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"Emir of the Battalion of the Veiled Men, Khalid Abu al-Abbas, in an exciting interview with Nouakchott News: Mauritania offered to send a delegation of Islamic scholars to talk to us; neutralizing it as regards the war is open to discussion" by Mohamed Mahmoud Abu al-Maaly.

His real name is Mokhtar Ben Mohammed Belmokhtar but he is known to his battalion comrades by his nom de guerre Khalid Abou el Abbes. Algerian newspapers refer to him as the Laouar [one-eyed] because he lost an eye in combat against the Russians during the Afghanistan liberation war at the beginning of the 1990s.

He was born in the town of Ghardaia, Algeria, in 1972 and left for Afghanistan at the beginning of the 1990s when the Russian forces were beginning to collapse and getting close to a final defeat. He received military training with scores of Algerians and Arabs, later known as Afghan Arabs, in Afghanistan and he took part in combat operations before returning to Algeria at the end of 1992 to join the so-called jihad against the Algerian regime with elements of the Armed Islamic Group [GIA].

Khalid Abou el Abbes became renowned as the founder of the Islamic Saharan Emirate which was previously known as the Ninth Region of the Salafi Group for Call and Combat [also known as Al-Qa'idah Organization in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb - AQLIM]. He was the most prominent leader to explore the Malian and Nigerien Sahara where he set up his camps and decided to stay. He married the daughter of a Touareg family.

He assumed the command of the Saharan region and then became the commander of the Battalion of the Veiled after Yahia Djouadi was appointed as the emir of the Sahara region. Despite that he continued to be described as the strong and mysterious man of the Sahara; he has an extensive relationship network in the region.

His name came to prominence during the 2005 events in Mauritania when he led an attack on the Lamghiti garrison in the northern part of the country and killed 17 Mauritanian military personnel. He also planned many operations in Mauritania.

Nouakchott News conducted an exciting interview with Khalid Bou el Abbes on subjects concerning Libya and the smuggling of arms to the organization, Al-Qa'idah operations in Mauritania and the likelihood of the organization's military activities coming to an end in the Mauritanian territory, reports that he had tried to negotiate surrendering himself to the Algerian authorities a few years ago, and the relationship between his organization and the mother Al-Qa'idah organization in Afghanistan.

[Nouakchott News] It has been reported that AQLIM benefited most from the Libyan crisis by getting armed and consolidating its presence in the region, and that its elements fought on the side of the Libyan rebels. Is it true that you took part in the fighting against Al-Qadhafi's forces on the side of the rebels?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] Praise be to God. Yes, the mujahidin of Al-Qa'idah organization in general benefited most from the revolutions in the Arab world because these revolutions broke the chains of fear and barriers of terror which were imposed by Western Lackey regimes.

Although the revolution, including the Libyan revolution, did not reach the stage which was hoped for, namely the establishment of an Islamic course that embraces all walks of life through this historical gift and the enormous sacrifices, albeit deservedly, offered by the Islamic nation, particularly its youths. In our opinion, the same (secular) ideological and political system is still dominant. However, the big benefit is that the region's peoples have achieved an important victory in terms of gaining confidence in their ability to change and to take initiative and win.

As for our benefit from weapons, this is natural in these circumstances, but more important to us is that the Libyan people as a whole and the youths of the Islamic movement in particular were able to take the weapons which represented the arm of the regimes to strike against their peoples.

In this context, I warn Muslim brothers in Libya against heeding proposals and calls for disarmament; by God they [arms] are their glory and security.

As to our participation in fighting Al-Qadhafi in terms of field participation, the answer is no.

[Nouakchott News] Some Libyan fighters are being accused of ideological and organizational links with you. Is it true that some of your comrades in arms and ideological convictions are among the Libyan rebels?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] The course of events in the Libyan revolution is no secret to anyone. The Islamic awakening and jihadist youths were the first to confront the regime's battalions with their bare chests and they were the first spark that provided strong impetus to the Libyan people in their all-embracing uprising.

As regards their ideological and organizational links with us, that is not an accusation but a source of pride and honour for us and for them. The effects of the Western occupation of our country such as the artificial borders and false nationalist considerations have not undermined our path and faith at the core of which is the duty of a Muslim to help his brother Muslim. [Muhammad] May God's peace and prayers be upon him, said: "Support your brother whether he is right or wrong" - in all corners of the Earth because the strength of Muslims lies in their unity which the infidel West has been trying and continues to try to combat.

[Nouakchott News] You have been at war with Mauritania for many years, and you were the first to start it when you attacked Lamghiti in 2005 and subsequently attacked Ghalaouia and Tourine. Why did you decide to take the war to Mauritania and confront its army without any justification?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] We never embarked on a direct war with the Mauritanian army in the traditional meaning of war. Our operations against the Mauritanian army were limited to a certain extent.

It is not our policy nor is it a priority of Al-Qa'idah to target these armies. Al-Qa'idah's declared strategy is to confront the Western crusaders and Jews because they are the effective rulers of the land of Muslims. That was clear in all the statements and meetings of Shaykh Usamah [Bin-Laden], may God rest his soul, and in all the organization's published literature.

Regarding the Lamghiti operation, it is necessary to provide some details because we believe that the Mauritanian people did not understand at the time our motives behind the operation, and to counter the misinformation and lies spread by [Maaouiya] Ould [Sid Ahmed] Taya's regime through its media and press. A poignant example is the Mauritanian Defence Ministry statement claiming that we had slaughtered prisoners. In this context, we want to stress that we have not slaughtered any soldiers and challenge the Defence Ministry to prove that we had done that to any soldier at the garrison. The Lamghiti operation was not a declaration of war on Mauritania but a limited operation and there were justifications. The following are examples:

1. The Mauritanian army had engaged in fighting the mujahidin, and Lamghiti Garrison was a base for joint US-Mauritanian exercises. Some of the 35 soldiers we captured admitted that US forces frequented the base and showed us some of the facilities allocated to them.

We released the 35 soldiers after handing them some letters addressed to the Mauritanian regime of the day. The issue was studied before the operation and we gave orders not to shoot anyone who put down their weapons, and we shouted the order during the operation.

2. The Mauritanian regime was establishing an Israeli embassy in the heart of Nouakchott in a clear contempt for the feelings and dignity of the Mauritanian people and all Muslims, because Mauritania was the only state to establish declared relations with Israel other than the countries that surrounded Israel. There was unusual Mossad activity in Mauritania during that period, including a visit by Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom which angered the Mauritians, and young people held demonstration at the university and secondary schools in Nouakchott.

It is not a secret that we set a trap to kill the Zionist entity's ambassador to Mauritania before an attack on the complex that housed the embassy and the club where the ambassador was minutes before the attack.

3. Increased use of force and coercion against the sons of the call in terms of imprisonment, harassment and torture of many religious scholars and missionaries which reached a point when mosques were put under siege and shots fired at them. That happened at Usamah Mosque in Arafat, Nouakchott. Veiled people were insulted and one of the sisters, who was pregnant, died from injuries sustained from persistent beating by security officers. [There was also] blatant encroachment on religious rights by threatening to change mosques into bakeries, as stated by the then minister of culture.

4. The existence of secret prisons in Mauritania run by the US Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], one of which was under surveillance by us and the building was guarded by US Marines. The issue was raised in newspapers and among the political class at the time.

[Nouakchott News] You said that your operations against the Mauritanian army, particularly in Tourine and Ghalaouia, were in self-defence and the groups which executed the operation were intercepted by the Mauritanian army while they were looking for Western tourists and employees in the region. Do you believe that the Mauritanian army could abandon its duty to protect the country's territory and foreign guests for you and when they attempt to intercept you to prevent you from abducting or killing them, they become wrongdoers and the soldiers would deserve to be killed and slaughtered?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] Yes, the Ghalaouia and Tourine operations which you mentioned were in self-defence because the Mauritanian army began the attack. I would like to stress again that the primary target in our operations are Western and Jewish economic and military interests which have plundered the wealth of our nation and which we consider to be a new form of occupation. Whoever obstructs our operations against them would be a legitimate target for us. How could we leave those Westerners alone when they are making our Muslim brothers in Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, even children and women, suffer the worst kind of pain, killing and homelessness? The pictures of Abu-Ghurayb are not distant in your memory. How could we call them guests when they have come to invade our country, destroy our religion and plunder our wealth? God Almighty said: "They will continue to fight you until they make you abandon your religion, if they could."

Regarding the killing of some soldiers by slitting their throat, this is something we do not accept and consider it a mistake, as it is the case with war mistake. My brother Abou Mousaab Abdelouadoud, the leader of the organization, issued directives at the time that that kind of action must not be repeated.

[Nouakchott News] What are your demands or conditions for ceasing your armed operations in Mauritania?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] If you mean the neutralization of Mauritania in this confrontation that has declared objectives and targets, as we previously stated, then I believe this issue is open to study. We will not reject it in principle. We would welcome an attempt similar to the one made at the beginning of last year when the regime started to set free some of our brothers and proposed to us through some brother prisoners to send a delegation of scholars led by Cheikh Mohamed Lahssen Ould Diddou to discuss our grievances. We welcome the idea, and we are still prepared to meet any delegation of scholars however different our views may be. We are also prepared for any scholarly discussion on the course and points of reference to examine the challenges faced by our Islamic nation.

[Nouakchott News] If the Mauritanian army stops its operations against you in Malian territory, would you be prepared to stop attacking them and Mauritanian territory?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] You have to know that the entry of [Mauritanian President Mohamed] Ould Abdelaziz's army into Mali was never an obstacle to us getting to our targets in Mauritania. However, as you know, the kind of target dictates the place and time of execution. For your information, the intervention of Ould Abdelaziz's army in Mali was with French planning, instigation and even participation, which was the case in the joint French-Mauritanian attack on a detachment of mujahidin during which eight of our brothers were killed.

It was a desperate attempt by the French to drag us into a war which was not one of the organization's priorities, and their agent to carry out the plan was Ould Abdelaziz and the pillars of his regime. It became crystal clear that Ould Abdelaziz was engaged in a war on behalf of France.

We became aware of the ramifications of the plan and activated a counter plan which was to attack the head of the regime, Ould Abdelaziz, and the French embassy which had become a den of intrigue and conspiracy, with two booby-trapped vehicles which reached the environs of Nouakchott despite the presence of Ould Abdelaziz's army in Mali. Incidentally, the vehicles crossed eight provinces and even passed military barracks, which indicates that we could have attacked military targets in those provinces. We believe that the operation achieved the most important political and military result we hoped for - the military result was the withdrawal of Ould Abdelaziz's army from Mali immediately after the operation and the political result was that the operation refuted Ould Abdelaziz's claim that he had tightened his control of the border and moved the battle to Al-Qa'idah's positions in northern Mali.

All the interventions by Ould Abdelaziz's army met with failure, starting with the Nouakchott operation which forced him to withdraw from Mali and ending with the military campaign in the Ouagadou forest, in which the mujahidin destroyed 12 military vehicles in the first clash of the military campaign. His interventions were characterized by humiliating the people, our brothers in Ezouad [region, northeastern Mali] and two of our Muslim sisters were killed and others wounded in a deliberate shelling of a civilian vehicle in which a family, including children, was travelling.

[Nouakchott News] In the last few years some theft and burglary incidents targeting public property have taken place in Mauritania, such as the theft of funds at El Sadaka [as transliterated] Port in October 2007 and the stealing of some government vehicles. These operations were attributed to your followers and it was said that at least one of the operations was planned by you and carried out on your orders. Do you believe that taking funds which belong to poor Muslim Mauritanian people is jihad or permissible?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] We believe that our country's people are Muslim and their lives and property have to be protected, according to our Shari'ah. Therefore, we cannot make it permissible to take the property of Muslims. As for public funds which you mentioned, they belong to the nation and have been taken by the ruling gangsters and only a small amount reaches the nation.

If we suppose for the sake of argument that your claim is true, El Sadaka Port operation represented nothing compared to the billions stolen by the ruling gangs which have exploited their influence over many years, and this is no secret to the public.

[Nouakchott News] It has been said that after your dismissal as the emir of the Sahara region and the appointment of the current emir, Yahia Abou Amar, a dispute began between you and Abou Amar and Abdelhamid Abou Zaid and you were in a state of semi-truce for many years during which you stopped armed action against the Algerian army and negotiated your surrender with the Algerian authorities, However, the negotiations failed and you decided to resume armed action. To what extent is this true, and have you overcome your disputes with the new leadership of the Sahara Emirate?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] As you know, dispute entails opposites and differences which are all due to differences in perception and understanding, each according to his experiences, the circumstance of their activities and the way they deal with various events and stances.

The dispute you mentioned did not go beyond differences in which we adhered to Islamic moral principles and mutual respect and avoided vilification and defamation. This kind of dispute which was within the confines of Shari'ah had taken place during the time of [first and second caliphs after the death of the Prophet Muhammad] Abu-Bakr [al-Siddiq] and Umar [Ibn al-Khattab], who were honourable companions [of Prophet Muhammad] and dealt with according to the traditions of that era.

As regards the semi-truce you mentioned, it was nothing more than a change in our strategy dictated by financial, logistical and morale considerations which made it necessary for us to embark on a new phase, after an in-depth reassessment and revision of the experience of fighting the Algerian regime for more than 15 years.

Regarding negotiations with the Algerian authorities and their failure, I would like to set the record straight and dispel any doubts and say that I have not entered into direct or indirect negotiations nor have I attended any meeting on this issue which was publicized by hired media in order to destabilize the ranks of the mujahidin and undermine the morale of the nation and the supporters of the mujahidin.

There was one meeting with one of the prominent notables in the Tamanrasset region in January 2007 at his request and initiative, as he said, and proposed something of that kind. Our response was candid, clear and not open to interpretation. We left and fought that regime which has suspended and changed God's Shari'ah, made the people suffer degradation and subjugation and sold our country, sold the country and its wealth to the enemies of the nation and insulted the dignity of the Algerian people when it opted for secularism as an alternative to Islam.

Regrettably, the first clause of the reconciliation proposal submitted by the regime and its intelligence service was to glorify the army and security officers, the savagery of whose vile crimes against this oppressed people have been witnessed by the whole world.

How could we abandon this godly path when the features of the global conflict between Islam and atheism have begun to become clear? We pray to God to support us and guide our steps on the path of righteousness until we face Him.

[Nouakchott News] Is it true that you personally objected to the Salafi Group for Call and Combat joining Al-Qa'idah?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] First of all I would like to point out that there was a plan behind most suspicions and misinformation publicized by lackey Algerian newspapers such as Ennahar and Echourouk, organs of the Algerian intelligence service, to put through and promote its political programme represented in the unjust reconciliation proposal.

Aware of the danger of that programme, we expedited steps which we had begun since 2000 to unite the ranks of the mujahidin with our brothers in Al-Qa'idah. It was by God's support that joining Al-Qa'idah was a political project that confronted the unjust reconciliation project.

Among the steps we took was to invite our brother Abou Ahmed El Yamani to go with us to Algeria to convey the situation at home and in the Greater Sahara.

We also sent our brother Younous El Mouretani (Yousef) who had been captured in Pakistan and our first direct contact with our brothers in Al-Qa'idah. That heralded the beginning of correspondence between us and the leadership there. There were also efforts by our brothers in Algeria.

I would not have mentioned these steps and initiatives had it not been for a lot of misinformation and rumours initiated by the Algerian media, particularly on this issue.

[Nouakchott News] Do you currently hold any French hostages whose fate was linked by the leadership of the organization to a demand made by Usamah Bin-Ladin, namely French withdrawal from Afghanistan. Are you still committed to that request after the death of Usamah Bin-Ladin or are you negotiating other demands for their release?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] We are still committed to that demand. As you know, our leadership has defined its demands clearly in the negotiations on the issue of the French nationals and there has been no change in that matter so far.

[Nouakchott News] Why did you insist during the process of exchanging the Spanish hostages on the release of Omar Essahraoui and abandoned your colleagues, members of the organization, in Mauritanian prisons, after you had asked for their release?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] Yes, our demand at the beginning was for the release of a group of our brother prisoners in Mauritania and the only reason there was a change in our demand was simply because the two Spanish prisoners, Roque Pascual (Abu-Nabil) and Albert Vilalta (Abu Yahya), embraced Islam. Their companion Alicia Gamez also embraced Islam and chose the name Ayishah. She embraced Islam without conditions. As for the two men, their lives became protected when they embraced Islam, which forced us to expedite the negotiations for the release of Omar Essahraoui, which was agreed a while earlier in proposals put forward to us.

[Nouakchott News] You are always accused of links with drug smugglers in Greater Sahara and that you explain why you deal with them on the basis that the drugs are destined to the land of the infidels and it is permissible to send them there to harm the people. Is that true?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] God forbid that we should permit or explain permitting what God has forbidden. The prohibition of hallucinogenic substances and trade in them even to the land of the infidels are very clear in God's law and it is clear to all Muslims, not to mention us the mujahidin who endeavour to establish God's law, justice, prescribing that which is good and prohibiting that which bad. The casting of that kind of suspicion which deliberately attempts to distort the image of the mujahidin is not new; we have been accused of worse things such as selling drugs and providing protection. We seek God's support and we are not the first to be accused in this way.

Regarding that claim that we deal with them, anyone who knows us would testify that we warn the people and tribes of this region of the danger of this phenomenon which has spread in a terrifying way throughout Greater Sahara.

I would like to point out that the Greater Saharan region which is the domain of our activities is swarmed by gangs smuggling arms, brigands, drug and cigarette smuggling, in addition to the presence of tribal and regional fronts which are in conflict with the governments in the region.

Our policy is clear and based on call, advice, God's ruling, mediation and warning against the paths that have brought nothing to the nation except wars and conflicts which were, regrettably, exploited by the enemies of Islam to make Muslims fight each other.

One of the results of the policy followed by the mujahidin for more than a decade was our ability to obstruct the path of Western countries' intelligence services, the activities of which increased significantly in the region, and the intelligence services of the regional countries which forced into clashes with groups and people in an effort to create a pretext to set militia forces (sahouat) to fight the mujahidin. This is the new US and Western policy to fight Al-Qa'idah

and the mujahidin as a whole following their experience in Iraq because they failed in their direct confrontation with the mujahidin.

The policy we are following is the result of a hard and long experience from which we and the residents of some areas in Algeria have suffered.

Nouakchott News] There are reports about execution you have carried out of some Mauritians who had been accused of complicity with the Mauritanian army. It has been said that among those you killed were elements from the organization. Is that true, and who were the victims of the executions?

[Khalid Abou el Abbes] Some spies were arrested and they confessed to having worked for military intelligence and carried out intelligence activities, after investigation and follow up by one of the mujahidin detachments. One of the arrested confessed to his involvement with Mohamed Ould Mekit in leading on a group of mujahidin. There were no members of the organization among them.

On this occasion, I would like to advise our Muslim brothers in Mauritania, particularly the youths, that they should be wary of the tricks played by security and intelligence services to involve them in a war that is waged by [Mauritanian President] Ould Abdelaziz's regime on behalf of the French against your brother mujahidin by exploiting your living conditions with trivial financial inducements.

As regards their names and details of their confessions, they have been recorded and would be published at an appropriate time.

Finally, I would like to salute our brothers in wounded Palestine and all Muslims for this great victory the likes of which our nation has not seen. We are now experiencing a reality in Gaza and its happiness at the freeing of hundreds of our Muslim brothers and sisters. We send our appreciation to our brother mujahidin in the Martyr Izz-al-Din al-Qassam Brigades [Hamas's military wing] and all the militant units in the land of the night journey [Arabic: Isra - Prophet Muhammad's midnight journey to heaven] whom we consider as the nation's shield in confronting the Zionist enemy and behind it the Western crusader countries, which proves that the words spoken by weapons are the only ones understood by the enemies.

We thank you for taking the initiative to look for the truth and convey it to the nation. We pray to God to help you succeed in your duty.