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Caroline Berges: "Al Qaidah wanted to establish itself in the Maghreb "

The arrest last May in Morocco of Saudi and Moroccan nationals linked to the Bin Ladin network revealed the al-Qa'ida presence in the kingdom. In this context, the elimination of Abu Muhammad in Algeria confers a Maghreban dimension to the case.

As arrests were made, experts in the fight against terrorism have managed to understand part of the puzzle constituted by al-Qa'ida. Clearly this obscure organization has deployed or tried to deploy its activities all over the world, notably in the Maghreb. While exposing one of the sleeping cells of al-Qa'ida last May, the arrest of three Saudi and seven Moroccan nationals in Morocco, accused of preparing to commit an outrage in the Detroit of Gibraltar, once again showed the semi opaque nature of this organization.

It was only six months later that it was learnt that a certain Umar Muhammad al-Harazi, alias Mola Bilal - one of his several nicknames - was the coordinator of the project of an attack against NATO warships. This man, arrested in extremely discreet conditions in Karachi, south of Pakistan, early this November, is considered by the CIA as currently one of the most active leaders of the Bin Ladin network.

In an article date 23 November, the French newspaper Liberation recalled that Al Harazi was the commander of the Karachi-based cell in charge of carrying out al-Qa'ida operations abroad.

This 30-year old Saudi national had, among other things, managed the Moroccan cell, through telephone calls which, due to their repetitions, permitted the arrest of the team led by Zuhayr Hilal Muhammad al Thabiti. This man, Al Harazi, was also in contact with the Yemeni national Abu Muhammad who has reportedly been "eliminated" in Algeria on 12 September last.

According to Algerian security sources, Imad Abd al Wahhab Ahmad Alwan - alias abu Muhammad - was appointed by Usama Bin Ladin in June 2001 as his "ambassador" in the Sahel and Maghreb region. In June 2001 he visited Algeria and returned there last Summer in order to "normalize" the Salafi Group for (religious) Call and Combat. This Armed Islamic Group (GIA) dissident movement was born in 1998 and is now under the command of Hassan Hattab. It has been for a long time under the suspicion of being linked to al-Qa'ida which, reportedly, helped in its creation in order to weaken the GIA.

The elimination of Abu Muhammad in Batna, eastern Algeria, was announced officially on Monday [25 November] by APS, the Algerian Press Agency. This is the first evidence that the Salafi Group for Call and Combat does belong to al-Qa'ida. It was thanks to the confessions made by a repentant former rebel that the Algerian security services have learned that several meetings were held between Abu Muhammad and the Emirs [commanders] of the Salafi Group for Call and Combat. The security forces later laid an ambush for them.

This 37-year old "big fish" - Abu Muhammad - is himself a former "Afghan" who has helped the installation in his country - Yemen - of Arab "Afghans", namely Algerians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Libyans and Egyptians who had fought in Afghanistan.

The [Algerian] newspaper Le Matin said on Tuesday [26 November] that Bin Ladin himself had envisaged in 1998 to establish his headquarters in Algeria, and that Abu Muhammad had the task of evaluating and forming the movement of Hassan Hattab in order to install a real presence of al-Qa'ida in the Sahel countries and the Maghreb, a real network consisting of Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Mali and Niger. This network was meant to be a compensation for the loss of important bases, notably Afghanistan and Somalia.

Abu Muhammad had not been seen in Morocco between 2001 and 2002. He had visited Niger, Sudan, Mauritania, Nigeria and Chad. Now that he has been eliminated, the question is: What remains of the structures that he had begun to set up in the Maghreb?