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## Preliminary Report

### Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Appoints a New Leader

**21 November 2020**

#### Incident

On Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) announced the appointment of Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi (Yazid Mubarak) as its new Emir following the killing of the group's long-term leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, in June this year by French forces in collaboration with their local counterparts in northern Mali.

The announcement came in a video posted on AQIM's propaganda website during which the new leader received the pledge of allegiance from members of the group. The video broadcast also, for the first time, showed what was claimed to be the dead body Abdelmalek Droukdel.

Before his ascension to the position of the Emir of AQIM, Abu Ubaida who is an Algerian national was the Head of the "Council of Dignitaries" of the organization.



*Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi*

Meanwhile, AQIM also confirmed the death of Swiss missionary, Beatrice Stockly, who was kidnapped in January 2016 from Mali's northern city of Timbuktu. The group attributed her death to a failed attempt by French forces to rescue her and blamed the Swiss government for delaying the process that could have led to her release, in an apparent reference to their demand for ransom.

## **Analysis**

The announcement of the appointment of Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi as the new leader of AQIM some five months after the killing of Abdelmalek Droukdel might have been as result of internal negotiations and horse-trading to ensure that whoever is named as the new leader will be acceptable to not only the members of AQIM but also to the group's Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) coalition partners comprising Ansar Dine, the Maccina Liberation Front (MLF) and Al Mourabitoun.

As the oldest terrorist organization within the coalition, the leader of AQIM naturally commands respect within the JNIM, a group that was amalgamated in March 2017 and focuses its operations in the Sahel region particularly Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Being the Head of the Council of Dignitaries, Abu Ubaida's appointment appears to have been a safe pick for the group. He has been featured in several of AQIM's propaganda videos over the past few years including one in 2013 in which famously demanded that Muslims retaliate against France's intervention in Mali. He is said to have been involved in the group's core operations. It is also reported that the US government blacklisted al-Annabi on its international terrorists list since 2015.

The choice of Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi may have also been influenced by his Algerian nationality for a number of reasons:

- To affirm the dominance of the Algerian element over this group affiliated to Al-Qaeda.
- Demonstrates some sort of structural respect of hierarchies and seniority within this terrorist group, which generally characterizes the conventional armed forces, in terms of appointment and promotion.
- Intention of Al-Qaeda to maintain the regional dimension of AQIM to operate in the Maghreb region and therefore making it necessary for the new leader to come from one of the countries of the region.
- Strategically, Al-Qaeda aims, through this appointment, to attract more terrorists from the Maghreb region, in particular Algerians terrorists, whose number among terrorist groups around the world is constantly decreasing.

Meanwhile due to his previous role in the organization, it is unlikely that the Abu Ubaida will move significantly away from the strategies of Abdelmalek Droukdel. He will most probably continue cooperating with other members of the JNIM to conduct deadly attacks in their areas of operation.

Under the March 2017 agreement leading to the formation of the JNIM, the individual terrorist groups maintain their respective leaders as well as some level of autonomy but coordinates their operations with other members of the coalition. While Abu Ubaida takes his new position, the MLF and Al Mourabitoun are still headed by Amadou Kouffa and Mokhtar Belmokhtar respectively. Iyad ag Ghali doubles as the leader of Ansar Dine and Emir of JNIM.

## **Conclusion**

Although the appointment of the veteran AQIM senior figure, Abu Ubaida Yusuf al-Annabi, as the successor of its now deceased leader, Abdelmalek Droukdel, is not expected to lead to significant changes in the operations of the group, the new Emir, as with most new leaders of terrorist organizations, may orchestrate attacks in order to establish his authority and credibility within AQIM and the larger JNIM.

Countries in the areas of operation of the AQIM and JNIM particularly Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco need to be extra vigilant so as to prevent any complex attacks that may be authorized by the new leader.