propelled grenades with eight rockets
- 10 grenades in explosive-belts

Soon after the Algerian military had retaken control of the gas facility, Belmokhtar put out a statement through the ANI news agency, threatening to carry out more attacks against the states battling the Islamists in Mali if they did not stop their military involvement there. In the statement, the group gave their account of the attack, saying that the operation had been planned a long time ago, that they had tried to negotiate with an oil company, "Westerners and Algerians", and "senior intelligence officials," but the Algerians chose to intervene instead. Britain refused to go into details about claims made during the siege by the hostage takers leader, Abdul Rahman al-Nigeri that he had been in contact with British officials, who said: "we don't negotiate with terrorists." Soon after Belmokhtar made another statement to claim once again responsibility for the carrying out of the attack and offered to negotiate with Western countries and the Algerian government in order to stop all military intervention in northern Mali.

II. THE PERPETRATORS

At the core of the attack is the veteran Algerian jihad Mokhtar Belmokhtar (a.k.a. Khalid Abu Al-Abbas), a prominent Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

commander whose differences with the movement's leadership resulted in Belmokhtar's eviction from AQIM in October 2012 and setting up his own fighting group, "*the Brigade of those who Sign with Blood*,"- *al-Muaqioon Biddam*¹-. It is reported that this group is closely linked to the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA)-*Jamāat at-tawhīd wal-jihād fī gharb afrīqīyā*², given that Belmokhtar is behind the creation of the latter, which in turn is fully financed by Narco-trafficking.

Early December 2012, Belmokhtar led a column of fighting vehicles and loyalist to the Malian border post of Al-Khalil, close to the Algerian border. Al-Khalil, north of Kidal, is a vital border post-along on the main Saharan road that brings all types of commerce, licit and illicit, South through the Algerian desert town of Adrar.

The twenty-nine (29) terrorists were from eight nationalities namely nine (9) Tunisians, eight (8) Egyptians, three (3) Algerians, two (2) Canadians, two (2) Libyans, two (2) Malians, two (2) Nigeriens, and one (1) Mauritians. The group used four (4) all terrain vehicles (4X4) to gain access into Algerian Territory. It was assisted by an Algerian veteran jihadist Lamine Boucheneb (a.k.a. Ami Tahir), leader of the "*Fils du Sahara pour la Justice Islamique*³" and Mauritanian Abdallahi Ould Humeida both eliminated in the Algerian helicopter attack on the terrorists when they tried to flee the gas plant in vehicles using hostages as human shield. Among the first terrorists to be neutralized was Abu al-Bara, an Algerian associate of Belmokhtar and the apparent leader of the raid.

III. THE DEMAND

It was reported that the terrorists demanded the release of 100 Islamists, from Algerian prisons in exchange for the release of hostages. The militants demanded an end to French military operations against Islamists in northern Mali, in return for the safety of the hostages. A spokesman claiming to represent the "Masked Brigade" (or al-Mulathameen Brigade) said the hostage seizure was a response to Algeria's opening of its airspace to French warplanes that attacked Mali's militants five days earlier. Another report mentioned a demand for the release of *Aafia Siddiqui* and *Omar Abdel-Rahman*, both held in American prisons on terrorism-related cases.

IV. THE CLAIM

On January 16, Belmokhtar's group issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack on In-Amenas and declaring that it was a "response to the blatant intervention of the Crusader French forces in Mali" and the Algerian "conspiracy with the French to strike the Muslims in Mali". Though the claim suggested that the attack was in

¹ **Arabic** : كتيبة الموقعون بالدماء, **French**: *les Signataires par le sang*

² **Arabic**: جماعة التوحيد والجهاد في غرب أفريقيا, **French**: *Mouvement pour le Tawhīd et du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO)

³ Sons of the Sahara for an Islamic Justice, a group which was made headlines following its attack of 2007 on the Djannet Airport, in southeastern Algeria.

response to Algeria's decision to allow over-flight of its territory by French military aircrafts, this is could not be true since the assault took place only a few days after the French intervention in Mali. An assault such as the one carried n In-Amenas would, for a fact necessitate weeks of planning and organization, even more if the attack was actually mounted in Mali as claimed by the attackers. The Algerian authorities, following the arrest of the three terrorists, have indeed confirmed that the operation had been prepared for nearly 2 months, and that the group did in fact come from Mali through the border between Algeria and Mali, Algeria and Niger and finally the borderline between Algeria and Libya from which they entered the Algerian territory, noting that In-Amenas is about 40 km from the Libyan border making it the ideal access point for the terrorists.

Most interesting was the nearly simultaneous claim of responsibility from AQIMs Katibat Al-Moulathamoun, the former group of Belmokhtar before the split in October. This could only confirm previous assumptions that the Belmokhtar is still the leader of Al-Moulathamoun from which he created the *Brigade of those who Sign with Blood* (Mua'qi'o'on Biddam) *which seems to be a brigade established for suicide attacks given that the Jihadist constituting the brigade are referred to as Fedayeen* (those who sacrifice themselves for the cause).

V. ANALYSIS:

A terrorist attack of this type was somewhat unexpected, at least based on previous experience. Even at the height of clashes between Algeria's Islamist militants and government forces in the 1990s, the Islamists never attempted to penetrate a heavy security cordon placed around Algeria's vital oil and gas infrastructure in the southern desert region. Fighting from well-concealed bases in the heavily-wooded Mountains of northern Algeria was always preferable to mounting operations in difficult desert terrain where no cover was available from air surveillance or strikes. In this sense, it seems that proximity to Libya may have been the deciding factor in the selection of In-Amenas as a target. Libya is still struggling to consolidate control over its desert interior and the distance from the Libyan border to In-Amenas could be easily covered at night, allowing the attackers to emerge undetected at dawn.

Furthermore, this is the first time that such a multinational constituency of AQ conducts an operation of this magnitude in the Sahel. This confirms the initial assumptions that a military intervention in Mali could unleash a new Jihad Front where jihadist from different nationalities could be attracted, as was the case with the reported Canadians, Egyptians and Tunisians who were among the terrorist group that conducted the attack in In-Amenas.

The Algerians know from harsh experience that the hostages are dead men walking. The fanatics launched their whole operation with suicide troops. To begin with, they never expected to walk away. Their goal is to take down as many Westerners/ infidels (as perceived by them) as inhumanly possible. There are no points of negotiation with

this crowd. It's very significant that they've raced, under fire, to the most sensitive part of the plant, with explosives in hand.

Keep in mind that even though Belmokhtar broke off from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to forge his own group, there are numerous reports that his group still fights alongside AQIM and its allies.

The hostage-taking was somewhat unusual in that both kidnappers and abductees remained in the in touch with the outside world by telephone. Also it was reported that foreign hostages were all tied up and gathered in one area whereas Algerian hostages were left to roam on-site freely. One of the hostages told France 24 TV that the prisoners had been forced to wear explosive belts by the readers, who promised to blow up the gas plant if attacked by the Algerian forces. Another hostage reported that the attackers had mined the entire plant and were well armed with rocket-propelled grenades. As the Algerian military made its final assault on the complex, a spokesman for the hostage takers was on the phone with the Mauritanian news agency, threatening to kill the hostages against the background of loud explosions before the line went dead. The reasons that explain such a situation is that the terrorists were using the Algerian hostages as human shields to any potential attack by the Algerian forces using helicopters or snipers. As for the telephone usage by foreign hostages it must have been done for the purpose of having the government's of those nationals putting pressure on Algeria to let free the hostage takers and the hostages and allow them to cross the borders.

VI. CONCLUSION

The raid suggests that Belmokhtar continues to work closely with AQIM elements despite the differences that led the veteran jihadist to be ejected as Emir of Katibat Al-Moulathamoun in October 2012 and to create his own formation in early December 2012. However, there is a strong possibility that Belmokhtar's raid on In-Amenas will have the inevitable result of creating further competition between him and the AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a *Abou Mosaâb Abdelouadoud*), having as a consequence further attacks in Algeria, from AQIM Central point of view, and further attacks of similar magnitude by Belmokhtar across the region, in particular against troop countries contributing in Mali, a way for him to confirm his supremacy over AQIM in retaliation to his eviction and probably negotiating with Al-Qaeda Central the creation of Al-Qaeda Sahel Franchise under his leadership.

Though unsuccessful in the short-term, the raid will have a long-term impact on the regional border security cooperation. There is a strong possibility of further strikes in Algeria to relieve pressure on embattled AQIM units in northern Algeria, where recent and effective counterterrorist operations have put the movement on its heels. Most importantly, however, is the realization that it is Libya, rather than northern Mali, might in the future, become a base for terrorist operations in the Sahara/Sahel region.