

May 28, 2013

AP Exclusive: Al-Qaida rips into prima donna terrorist for failing to deliver big operations

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Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — After years of trying to discipline him, the leaders of al-Qaida's North African branch sent one final letter to their most difficult employee. In page after scathing page, they described how he didn't answer his phone when they called, failed to turn in his expense reports, ignored meetings and refused time and again to carry out orders.

Most of all, they claimed he had failed to carry out a single spectacular operation, despite the resources at his disposal.

The employee, international terrorist Moktar Belmoktar, responded the way talented employees with bruised egos have in corporations the world over: He quit and formed his own competing group. And within months, he carried out two lethal operations that killed 101 people in all: one of the largest hostage-takings in history at a BP-operated gas plant in Algeria in January, and simultaneous bombings at a military base and a French uranium mine in Niger just last week.

The al-Qaida letter, found by The Associated Press inside a building formerly occupied by their fighters in Mali, is an intimate window into the ascent of an extremely ambitious terrorist leader, who split off from regional command because he wanted to be directly in touch with al-Qaida central. It's a glimpse into both the inner workings of a highly structured terrorist organization that requires its commanders to file monthly expense reports, and the internal dissent that led to his rise. And it foreshadows a terror-



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Terrorist leader Moktar Belmoktar.

ism landscape where charismatic jihadists can carry out attacks directly in al-Qaida's name, regardless of whether they are under its command.

Rudolph Atallah, the former head of counterterrorism for Africa at the Pentagon and one of three experts who authenticated the 10-page letter dated Oct. 3, said it helps explain what happened in Algeria and Niger, both attacks that Belmoktar claimed credit for on jihadist forums.

“He’s sending a message directly north

The letter describes the group’s relationship with Belmoktar as “a bleeding wound.”

to his former bosses in Algeria saying, ‘I’m a jihadi. I deserve to be separate from you.’ And he’s also sending a message to al-Qaida, saying, ‘See, those bozos

in the north are incompetent. You can talk to me directly.’ And in these attacks, he drew a lot of attention to himself,” says Atallah, who recently testified before Congress on Belmoktar’s tactics.

Born in northern Algeria, the 40-something Belmoktar, who is known in Pentagon circles by his initials MBM, traveled to Afghanistan at the age of 19, according to his online biography. He claims he lost an eye in battle and trained in al-Qaida’s camps, forging ties that would allow him two decades later to split off from its regional chapter.

Over the years, there have been numerous reports of Belmoktar being sidelined or expelled by al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. The letter recovered in Timbuktu, one of thousands of pages of internal documents in Arabic found by the AP earlier this year, shows he stayed loyal to al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, until last year, and traces the history of their difficult relationship.

The letter, signed by the group’s 14-member Shura Council, or governing body, describes its relationship with Belmoktar as “a bleeding wound,” and criticizes his proposal to resign and start his own group.

“Your letter ... contained some amount of backbiting, name-calling and sneering,” they write. “We refrained from wading into this battle in the past out of a hope that the crooked could be straightened by the easiest and softest means. ... But the wound continued to bleed, and in fact increasingly bled, until your last letter arrived, ending any hope of stanching the wound and healing it.”

They go on to compare their group to a towering mountain before raging storms and pounding waves, and say Belmoktar’s plan “threatens to fragment the being of the organization and tear it apart limb by limb.”

They then begin enumerating their complaints against Belmoktar in 30 successive bullet points.

“Abu Abbas is not willing to follow anyone,” they add, referring to him by his nom de guerre, Khaled Abu Abbas. “He is only



File • AP

Nigerien soldiers walk near debris after suicide bombers blew themselves up inside a military barracks, in Agadez.

willing to be followed and obeyed.”

First and foremost, they quibble over the amount of money raised by the 2008 kidnapping of Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, the highest-ranking United Nations official in Niger, and his colleague. Belmoktar’s men held both for four months, and in a book he later published, Fowler said he did not know if a ransom was paid.

The letter says they referred the case to al-Qaida central to force concessions in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, a plan stymied

when Belmoktar struck his own deal for 700,000 euros (about \$900,000) for both men. That’s far below the \$3 million per hostage that European governments were normally paying, according to global intelligence unit Stratfor.

“Rather than walking alongside us in the plan we outlined, he managed the case as he liked,” they write indignantly. “Here we must ask, who handled this important abduction poorly? ... Does it come from the unilateral behavior along the lines of our brother Abu

Abbas, which produced a blatant inequity: Trading the weightiest case (Canadian diplomats!!) for the most meager price (700,000 euros)!!”

The complaint reflects how al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, initially considered one of the group’s weaker wings, rose to prominence by bankrolling its operation with an estimated \$89 million raised by kidnapping-for-ransom foreign aid workers and tourists. No less than Osama bin Laden endorsed their business model, according to documents retrieved in the terror leader’s hideout in Pakistan.

He aired the organization’s dirty laundry in online jihadist forums.

against Western targets, as long speculated by experts. The council chides Belmoktar for not following this practice.

“(The chapter) gave Abu Abbas a considerable amount of money to buy military material, despite its own great need for money at the time. ... Abu Abbas didn’t participate in stepping up to buy weapons,” the letter says. “So whose performance deserves to be called poor in this case, I wonder?”

The list of slights is long: He would not take their phone calls. He refused to send administrative and financial reports. He ig-

nored a meeting in Timbuktu, calling it “useless.” He even ordered his men to refuse to meet with al-Qaida emissaries. And he aired the organization’s dirty laundry in online jihadist forums, even while refusing to communicate with the chapter via the Internet, claiming it was insecure.

Sounding like managers in any company, the Shura leaders accuse Belmoktar of not being able to get along with his peers. They charge that he recently went to Libya without permission from the chapter, which had assigned the “Libya dossier” to a rival commander called Abou Zeid. And they complain that the last unit they sent Belmoktar for backup in the Sahara spent a full three years trying to contact him before giving up.

“Why do the successive emirs of the region only have difficulties with you? You in particular every time? Or are all of them wrong and brother Khaled is right?” they charge.

The letter reveals the rifts not only between Belmoktar and his superiors, but also the distance between the local chapter and al-Qaida central. The local leaders were infuriated that Belmoktar was essentially going over their heads, saying that even AQIM has had few interactions with the mother brand in Pakistan and Afghanistan, a region they refer to by the ancient name of Khorasan.

“The great obstacles between us and the central leadership are not unknown to you. ... For example, since we vowed our alle-

giance, up until this very day, we have only gotten from our emirs in Khorasan just a few messages, from the two sheiks, bin Laden (God rest his soul) and Ayman (al-Zawahri),” they write. “All this, despite our multiple letters to them.”

Belmoktar’s ambition comes through clearly not only in the bitter responses of his bosses, but also in his own words: “Despite great financial resources ... our works were limited to the routine of abductions, which the mujahedeen got bored with.”

In another quote, he calls bin Laden and al-Zawahri “the leaders of the Islamic nation, not the leaders of an organization alone. We love them and we were convinced by their program. ... So it’s even more now that we are swords in their hands.”

To which AQIM replies with more than a hint of sarcasm: “Very lovely words. ... Do you consider it loyalty to them to revolt against their emirs and threaten to tear apart the organization?”

Belmoktar’s defection was a long time in the making, and dates back to his time as a commander of Algeria’s Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, or GSPC. When the Iraq war started in 2003, his ambition created friction between younger Algerian

fighters like himself, who wanted to join the global jihad, and an older generation whose only goal was to create an Islamic state in Algeria, according to Islamic scholar Mathieu Guidere, a professor at the University



Anis Belghoul • AP File

Algerian firemen carry the coffin of a person killed during the gas facility hostage situation in Ain Amenas.

of Toulouse.

The younger faction won, but Belmoktar felt slighted because his contemporary, Abdelmalek Droukdel, was named emir of the GSPC, instead of him.

Soon after, the group petitioned to join al-Qaida. The terror network announced a “blessed union” on the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks in 2006.

Both Belmoktar and Droukdel wrote “candidacy letters” to bin Laden asking to be emir, according to Guidere’s book on the

subject. Again, Droukdel won.

Frustrated, Belmoktar drifted farther south. He set up in the ungoverned dunes of neighboring Mali, took a Malian wife and tapped into the smuggling routes that crisscrossed the Sahara, amassing arms and fiercely loyal fighters who called themselves, “The Masked Brigade.”

His fighters killed more than a dozen soldiers at a military garrison in Mauritania

The unit foreshadowed the terrorist vision that led to the fall of the Twin Towers in New York.

in 2005 and gunned down four French tourists there in 2007. On multiple occasions Belmoktar was declared dead, including most recently in March, and each time, he re-emerged to strike again.

The sharpest blow in the council’s letter may have been the accusation that, despite this history of terrorism, Belmoktar and his unit had not pulled off any attack worthy of mention in the Sahara.

“Any observer of the armed actions (carried out) in the Sahara will clearly notice the failure of The Masked Brigade to carry out spectacular operations, despite the region’s vast possibilities — there are plenty of mujahedeen, funding is available, weapons are widespread and strategic targets are within reach,” the letter says. “Your brigade did not achieve a single spectacular operation target-

ing the crusader alliance.”

In December, just weeks after receiving the letter, Belmoktar declared in a recorded message that he was leaving the al-Qaida chapter to form his own group. He baptized it, “Those Who Sign in Blood.”

With that name, he announced his global ambition. “Those Who Sign in Blood” was also the name of an Algerian extremist unit that hijacked an Air France flight leaving Algiers in 1994. Though their goal to fly the plane into the Eiffel Tower in Paris was thwarted, the unit foreshadowed the terrorist vision that led to the fall of the Twin Towers in New York.

On Jan. 11, French warplanes began bombarding northern Mali, the start of a now 5-month-old offensive to flush out the jihadists, including Belmoktar’s brigade. Five days later, suicide bombers took more than 600 hostages in Ain Amenas in far eastern Algeria and killed 37, all but one foreigners, including American, French and British nationals. Belmoktar claimed responsibility in a triumphant recording.

It was no accident that he chose Ain Amenas, Guidere said. The area is in the home province of Abou Zeid, Belmoktar’s longtime rival who commanded a different Saharan brigade and was always in step with the Algeria-based emirate.

“It’s a punch in the gut,” Guidere said. “It’s saying, ‘You’ve never been able to do anything even in your native region. Watch me. I’ll carry out the biggest hostage operation ever

in that very region. ... Ain Amenas is the illustration of his ability to do a quality operation, when he is under no authority other than his own, when he doesn't have to turn in expense reports or answer to anybody."

As if to turn the knife even further, last week Belmoktar also claimed responsibility for a May 23 attack at a French-owned uranium mine in Arlit, Niger. It was in Arlit in 2010 that Abou Zeid carried out his boldest operation and seized seven foreign hostages, including four French nationals who are still in the hands of AQIM.

In an apparent attempt to raise the stakes, Belmoktar's men slipped past a truck entering the mine and detonated explosives inside. More than 100 miles to the south, a different unit of fighters under his command killed 24 soldiers at a military camp, with help from another local al-Qaida off-shoot, called the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa.

Jean-Paul Rouiller, the director of the

Geneva Center for Training and Analysis of Terrorism, compared the escalation in attacks to a quarrel between a man and a woman in which each tries to have the last word. "They accused him of not doing something," Rouiller said. "His response is, 'I'll show you what I can do.'"

Belmoktar might have seen a certain justice in the coverage of the last week's attack in Niger in the leading French daily, *Le Monde*. Among the adjectives used to describe the event: "Spectacular."

Rukmini Callimachi, AP's West Africa bureau chief, reported this article in Dakar, Senegal and Timbuktu, Mali. Lee Keath, AP's Mideast enterprise editor in Cairo, translated the Arabic letter into English.

The letter can be found in Arabic and English at: http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-belmoktar-letter-english.pdf