

Nouakchott *Al-Akhbar* in Arabic June 6, 2012

"Al-Qa'ida Leaders Talk with al-Akhbar about the Organization's History and Future"

"We joined Al-Qa'ida organization ideologically and in practical terms and were transformed to a branch for it in the Islamic Maghrib region long before this was announced publicly. This gave us a long breath and represented our principal backing in the face of the so-called reconciliation blueprint Algeria started to implement."

This is how a prominent leader in Al-Qa'ida in the countries of the Islamic Maghrib, a former leader in the Salafi Group for Advocacy and Combat, summarizes "the pivotal moment" for his organization in joining Al-Qa'ida in the countries of the Islamic Maghrib. He talked about the benefits his movement reaped from this, adding in an interview with Al-Akhbar that his jihadist organization started to join Al-Qa'ida ideologically and operationally in 2003. This reached a peak in 2005 before it was announced in 2007.

He said the most prominent gains from joining Al-Qa'ida included the fact that they benefited from the style of its military activities, its literature, and how it presents its ideas in the media. He attributed much of what he called "the jihadist long breath" to the American invasion of Iraq. "The entry into Iraq gave a strong breath to international jihad, and it was incumbent upon us to benefit from this breath," he said.

Reconciliation and Al-Qa'ida

The leaders of the organization admit the dangers in the reconciliation blueprint announced by Algeria and its substantial success in exhausting their capabilities. They describe as "a setback" what their organization suffered as a result of the Algerian blueprint, and also as a result of what they termed "the massacres the Muslim people in Algeria were exposed to". They said that the most important and effective means of facing it was joining Al-Qa'ida. "We joined Al-Qa'ida in a difficult phase. The Reconciliation blueprint did in fact hurt us," he said. "Our joining Al-Qa'ida was an important political tactic to confront the Algerian blueprint. This opened the door for many emigrants in all parts of the world to join us, something which limited if not ended the effectiveness of the Algerian blueprint. It gave us the card of globalization which benefited us greatly and took us out of the shell of nationalism within which we had been restricted."

"If it had not been for this joining [of Al-Qa'ida] and the emergence from nationalism to globalization, and for receiving volunteers in the organization from all parts of the world, the reconciliation blueprint would have hurt the organization in Algeria and resulted in many other effects".

Start of Entering Sahara

The prominent leader says the first entry by the armed organization in the desert was in 1994 (during the days of the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria). The objective of the entry was principally to search for weapons. The organization

reached Niger in a first phase and later Nigeria. It succeeded to a certain extent in attaining its objectives of getting weapons. In any event, this entry continued to be temporary and with a limited objective.

"The relationship with the regimes in the region in which the entry was made remained peaceful because there was no friction and no confrontation with them. The relationship developed later--after the decision to take position in the Sahara--into positive signals which the Nigerians understood properly first and were followed in this by the Mali regime. They both acted in accordance with these signals."

Six years later the Ninth Region in the Salafi Group for Advocacy and Combat (the Sahara Emirate) was to begin looking for a foothold in the desert. This came after an analysis of its internal situation in Algeria reached the conclusion that it was suffering from "a diversion and a setback" because of internal conflicts and the struggle with those known in the organization's literature as "Al-Khawarij [renegades in early Islam] and their sedition". Another factor was the activities by the Algerian Intelligence which he said "mixed the cards in a way which greatly confused the Muslim people in Algeria".

The prominent leaders who talked to Alakhbar said that the task of looking for a place for establishing a center and a foothold in the desert was assigned to a vanguard of 16 persons who entered northern Mali and began implementing a plan to acquaint themselves with the region, seek to attract its youths, and introduce the armed movement in the areas in which it was not known, especially the eastern territories of Mauritania. It also made it a point to avoid the mistakes it made in Algeria.

The members of the so-called "Sahara vanguard" died one by one during the past decade. The only one alive is the Emir of the Brigade of the Masked Men, Algerian Mukhtar Bilmukhtar, known as "Bil'ur" and referred to inside the organization as Khalid Abu-al-Abbas.

Preparations and Taking Position

The prominent leaders who talked to Alakhbar said that the organization's leaders found "major" difficulties in building trust with the inhabitants and calling on them to abide by what they described as "adherence to the teachings of Islam" and "clarifying the facts about the conflict with the regimes". They said they succeeded later in gaining this trust. They said they were careful in the beginning of their entry into the Sahara region to seek to attain specific objectives.

The commanders in the Al-Qa'ida Organization in the Islamic Maghrib countries listed the objectives they sought to attain during the first stage of their presence in the Sahara. "We defined at the start of our entry a set of objectives headed by getting acquainted with the youths of the region and with the region itself. The Mali-Algeria borders area was a known smuggling area. We also sought to introduce the organization in the areas in which it was not well

known, especially in Mauritania. We emphasized the need to avoid the mistakes we committed in Algeria which led to tarnishing the image of jihad in general".

The leaders attributed the organization's success in infiltrating the social fabric in northern Mali to various reasons led by what they called "the wise policy in dealing with the peoples and governments of the region". They said: "We sent after our arrival in the region positive signals to the Niger and the Mali governments when we were in Niger before entering northern Mali. The second reason is that we avoided opening new fronts because too many fronts would make you unable to move, just as we focused our enmity and efforts in the confrontation with Algeria in the first period (before 2005)."

Phases of Entry into Sahara

At our request, the prominent leader divided the stages the organization went through in the Sahara according to their objectives to three principal stages with some overlapping among them. They were:

The first phase: This started from the organization's entry into the Sahara in 1994 and ended in 2000. The objective of entering the desert during that time was primarily material. The organization focused in it on searching for weapons in these areas to send them to the internal fronts in the confrontation with the Algerian regime. Within the framework of this search for weapons, some of the organization's commanders reached Nigeria. This period also witnessed the first beginnings for establishing substantial relations with some of the inhabitants and activists in the region.

The second phase: Its actual beginning dates to around 1999 and it lasted until 2002/2003. During that phase the primary objective remained as it is but another objective was added to it, namely searching for a foothold in the Sahara after the suffocating siege the organization faced in northern Algeria.

The leader stressed that they focused in that phase on building foreign relations with "many of the brethren mujahidin in many world countries, even the European countries". He said they sought to "rebuild trust, correct twisted perceptions, and providing a true picture about the situation given by those who had first-hand experience with the events". He said the objective from this was to prove "that there is still a group adhering to the genuine line of jihad in Algeria," as he put it.

The leader considered that this phase represented for him and his comrades an opportunity to get acquainted with the inhabitants and build trust with them, as well as get acquainted with the terrain. This phase also marked the start of the conviction by the organization's leaders of the methodology of Al-Qa'ida, especially in the bid to emerge from regionalism to globalization. "The regional jihad proved its failure, and we were convinced that our religious duty and the realities should prompt us to prove to the mujahidin that we were one hand wherever we are in the world," he said.

The third phase: Joining Al-Qa'ida organization. The leader said the actual declaration about joining Al-Qa'ida and becoming a branch for it in the Islamic Maghrib region came long after this had already happened. This was due to many reasons, mostly the circumstances and means of communications and the need to ensure suitable circumstances, in addition to building trust between the two sides.