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Adlene Meddi and Melanie Matarese: "Abou Zeid, the Irresistible Ascent"]

On Thursday [30 December] Al Jazeera showed a photo of the seven hostages kidnapped on the night of 15 to 16 September in Niger, including five French nationals. The hostages are surrounded by armed men, their faces hidden. Except for one, the leader, without a weapon: The instigator of this bold kidnapping. Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, former smuggler who has since joined the Salafist fight and is steadily expanding his area of activity, and influence, in the Sahel. Portrait of a jihadist quite unlike the others.

A long face, the forehead marked by deep wrinkles, surmounted by a *cheche* and wearing a thin and graying beard. There are only a handful of images of Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, rare photos and videos of poor quality. This is undoubtedly why the man responsible for the kidnapping of five French nationals, one Togolese and one Madagascan on 16 September in Niger fuels so many myths. France's new enemy number 1 is not a Bin Ladin: discreet, he does not like to show himself. Yet for 10 days now the world has never talked about him so much. But who is Abou Zeid, whose real name is Abid Hammadou, 45? Is he truly the cold and bloody terrorist described by the French media who killed the Briton Edwin Dyer and Michel Germaneau with his own hands? A Salafist of the likes Algeria has never known? Or a simple smuggler in the pay of Al-Qa'ida?

Flash-back. "We are in 1998, in Takhoukht, in Kabylia, during the founding meeting of the GSPC [Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat] that marked the break with the GIA [Armed Islamic Group] under the leadership of Abdelmadjid Dichou, alias Abou Mossaab," an Algerian expert on terrorism relates. Four main groups attend this event: those called "the Arabs," who include Abdelmalek Droukdel; "the Kabylis," with Hassan Hattab as their head; "the veterans," under the direction of Okacha; and "the Southerners" (east-south axis), at that time not very important. Among these latter are Mokhtar Belmokhtar and...Abou Zeid.

Imagine an Oumma

The man is not new in the landscape. "Known to the Libyan and Algerian services since the 1980s, he did several stays in prison, where furthermore he was mistreated," another expert on the issue states. But at that time he did only smuggling. According to the magazine *Paris Match* that yesterday published a report on him, it was in 1989 with the death of his father that he started associating with the Islamists. Then in 1992 he went into trafficking for networks supporting armed groups. "In 1993 we know he was in charge of recruiting for the GIA," antiterrorist sources in Algiers continue. "With close ties to Kamareddine Kherbane, at the time in charge of the GIA's external relations, in 1995 he even became one of the right-hand men of emir Belabdi Derradji."

His ascent began and did not stop. In 1996 he entered the underground in Kabylia, where he was briefly in charge of logistics and reportedly escaped an assassination attempt by other terrorists. He then went to the eastern-southern

region. His leader, Abderrezak El Para, very quickly made him his confidant. As of 1997 he transported weapons to northern Mali to prepare the GSPC's rear base. Why? "In joining Al-Qa'ida the GSPC adopted the strategic vision of most of the Salafist groups in the Sahel," an expert in Algiers explains. The Islamic Maghreb extends from the Atlantic with an African depth as far as the Sinai. This is why the "Droukdel" center descended toward to the Sahel.

"It is a way of differentiation from the traditional Arab Maghreb as a border, geographic region, and political entity. And in Africa," he continues, "the movement of weapons and the work of armed groups in general are favored by the environment: a region of coups, of political instability, poverty with a tribal social and decision-making system. Last of all, descending toward the south makes it possible to imagine an Oumma, to break the legacy of borders, colonialist and ungodly.

Local strongman

"The directions from Al-Qa'ida, Afghanistan, and Pakistan have always emphasized the Sahel, identified as an unstable and tribal region. Al-Qa'ida's strategy was to shift its actions from the Middle East toward the Islamic Maghreb." It was only in 2000 that the name of Abou Zeid appeared for the first time as a terrorist active in zone 5 of the GSPC (Tebessa, Khenchela, Batna). In 2001 he was assigned to prepare a convoy of vans for the move toward Tassili that ultimately left for Mali. "El Para knew as of 2002 that Al-Qa'ida could no longer count on Hattab and that a new leader was needed," a source close to the issue continues. "The Sahel, a gray zone, was the ideal place to create a cell. This is how the katiba Tareq Ibn Ziyad was born. El Para wanted to become the leader and place Abou Zeid as the local strongman. Furthermore, this is why this latter is surrounded by former leaders of zone 5."

The turn in Abou Zeid's career came in February 2003, during the kidnapping of 14 European tourists (nine Germans, four Swiss, and one Dutch) vacationing in the Algerian Sahara. "Abou Zeid was one of the negotiators, alongside the governor of Gao, Ag Bahanga, and Iyad ag Ghaly," an Algerian source explains.

Rivalries

He was then 38 but, unlike other jihadists, he had not "done Afghanistan." The child of the zaouia El Abidia, near Touggourt, had to create another legitimacy, a local one. His main rival: Mokhtar Belmokhtar (MBM), about seven years his junior. With the exception of their marriage to women from the tribe of Beni Omrane, the two men have nothing in common. MBM came from the Afghanistan camps. "He knows many terrorist leaders and relies on a very solid smuggling network," an expert in the Salafists continues.

As Dominique Thomas, expert in Al-Qa'ida at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in Paris emphasizes, "in this type of organization there have always been rivalries; recall how the GSPC was born, or purges within the GIA, then afterwards the GSPC. Furthermore, in a geographic territory this large. MBM was undoubtedly very disappointed at not having won total leadership after the death of Nabil Sahraoui, emir of the GSPC." It is worth

noting that after the Lemgheity barracks attack in Mauritania, Mokhtar Belmokhtar gave an interview in the GSPC's magazine, *El Jamaa*, where he did not hide his ambitions to become the region's emir.

Filming and... talking about money

Of course, the movement's official history reveals none of this. "If we stick to the report of the 2009 council of leaders, it is MBM himself who left the way free for Abou Zeid," observes Mathieu Guidere, professor at Geneva University and expert in Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb. "The group wanted to clean up the financing methods of jihad. The smuggling on which Mokhtar Belmokhtar relied in the Sahel could no longer be a solution. But how can money be found without trafficking? Their legal official then suggested resorting to war prisoners. According to the war of law in Islam there was nothing against it. The question was then posed as to who could assume this new responsibility. With Mokhtar Belmokhtar recognizing it was not his field, the name of Abou Zeid then came up naturally. He was well-considered and already actively participating in the guerrilla warfare. He also had known Droukdel very well since the 1990s."

At any rate his first contact with Al-Qa'ida went back to 2004, when he received a message of praise from Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. "You must understand that Abou Zeid's thinking is much more doctrinal than that of MBM," an expert continues. "He prohibited his fighters from listening to *anachid* music to replace it with recitations of the Quran!," adds an expert in the fight against terrorism. "He then criticized MBM for having gone too much into business, for having become a notable and being overly infiltrated by all the region's services." But on this point versions diverge.

"Abou Zeid is anything but a religious fanatic," another expert on the issue asserts. "He is the Rockefeller of the Sahel! Between 2008 and 2009 alone, the number of armed clashes recorded between smugglers and Algerian security services in the region went from four to 15! Meaning three times more. He created such a dynamic of wealth that he is now the only one with whom people selling weapons or drugs want to talk. In short, he is a businessman. He is not like Abu-Mus'ab al-Zarqawi who films his hostages and then slits their throat. Abou Zeid films them and then afterward...talks money. As to the political message of his actions, he leaves that to Droukdel." Who found himself in the same situation as Bin Laden once encircled in Afghanistan.

Yemen and Saudi Arabia

He asked the other cells to take initiative. Droukdel did the same thing: With his room for maneuver limited in Kabylia, he found himself forced to ask the fighters of the South to take the initiative. Put simply: He defines the broad directions of the AQMI (Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb), but it is the jihadists on the ground who decide on the options.

Dominique Thomas feels it would nonetheless be "simplistic to reduce Abou Zeid to a simple smuggler. At the end of the 1990s it was vital for the GSPC to be endorsed by Al-Qa'ida, which made it possible to give its operations an international resonance and avoid falling into a localized fight.

"The extension to the South was also vital to the organization, whose extension to the Maghreb had failed. And that required weapons, gasoline, computer equipment," he points out. "We can therefore think that the economic aspect has always been decisive. To go from that to saying that the lure of gain is their only motivation... The communication war of governments to strip these movements of their religious cachet and reduce them to simple criminal groups is a classic strategy. It is exactly the same thing in Yemen and Saudi Arabia."

Channel in Burkina Faso

In 2007 Abou Zeid continued his contacts with Al-Qa'ida and met with a Libyan emissary of Bin Ladin, later arrested, to whom he expressed his wish to go to Afghanistan. His ambition: to become leader. For that he recruited in order to assemble his own group, in Mauritania as far as...within MBM's faction itself. "Abou Zeid had reportedly heard that MBM was in the process of negotiating his surrender," the antiterrorist expert explains. "Al-Qa'ida asked him to become the leader, in a message intercepted by the Libyan and Algerian services. He also met with an emissary of the organization, probably in Chad. And he even showed a document stating that Bin Ladin officially charged him with restructuring the movement with a view to a new organization. He had connections with a channel in Burkina Faso." This would correspond to the concerns of Said Djinnit, special representative of the UN Secretary-General. Yesterday in Dakar he mentioned the "risks of the spread of the terrorist threat in West Africa." Credible? Yes. Feasible? That is debatable.

Coup

One person close to the case believes MBM and Abou Zeid succeeded in "a sort of coup against the North. They became independent. Now it is down below where things take place." The AQMI's big success in the Sahel is to have established alliances with the local network. But will these ties be strong enough to avoid betrayals? "History shows that the lifetime of an emir in a region like the Sahel, where the countries are sufficiently well-equipped to end a war rapidly, is rather limited," observes Dominique Tomas. "And the comparison with Afghanistan does not hold up: It is a different geography and a different sociology. The relationship between the Taliban and the Pakistani tribal regions is based on social foundations much better anchored than those in the Sahel. Furthermore, the ratio of fighters is not at all comparable. According to the documents each katiba has some 30 people. In Afghanistan and Pakistan the cells have several thousand fighters. The day the AQMI shows videos with hundreds of fighters, we will see. If they continue to recruit in Mauritania, as they are currently succeeding in doing, the situation can change. Especially since up to now the organization has failed to maintain a sufficiently active center of tensions in the North, for lack of recruits in Morocco and Tunisia, who (until there is proof to the contrary) are also part of the Islamic Maghreb."

[Description of Source: Algiers El-Watan Online in French -- Website of privately owned daily; launched in 1990, it is the most widely distributed French-language newspaper in Algeria; while critical of the authorities, it used to have links to the military establishment and remains a good source for information on security matters; URL: www.elwatan.com]

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