

Al-Qaeda splinter group reveals internal erosion

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The defection of the "Tawhid wal Jihad" group may encourage other disgruntled fighters to defect from AQIM.

Analysis by Raby Ould Idoumou for Magharebia in Nouakchott - 30/12/11

A previously unknown terror group tried to generate fear this month when it claimed responsibility for kidnapping three Europeans from a Sahrawi refugee camp. Instead, the announcement highlighted the new fragility of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).



[File] The abduction of Western aid workers from a Polisario-run refugee camp could signal a new divide in AQIM.

Along with claiming the abductions, Jamat Tawhid Wal Jihad Fi Garbi Afriggiya (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa) said it had "defected" from AQIM, leading terrorism analysts to posit that heightened security co-operation by Sahel countries has led to erosion within the ranks of the terror group.

"AQIM has already started to lose control over some non-Algerian leaders," a Mauritanian counterterrorism agency official who preferred not to be identified for security reasons told Magharebia.

"This is because some young people from different nationalities have joined it in recent years, and they now look forward to assuming leadership positions in the group; something that the Algerian leaders are denying them," said the intelligence officer.

The group that abducted the European humanitarian aid workers from the Tindouf camps is reportedly comprised of Sahrawis and West Africans, as well as Algerians.

The supposed "splinter" cell could be nothing more than an attempt to deceive Sahel security agencies into believing that al-Qaeda is not the only group to employ abductions and ransoms as a tool of terrorism.

The weakening of al-Qaeda is supported by another theory about the cell members. The new terror group could be comprised of young AQIM fighters who revolted against their Algerian leaders because of their unwillingness to share ransom money.

If, as some security officials suggest, the group is legitimate, its self-professed "defectors" have actually succeeded where Mauritanian terrorist Khadim Ould Semane failed. Ould Semane tried to split from AQIM and establish a new, independent "partner" arm.

The Algerian al-Qaeda leadership rejected his request.

"The new defection may reflect what is going on now in Arab countries," says Dah Ould Hamadi, an analyst of Salafist groups and Sahel terrorism.

Young people - including young terrorists - have started to turn against what they believe is unilateral authority on the part of their leaders, Ould Hamadi says.

"If the Arab Spring represents a civil revolt against despotic leaders, young terrorists could be seen as echoing that sentiment," he explains.

It could mean "the start of the disintegration of terrorist groups", Ould Hamadi suggests.

The new group is led by Mauritanian national Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (alias Abou Qumqum). Mauritania issued an international arrest warrant for the alleged terror leader on Wednesday (December 28th).

Ould Kheirou escaped from a Mauritanian prison in 2006 with Khadim Ould Semane, the leader of the AQIM branch in Mauritania and founder of Ansar Allah Almouribitoun.

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AQIM leaders have tried to quell internal resentment and dissuade members from defecting. One method was to appoint disaffected young fighters to important posts. In 2009, for example, Mauritanian Abdel Abderrahman Tandaghi was named mufti for the Sahara region despite his young age and ideological differences with the Algerian senior leadership.



[AFP/STR] Mauritanian terrorist Khadim Ould Semane once tried to form his own splinter group separate from AQIM's Algerian-dominated leadership.

The top AQIM emirs even resorted to dividing the Sahara emirate into quasi-autonomous battalions (the Masked, Tarik bin Zeyad and others) to provide more fighters with titles and defined roles.

The simultaneous appearance of three chiefs for this nascent organisation is a strong indicator that al-Qaeda members no longer trust each other or their bosses.

It could also be a sign is that young AQIM members prefer being managers to employees. The financial and other benefits accrued by leaders are more appealing to the younger generation of terrorists than the prospect of following orders.

The splinter group is also defying the common Sahel terrorists' practice of focusing on foreigners.

"There is a possibility that the 'Tawhid and Jihad' group is responsible for the kidnapping of the Mauritanian gendarme," terrorism analyst Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Abou El Maali says, adding that days before the incident, it had declared its intention to expand its activities to West Africa.

For this new group, there is no difference between an "original infidel and apostate infidel". Both westerners and local soldiers can be kidnapped or killed.

Another fear is that young operatives, far from the control of terrorist leaders, may rashly kill their victims rather than wait for hostage negotiations to play out. Moreover, they may have a strong desire to make a name for themselves by committing horrific acts.

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And if this group succeeds in carrying out other terror operations, it may encourage other disgruntled fighters to defect from the "parent" organisation at any moment. This will be a new challenge for Sahel countries.

But it will also show that AQIM has started to disintegrate.

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