

*Al-Mourabitoun*

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**Name:** Al-Mourabitoun

**Type of Organization:**

- Insurgent
- non-state actor
- religious
- terrorist
- transnational
- violent

**Ideologies and Affiliations:**

- Islamist
- jihadist
- Qutbist
- Sunni
- Salafist

**Place of Origin:**

West Africa

**Year of Origin:**

2013

**Founder(s):**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi

**Places of Operation:**

Algeria, southwestern Libya, Mali, and Niger

**Overview**

*Executive Summary:*

Al-Mourabitoun (“The Sentinels”) is a violent, jihadist terrorist group in West Africa that aims to implement sharia (Islamic law). The group was formed from a 2013 merger between al-Mulathamun (“The Masked Men”) Battalion (AMB) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).<sup>1</sup> Both groups were offshoots of [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#).<sup>2</sup> In December 2015, al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM<sup>3</sup> after a joint attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, the Malian capital. This attack signaled a declaration of unity between both groups. Al-Mourabitoun has since taken the lead in AQIM operations, including a high-profile attack on a U.N. base in northern Mali.<sup>4</sup>

According to the United Nations, al-Mourabitoun established ties with local Libyan tribes and marginalized groups in early 2017 in order to expand its operations into Libya.<sup>5</sup> On March 2, 2017, al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM and the local Jihadist groups Ansar al-Dine and the Macina Liberation Front to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).<sup>6</sup> The formation of JNIM represents al-Qaeda’s new emphasis on “unity” in order to strengthen jihadist groups and successfully implement sharia law in the Maghreb region.<sup>7</sup>

[Mokhtar Belmokhtar](#) had previously split his AMB from AQIM in 2012.<sup>8</sup> AMB orchestrated a January 2013 attack on a gas facility near In Amenas, Algeria, that left 38 civilians dead.<sup>9</sup> In May 2013, AMB and MUJAO carried out twin suicide bombings in Niger that killed at least 20 people.<sup>10</sup>

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After AMB's August 2013 merger with the Mali-based MUJAO to form al-Mourabitoun, the newly formed group claimed that the region's jihadist movement was "stronger than ever."<sup>11</sup> Al-Mourabitoun announced its intentions to "rout" France and its allies in the region.<sup>12</sup> The group carried out attacks against French interests in the region, African military units coordinating against Islamist forces, and African civilians.

Belmokhtar has been falsely declared dead on numerous occasions. In 2013, the government of Chad announced Belmokhtar had been killed in an antiterrorism operation in Mali. In early October 2015, an Algerian news channel reported that Belmokhtar's death had been announced by an al-Qaeda spokesman in a recorded audio message. A U.S. airstrike in Libya was reported to have killed Belmokhtar on June 14, 2015, although the United States has not confirmed his death.<sup>13</sup> Al-Mourabitoun later denied Belmokhtar had been killed and declared him its official leader in July 2015.<sup>14</sup>

### *Doctrine:*

Al-Mourabitoun believes it has a "Shari'a-based duty" to unite Africa's Muslims and Islamic movements against secular and non-Muslim influences, according to the Australian government.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the group targets France and French interests in the region.<sup>16</sup> The group's stated goal is to "rout" France and its regional allies.<sup>17</sup> To that end, al-Mourabitoun has accused France of killing "peaceful children, women and old men" during its 2013 intervention in Mali.<sup>18</sup>

Both MUJAO and al-Mourabitoun originated as splinter groups of al-Qaeda's affiliate in the region, AQIM.<sup>19</sup> MUJAO's stated goal was to spread jihad across West Africa.<sup>20</sup> According to the Australian government, MUJAO objected to Algerian dominance of AQIM's leadership.<sup>21</sup> Al-Mourabitoun initially allied itself with al-Qaeda while remaining operationally independent.<sup>22</sup> While co-founder [Adnan al-Sahrawi](#) declared the group's allegiance to [ISIS](#) in May 2015, co-founder Mokhtar Belmokhtar rejected the pledge and stated that the group's shura (advisory) council had not yet ruled on an ISIS alliance.<sup>23</sup> Al-Mourabitoun officially realigned itself with al-Qaeda in 2015, and renamed itself "Al Murabitoun – Al Qaeda in West Africa."<sup>24</sup>

On March 2, 2017, al-Mourabitoun merged with AQIM, Ansar al-Dine, and the Ansar al-Dine sub-group Macina Liberation Front to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). JNIM announced Ansar al-Dine's former emir, Iyad Ag Ghali, as its leader.<sup>25</sup> Ghali claimed that the factions had united "into one group" operating under "one emir" after al-Qaeda "sought unification according to Sharia law."<sup>26</sup> While operating under a new name and new emir, JNIM appears to remain under the aegis of al-Qaeda. Ghali paid *bayat* (allegiance) to al-Qaeda central and AQIM emir [Abdelmalek Droukdel](#), a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud.<sup>27</sup>

### *Organizational Structure:*

Al-Mourabitoun's specific leadership structure is unknown, although the group's leaders were subsumed under the AQIM branch in late 2015. The AQIM-affiliated group appears to be governed by an emir and a shura council that sets the organization's agenda. Al-Mourabitoun has not publicly named most of its leaders,<sup>28</sup> although co-founder Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi described himself as the group's emir in a May 2015 declaration of al-Mourabitoun's allegiance to ISIS.<sup>29</sup> Co-founder Mokhtar Belmokhtar rejected the pledge a week later, raising the question of whether al-Sahrawi or Belmokhtar was more senior in the group's hierarchy.<sup>30</sup> However, Sahrawi split from al-Mourabitoun following his pledge of loyalty to ISIS.<sup>31</sup> Belmokhtar revealed that al-Mourabitoun has a governing shura council, which he said had not yet approved the pledge to ISIS.<sup>32</sup> Sahrawi died in a French drone strike in August 2021.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Mourabitoun issued an online statement in July 2015 that its shura council had elected Belmokhtar the group's new leader.<sup>34</sup> In March 2017, two additional al-Mourabitoun leaders were revealed: Abderrahmane al-Sanhadji, al-Mourabitoun's top judge, and Elhacen Al-Ansari, its deputy leader.<sup>35</sup>

Following al-Mourabitoun's March 2017 merger with AQIM, Ansar al-Dine, and the Macina Liberation Front into JNIM, the relationship between the groups has shifted from one of collaboration to a structured hierarchy with AQIM at the top.<sup>36</sup> Ansar al-Dine emir Iyad ah-Ghali leads JNIM, but he has also reaffirmed his allegiance to AQIM emir Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud.<sup>37</sup> According to Malian and Mauritanian security sources, al-Mourabitoun's top judge, Abderrahmane al-Sanhadji, replaced Mokhtar Belmokhtar as emir of al-Mourabitoun after its merger into JNIM.<sup>38</sup> Al-Mourabitoun and JNIM have not confirmed the change in leadership.

### *Financing:*

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Al-Mourabitoun is likely funded through kidnapping ransoms and criminal activities, according to the U.S. State Department.<sup>39</sup> The group also likely receives funding through its connections to other terrorist organizations.<sup>40</sup> MUJAO had previously received funding through regional drug smuggling.<sup>41</sup> MUJAO had also been involved in a 2011 kidnapping of three aid workers in Algeria who were later released in exchange for a ransom payment.<sup>42</sup>

### *Recruitment:*

Al-Mourabitoun largely consists of former AQIM members who left with AMB and MUJAO.<sup>43</sup> Al-Mourabitoun's primary recruiting area includes northern and western Africa, particularly Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger.<sup>44</sup> The organization relies heavily upon recruiting locally, as Malians now make up the largest ethnic group in al-Mourabitoun.<sup>45</sup>

According to the United Nations, al-Mourabitoun established ties with local Libyan tribes and marginalized groups in early 2017 in order to expand its operations into Libya.<sup>46</sup> However this is not the first time that al-Mourabitoun has tried to expand into Libya. In June 2015, a U.S. airstrike targeted Mokhtar Belmokhtar near Tobruk, Libya. In 2011, Belmokhtar visited an al-Qaeda training camp in Libya where he recruited the former al-Mourabitoun emir Abu Bakr al-Nasri.<sup>47</sup>

### *Training:*

Both of al-Mourabitoun's emirs, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his predecessor Abu Bakr al-Nasri, first trained and fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>48</sup> Both men trained in al-Qaeda training camps in the 1990s, and Belmokhtar first met and recruited al-Nasri from one such camp in Libya in 2011.<sup>49</sup> French forces killed Nasri in April 2014.<sup>50</sup>

AQIM previously ran a training camp in Timbuktu, Mali, until the camp was destroyed in an airstrike.<sup>51</sup> Recruits ate, slept, and trained together in the camp.<sup>52</sup> Al-Qaeda also utilizes proxy training facilities provided by like-minded groups.<sup>53</sup>

Al-Mourabitoun's leadership has maintained contact with AQIM, particularly through Djamel Okacha, AQIM's leader in West Africa.<sup>54</sup>

### *Also Known As:*

- Al-Mulathamun Brigade<sup>55</sup>
- Al-Mulathamun Masked Ones Brigade<sup>56</sup>
- Al Murabitoun – Al Qaeda in West Africa<sup>57</sup>      58
- Al-Murabitoun<sup>59</sup>
- Al-Muwaqqi'un bil-Dima<sup>60</sup>
- Khaled Abu al-Abbas Brigade<sup>61</sup>
- Masked Men Brigade<sup>62</sup>
- Signatories in Blood<sup>63</sup>
- Signed-in-Blood Battalion<sup>64</sup>
- The Sentinels<sup>65</sup>
- Those Signed in Blood Battalion<sup>66</sup>
- Those who Sign in Blood<sup>67</sup>
- Witnesses in Blood<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Terrorist Designation of the Al-Mulathamun Battalion," U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> "Al-Murabitoun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitoun.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Associated Press, "Mali: Group Merges With Al Qaeda," *New York Times*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/world/africa/mali-group-merges-with-al-qaeda.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Conor Gaffey, "Peacekeeping in Mali: The U.N.'s Most Dangerous Mission," *Newsweek*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/mali-un-mission-northern-mali-conflict-aqim-africa-peacekeeping-468907>.

<sup>5</sup> "Challenges in Countering Terrorism in Libya," Joint open briefing of the Counter Terrorism Committee, the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, and the Libya Sanctions Committee, June 22, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Concept-Note-Joint-open-briefing-on-Libya-22-Jun-17.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.

<sup>8</sup> "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> "Terrorist Designation of the Al-Mulathamun Battalion," U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> "Terrorist Designation of the Al-Mulathamun Battalion," U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm>.

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**Key Leaders**



**Mokhtar Belmokhtar**

Emir, co-founder



**Abderrahmane al-Sanhadji**

Judge



**Elhacen Al-Ansari**

Deputy Leader



**Mohamed Lahbous (a.k.a.  
Mohamed Ould Nouini)**

Military commander of al-Mourabitoun and co-founder of JNIM (deceased)



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### History:

- **September 26, 2021:** Given the impending end of France's military mission Operation Barkhane, Mali's transitional government announces that Mali would partner with the Russian Wagner Group to combat Islamist jihadist movements across the country. In the \$10.8 million a month deal, Mali will allegedly hire 1,000 Wagner Group mercenaries to combat JNIM and AQIM fighters. Source: Steve Balestrieri, "Mali to Hire Wagner Group to Fight Terrorists as the EU Draws a Red Line Against Russia," SOFREP, September 26, 2021, <https://sofrep.com/news/mali-to-hire-wagner-group-to-fight-terrorists-as-the-eu-draws-a-red-line-against-russia/>.
- **August 8, 2018:** French forces kill 14 al-Mourabitoun fighters, including senior commander and explosives expert Hamza Ould Lekhweir, outside the city of Gao. Source: "MALI: AL-MOURABITOUN COMMANDER AND ASSOCIATES KILLED AMIDST BARKHANE OPERATION NEAR TABANKORT," MENASTREAM, August 8, 2018, <http://menastream.com/mali-mourabitoun-barkhane-tabankort/>.
- **February 14, 2018:** French forces kill JNIM co-founder Mohamed Lahbou and other senior leaders in an operation in the Tin Zaouatene, Boughessa, and Aouhou areas of northern Mali. Source: "MALI: AL-MOURABITOUN COMMANDER AND ASSOCIATES KILLED AMIDST BARKHANE OPERATION NEAR TABANKORT," MENASTREAM, August 8, 2018, <http://menastream.com/mali-mourabitoun-barkhane-tabankort/>.
- **May 9, 2017:** Rumors begin to circulate that head judge Abderrahmane al-Sanhadji has replaced Mokhtar Belmokhtar as emir of al-Mourabitoun. Malian and Mouritanian security sources say that al-Mourabitoun's council of elders dismissed Belmokhtar, but the group does not confirm the reports. Source: Malek Bachir, "EXCLUSIVE: Notorious leader of Saharan al-Qaeda group loses power," Middle East Eye, May 9, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-belmokhtar-dismissed-leadership-al-mourabitoun-274790462>.
- **- August 14, 2017:** On March 2, al-Mourabitoun merges with AQIM and local jihadist groups into Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) led by Ansar al-Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghali. JNIM pledges allegiance to al-Qaeda and to AQIM emir Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud. Under its new name, JNIM conducts or is suspected of conducting six attacks in Mali and one attack in Burkina Faso, which altogether kill more than 40 civilians and soldiers. Sources: Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa," Long War Journal, March 13, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>; Dario Cristiani, "Ten Years of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Evolution and Prospects," Jamestown Foundation, May 5, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/ten-years-al-qaeda-islamic-maghreb-evolution-prospects/>; Beligh Nabli, "L'unification du djihadisme sahelien," L'Economiste, June 3, 2017, <http://www.leconomistemaghreb.com/2017/03/06/unification-djihadisme-sahelien/>; "Mali : l'attaque contre la base militaire de Boulikessi revendiquée par l'organisation jihadiste d'Iyad Ag Ghali," Jeune Afrique, March 10, 2017, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/411287/politique/mali-lattaque-contre-base-militaire-de-boulikessi-revendiquee-lorganisation-jihadiste-diyad-ag-ghali/>; Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda entity involved in communal violence in central Mali," Long War Journal, March 27, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/al-qaeda-entity-involved-in-communal-violence-in-central-mali.php>; Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda group claims assault near Mali capital," Long War Journal, June 20, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/al-qaeda-group-claims-assault-near-mali-capital.php>; Caleb Weiss, "Jihadists strike across West Africa," Long War Journal, August 15, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/08/jihadists-launch-attacks-across-west-africa.php>.
- **March 16, 2016 - January 19, 2017:** Despite merging with AQIM, al-Mourabitoun continues to operate semi-independently, conducting one joint and two independent attacks in this period. On March 16, Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility alongside AQIM for a joint attack on a hotel in the Côte d'Ivoire that leaves 19 dead. On May 31, an al-Mourabitoun militant detonates a suicide bomb near the U.N. airport in Gao, Mali, killing a Chinese peacekeeper and three others. On January 19, 2017, al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility for a suicide bombing at a Malian army camp outside Gao, Mali, which kills 77. Sources: Conor Gaffey, "IVORY COAST ATTACK: AL-QAEDA SAYS BEACH SIEGE WAS REVENGE AGAINST FRANCE," *Newsweek*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/ivory-coast-attack-al-qaeda-says-beach-siege-was-revenge-against-france-437279>; Caleb Weiss, "AQIM claims two attacks in northern Mali," Long War Journal, November 30, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/aqim-claims-two-attacks-in-northern-mali.php>; Angela Dewan and Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Mali suicide bombing: Al Qaeda-linked group claims responsibility," CNN, January 19, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/19/africa/mali-military-bombing/index.html>; "Three U.N. peacekeepers killed in northern Mali attack," Reuters, June 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security/three-u-n-peacekeepers-killed-in-northern-mali-attack-idUSKBN1901TA>.
- **June 14, 2015 - :** The United States carries out an airstrike in Libya targeting Belmokhtar. The Libyan government reports that Belmokhtar is killed in the airstrike. However, on July 21, al-Mourabitoun releases an online statement naming Belmokhtar its official leader. The organization signs the statement, "Al Murabitoon – Al Qaeda in West Africa." A December 4 audio message by AQIM emir Abu Musab Abdul Wadud claims that al-Mourabitoun and AQIM have merged. Both of al-Mourabitoun's attacks in November 2015 and January 2016 are carried out in conjunction with AQIM and leave 51 people dead. Al-Mourabitoun also kidnaps an Australian doctor and his wife during the January 15, 2016, attack on a hotel in Burkina Faso. Sources: Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Airstrike in Libya Targets Planner of 2013 Algeria Attack," New York Times, June 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/15/world/middleeast/us-airstrike-targets-qaeda-operative-in-libya.html>; Reuters, "U.S. Confirms Militant Belmokhtar Was Target of Libya Air Strike," New York Times, June 15, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2015/06/15/world/africa/15reuters-libya-usa-target.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2015/06/15/world/africa/15reuters-libya-usa-target.html?_r=0); Reuters, "Libya Says 'Uncatchable' Veteran Militant Killed in U.S. Strike," New York Times, June 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2015/06/15/world/africa/15reuters-usa-libya.html>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar now leads 'Al Qaeda in West Africa,'" Long War Journal, August 13, 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/mokhtar-belmokhtar-now-leads-al-qaeda-in-west-africa.php>; "Al Qaeda group says staged Mali hotel attack in joint operation," Reuters, December 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-attacks/al-qaeda-group-says-staged-mali-hotel-attack-in-joint-operation-idUSKBN0T2FU20151204>; Faith Karimi and Erin Burnett, "Mali hotel attack: Gunmen barged in, shot at 'anything that moved,'" CNN, November 22, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/21/africa/mali-hotel-attack/>; Nadia Khomami, "Burkina Faso hotel attack: 18 nationalities among dead," Guardian (London), January 16, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/16/security-forces-battle-suspected-jihadists-in-burkina-faso-capital>; Jason Burke, "Burkina Faso attack signals spread of Islamist menace," Guardian (London), January 16, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/16/burkina-faso-attack-signals-spread-of-islamist-menace>; Tim Lister, "Burkina Faso attack demonstrates al Qaeda revival in Africa," CNN, January 16, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/16/world/burkina-faso-attack-al-qaeda/>; Drew Hinshaw and Zoumana Wonogo, "Al Qaeda Attacks in Burkina Faso Kill at Least 30," Wall Street Journal, January 17, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/operation-ends-at-burkina-faso-hotel-seized-by-al-qaeda-1452936866>; Merieme Arif, "Al Qaeda group says it holds two Australians," CNN, February 5, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/05/world/burkina-faso-australians-kidnapping-claim/index.html>.
- **March 7, 2015 - :** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility for one kidnapping and two attacks in the spring of 2015. In March, al-Mourabitoun attacks the La Terrasse restaurant in Bamako, Mali, killing five people, and a week later attacks Malian security forces as they attempt to arrest Mohamed Tanirou Cisse, the suspected driver who drove attackers to the La Terrasse. An April 15 attack on a U.N. peacekeeping base in Ansogo, Mali kills three people and

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wounds 16. In May, al-Mourabitoun announces it kidnapped a Romanian citizen on April 4 in Burkina Faso. The same month, an Arabic-language news website posts a recording of al-Mourabitoun leader Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi pledging the group's allegiance to ISIS. A week later, Belmokhtar rejects the pledge and Sahrawi and his followers break from al-Mourabitoun. Sources: Baba Ahmed, "Mali officials: 1 killed, 3 injured in attack in north," Associated Press, April 5, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/bc94eff4a46f40ebdb8c74ebf1f9e3/mali-officials-1-killed-3-injured-attack-north>; Baba Ahmed, "Special forces kill Mali attack suspect, army official says," Reuters, March 13, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/fbfd43635d6e40e8975a9b948067e9a2/special-forces-kill-mali-attack-suspect-army-official-says>; Tiemoko Diallo and Adama Diarra, "Islamist group claims attack on U.N. peacekeepers in Mali," Reuters, April 18, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/18/us-mali-un-idUSKBN0N90F920150418>; Rukmini Callimachi, "Militant Group Says It Has Romanian Hostage," New York Times, May 18, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/militant-group-says-it-has-romanian-hostage.html>; Agence France-Presse, "Belmokhtar's jihadist group in N. Africa vows allegiance to IS," Yahoo News, May 14, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/al-qaeda-linked-belmokhtar-group-n-africa-claims-001449854.html>; Reuters, "Sahara Islamist Leader Belmokhtar Dismisses Islamic State Pledge: Report," New York Times, May 17, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2015/05/17/world/africa/17reuters-sahara-militants.html>; Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State recognizes oath of allegiance from jihadists in Mali," Long War Journal, October 31, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/islamic-state-recognizes-oath-of-allegiance-from-jihadists-in-west-africa.php>.

- **January 4, 2014 - :** On January 4, al-Mourabitoun threatens to target the interests of "France and her allies" in a statement sent to the Mauritanian website Nouakchott Information Agency. The group only conducts one kidnapping during the year, seizing five Malian aid workers near Gao, Mali, on February 8. On April 11, al-Mourabitoun sends Mauritania's ANI news agency a video of one of three Algerian diplomats it is holding hostage from the 2012 kidnapping. Three had already been released and one was reportedly executed. The video is the first proof of life since January 2013. In January 2015, Belmokhtar praises the Islamist attacks on French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo and kosher grocery store Hyper Cacher. Sources: Robbie Corey-Boulet, "Website: Terror group threatens France over Mali," Associated Press, January 6, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/website-terror-group-threatens-france-over-mali>; Currently Listed Entities, "Public Safety Canada, last updated March 24, 2014, Al-Mourabitoun 8 <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-nts/crrnt-lstd-nts-eng.aspx>; Laurent Prieur, "Saharah Islamists release video of Algerian diplomat hostage - agency," Reuters, April 13, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/13/algeria-islamist-kidnapping-idUSL6N0N500F20140413>; "Veteran Algerian militant hails Paris killings," Reuters, January 12, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/12/us-france-shooting-militant-idUSKBN0KL0E020150112>.
- **- :** The newly formed al-Mourabitoun and its affiliates claim responsibility for five attacks. In October, the group fires rockets at two bridges and the airport in Gao, Mali while four suicide bombers attack a MINUSMA (the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) military camp in Kidal, killing three. Al-Mourabitoun and its affiliates conduct one suicide bombing and two IED attacks in November targeting Malian, French, and MINUSMA troops, killing six. On November 21, French forces kill Mokhtar's second-in-command, Hacene Ould Khalil, a Mauritanian also known as Jouleibib. Sources: "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>; Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>; Adama Diarra, "French troops kill deputy to veteran Islamist Belmokhtar," Reuters, November 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/21/us-mali-france-islamists-idUSBRE9AKQ0520131121>.
- **August 22, 2013:** AMB and MUJAO merge to form al-Mourabitoun. The group releases a statement that the region's jihadist movement is "stronger than ever." Al-Mourabitoun announced its intentions to "rout" France and its allies in the region. Sources: "Belmokhtar's militants 'merge' with Mali's Mujao," BBC News, August 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23796920>; "Sahara jihadist groups merge, threaten French interests - report," Reuters, August 22, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/22/northafrica-islamists-idUSL6N0GN20Q20130822>.
- **- :** In the seven months following its formation, AMB takes over 800 people hostage at the Tiguentourine gas facility in southeastern Algeria and carries out a joint double suicide bombing with MUJAO on a Niger military camp and French-run uranium mine. Thirty-nine civilians die in the four-day siege at Tiguentourine while 25 are killed in the double suicide attacks. In February, a MUJAO car-bombing targets Tuareg separatist group the Liberation of the Azawad (MNL) at In-Khalil, Mali. MUJAO reportedly believed the MNL was allied with French troops. In July, MUJAO releases a video of two of its members encouraging Muslims in France and the United States to carry out terrorist attacks while the United States offers a \$5 million reward for Belmokhtar's capture. Sources: "Niger attacks launched from southern Libya - Niger's president," Reuters, May 25, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/25/niger-attacks-libya-idUSL5N0E60DD20130525>; "The List established and maintained by the 1267/1989 Committee," U.N. Security Council, last modified May 22, 2015, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/1267.pdf>; "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>; Lamine Chikhi, "WRAPUP 6-Algeria hostage crisis death toll hits 80, could rise further," Reuters, January 20, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/20/sahara-crisis-idUSL6N0AO37H20130120>; Lamine Chikhi, "WRAPUP 8-Algeria accuses Canadian, puts hostage toll at 38," Reuters, January 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/21/sahara-crisis-idUSL6N0AP4TU20130121>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; "Belmokhtar's militants 'merge' with Mali's Mujao," BBC News, August 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23796920>.
- **- :** In the year following its split from AQIM, MUJAO kidnaps seven Algerian diplomats and a Portuguese-French citizen in Mali. On June 30, the group claims responsibility for a suicide bombing of the Algerian national gendarmerie headquarters in Ouargla, Algeria. In December, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a commander in AQIM, leaves the group and forms the al-Mulathamun Battalion (AMB). He creates a sub-battalion called al-Muwaqi'un Bil Dima ("Those Who Sign in Blood") and threatens to fight against Western interests. Sources: Laurent Prieur, "Saharah Islamists release video of Algerian diplomat hostage - agency," Reuters, April 13, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/13/algeria-islamist-kidnapping-idUSL6N0N500F20140413>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>; "Currently Listed Entities," Public Safety Canada, last updated March 24, 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-nts/crrnt-lstd-nts-eng.aspx>.
- The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) splinters from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), reportedly over objections to Algerian dominance of AQIM's leadership. MUJAO declares its goal is to spread jihad across West Africa. Source: "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>.



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### **Violent history:**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar first came to international attention with his January 2013 attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility in southeastern Algeria where his group, al-Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), took 800 people hostage, ultimately killing 39 of them.<sup>69</sup> Since then, Belmokhtar and al-Mourabitoun have expanded their operations into Mali, Burkino Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire. Al-Mourabitoun has kidnapped diplomats and aid workers and conducted at least 11 suicide bombings against both European and African soldiers and civilians. Following al-Mourabitoun's merger with AQIM and the formation of JNIM, most of the group's attacks have been attributed to either AQIM or JNIM. However, al-Mourabitoun still acts independently on some operations.

- **January 19, 2017:** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility for a suicide bombing in a Malian army camp outside Gao, Mali, which kills 77.<sup>70</sup>
- **May 31, 2016:** An al-Mourabitoun suicide bomber detonates near the U.N. airport in Gao, Mali, killing a Chinese peacekeeper and three others.<sup>71</sup>
- **March 16, 2016:** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility alongside AQIM for a joint attack on a hotel in Côte d'Ivoire, which leaves 19 dead.<sup>72</sup>
- **February 5, 2016:** In an audio message, al-Mourabitoun claims it abducted an Australian doctor and his wife in Burkina Faso the previous month but plans on releasing the wife as it does "not target women in times of war."<sup>73</sup> Al-Mourabitoun releases the doctor's wife two days late, but continues to hold the doctor and five others hostage, including three women.<sup>74</sup>
- **January 15, 2016:** Militants attack a hotel in Burkina Faso and a police station outside of the capital, killing 30 people of 18 nationalities. The attack is believed to be carried out by al-Mourabitoun, in conjunction with AQIM.<sup>75</sup>
- **November 20, 2015:** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility for a deadly gun and hostage attack on the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali, allegedly as part of a joint attack with AQIM. According to U.N. spokesman Olivier Salgado, 21 people were killed in the attack when gunmen stormed the hotel using counterfeit diplomatic license plates.<sup>76</sup>
- **May 18, 2015:** Al-Mourabitoun announces it kidnapped a Romanian citizen on April 4 in Burkina Faso.<sup>77</sup>
- **April 15, 2015:** An attack on a U.N. peacekeeping base in Ansogo, Mali, kills three people and wounds 16. Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility.<sup>78</sup>
- **March 13, 2015:** Malian security forces are attacked while trying to arrest Mohamed Tanirou Cisse, the suspected driver who drove attackers to the La Terrasse a week earlier. Cisse is killed while resisting arrest.<sup>79</sup>
- **March 7, 2015:** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility after an attack on the La Terrasse restaurant in Bamako, Mali, kills five people, including a Frenchman and a Belgian.<sup>80</sup>
- **April 11, 2014:** Al-Mourabitoun sends Mauritania's ANI news agency a video of one of three Algerian diplomats it is holding hostage. MUJAO had kidnapped seven diplomats in April 2012 in Mali. Three were released and one was reportedly executed. The video is the first proof of life since January 2013.<sup>81</sup>
- **February 8, 2014:** Al-Mourabitoun kidnaps five Malian aid workers near Gao, Mali.<sup>82</sup>
- **January 4, 2014:** Al-Mourabitoun threatens to target the interests of "France and her allies" in a statement sent to the Mauritanian website Nouakchott Information Agency.<sup>83</sup>
- **November 14, 2013:** Sultan Ould Badi, a Malian formerly affiliated with MUJAO and currently affiliated with AMB, claimed responsibility for a vehicle-borne IED that detonated at the Malian Solidarity Bank in the northern city of Kidal. The explosion killed two Senegalese MINUSMA troops and injured seven Malian Armed Forces who were guarding the bank. The perpetrator died in the bombing.<sup>84</sup>
- **November 2013:** A suicide bomber attacks the French barracks in Menaka, Mali. Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility and asserts the bombing killed French soldiers. The French military says only the bomber was killed.<sup>85</sup>
- **November 2013:** Four soldiers die in an IED attack on a Malian army vehicle between Asongo and Menaka. Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility.<sup>86</sup>
- **October 23, 2013:** Four suicide bombers detonate IEDs near a military camp in Mali's Kidal region. The bombers target a Chadian contingent of MINUSMA forces. Two Chadian soldiers, one Malian civilian, and the four bombers are killed, while at least six others are wounded. AMB claims responsibility in the press.<sup>87</sup>

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- **October 2013:** Al-Mourabitoun claims responsibility for firing rockets at the Gao airport in Mali. The group also fires mortar shells at two bridges in Gao, destroying one.<sup>88</sup>
- **July 2013:** MUJAO releases a video of two of its members encouraging Muslims in France and the United States to carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>89</sup>
- **May 23, 2013:** AMB and the Mali-based MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad) jointly carry out twin suicide attacks in Niger on a military camp and uranium mine run by the French company Areva. The attacks kill 24 soldiers and one civilian.<sup>90</sup>
- **February 2013:** A Mujao car-bombing targets Tuareg separatist group the Liberation of the Azawad (MNL) at In-Khalil, Mali. The Mujao reportedly believed the MNL was allied with French troops.<sup>91</sup>
- **January 2013:** AMB takes over 800 people hostage during a four-day siege of the Tiguentourine gas facility in southeastern Algeria. Thirty-nine civilians, including three U.S. citizens, are killed.<sup>92</sup> Belmokhtar claims responsibility for what is considered one of the worst international hostage crises in decades.<sup>93</sup>
- **December 2012:** MUJAO claims responsibility for the kidnapping of a Portuguese-French citizen in Mali.<sup>94</sup>
- **June 30, 2012:** MUJAO claims responsibility for a suicide bombing of the Algerian national gendarmerie headquarters in Ouargla, Algeria.<sup>95</sup>
- **April 2012:** MUJAO kidnaps seven Algerian diplomats in Mali.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>69</sup> "Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Angela Dewan and Mohammed Tawfeeq, "Mali suicide bombing: Al Qaeda-linked group claims responsibility," CNN, January 19, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/19/africa/mali-military-bombing/index.html>; "Three U.N. peacekeepers killed in northern Mali attack," Reuters, June 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security/three-u-n-peacekeepers-killed-in-northern-mali-attack-idUSKBN1901TA>.

<sup>71</sup> Caleb Weiss, "AQIM claims two attacks in northern Mali," Long War Journal, November 30, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/aqim-claims-two-attacks-in-northern-mali.php>.

<sup>72</sup> Conor Gaffey, "IVORY COAST ATTACK: AL-QAEDA SAYS BEACH SIEGE WAS REVENGE AGAINST FRANCE," *Newsweek*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/ivory-coast-attack-al-qaeda-says-beach-siege-was-revenge-against-france-437279>.

<sup>73</sup> Merieme Arif, "Al Qaeda group says it holds two Australians," CNN, February 5, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/05/world/burkina-faso-australians-kidnapping-claim/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Faith Karimi, "Australian woman freed by al Qaeda-linked kidnappers," CNN, February 7, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/07/africa/burkina-faso-kidnapped-australian-released/index.html>; Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda video shows its hostages in northern Mali," Long War Journal, July 2, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/al-qaeda-video-shows-its-hostages-in-northern-mali.php>.

<sup>75</sup> Nadia Khomami, "Burkina Faso hotel attack: 18 nationalities among dead," *Guardian* (London), January 16, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/15/security-forces-battle-suspected-jihadists-in-burkina-faso-capital>;

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## *Al-Mourabitoun*

### **Designations:**

#### *Designations by U.S. Government:*

- **October 24, 2003:** The U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Mokhtar Belmokhtar a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.<sup>97</sup>
- **December 7, 2012:** The U.S. Department of State designated the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA, also known by MUJAO) a Specially Designated Global Terrorist under Executive Order 13224.<sup>98</sup>
- **December 7, 2012:** The U.S. Department of State designated MUJAO leaders Hamad el Khairy and Ahmed el Tilemsi Specially Designated Global Terrorists under Executive Order 13224.<sup>99</sup>
- **December 18, 2013:** The U.S. Department of State designated the “al-Mulathamun Battalion” a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity. The State Department included “al-Murabitoun” as an alias of AMB.<sup>100</sup>
- **September 5, 2018:** The U.S. Department of State designated Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) as a foreign terrorist organization.<sup>101</sup>

#### *Designations by Foreign Governments:*

- **November 7, 2013:** Canada designated “al-Muwaqi’un Bil Dima” a terrorist organization.<sup>102</sup>
- **December 5, 2012:** New Zealand designated “Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO)” a terrorist organization.<sup>103</sup>
- **June 2, 2014:** Canada designated “al-Murabitoun” a terrorist organization.<sup>104</sup>
- **June 2, 2014:** New Zealand designated al-Mourabitoun a terrorist organization.<sup>105</sup>
- **June 2, 2014:** Canada designated “Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa” a terrorist organization.<sup>106</sup>
- **June 2, 2014:** New Zealand designated al-Mulathomoun a terrorist organization.<sup>107</sup>
- **April 2, 2014:** The United Arab Emirates designated al-Mourabitoun a terrorist organization.<sup>108</sup>
- **June 16, 2014:** The United Kingdom added al-Mourabitoun to its list of proscribed terrorist organizations.<sup>109</sup>
- **June 2, 2014:** The United Nations added al-Mourabitoun to its Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities list.<sup>110</sup>
- **November 5, 2014:** Australia listed “al-Murabitun” as a terrorist organization.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>97</sup> “U.S. Designates Three Individuals And One Organization Involved In Terrorism In Algeria,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 24, 2003, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js944.aspx>; “Recent OFAC Actions,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 24, 2003, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/pages/20031024.aspx>.

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<sup>100</sup> “Terrorist Designation of the Al-Mulathamun Battalion,” U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/218880.htm>.

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<sup>102</sup> “Currently Listed Entities,” Public Safety Canada, last updated March 24, 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-eng.aspx>.

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<sup>109</sup> “Proscribed Terrorist Organizations,” U.K. Home Office, last modified March 27, 2015, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/417888/Proscription-20150327.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417888/Proscription-20150327.pdf).

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## *Al-Mourabitoun*

### **Associations:**

#### *Ties to Extremist Entities:*

- **Al-Qaeda**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is a former commander in al-Qaeda's North African franchise, AQIM. He left the group to form the al-Mulathamun Battalion in December 2012.<sup>112</sup> MUJAO is also a splinter group of AQIM.<sup>113</sup> Al-Mourabitoun coordinated with al-Qaeda and AQIM in its May 2013 attack in Niger.<sup>114</sup> The United Nations added al-Mourabitoun to its Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities list on June 2, 2014.<sup>115</sup> Al-Mourabitoun released an online statement declaring al-Qaeda-aligned Belmokhtar its official leader on July 21, 2015. The statement was signed "Al Murabitoun – Al Qaeda in West Africa,"<sup>116</sup> signaling the group's official alignment with al-Qaeda.

- **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)**

Mokhtar Belmokhtar is a former commander in AQIM. He left the group to form the al-Mulathamun Battalion in December 2012.<sup>117</sup> MUJAO is also a splinter group of AQIM.<sup>118</sup> Al-Mourabitoun coordinated with al-Qaeda and AQIM in its May 2013 attack in Niger.<sup>119</sup> Al-Mourabitoun also maintains contact with AQIM leaders, such as Yahia Djouadi, Ahmed Deghdegh, Mohamed Belkalem, Tayeb Nail, and Djamel Akkacha, AQIM's coordinator of groups associated with AQIM in northern Mali.<sup>120</sup> On December 4, 2015, al-Mourabitoun and AQIM officially merged following their first joint attack in Mali the month before.<sup>121</sup> On March 2, 2017, al-Mourabitoun, AQIM, the Macina Liberation Front, and Ansar al-Dine formed the new group Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), which pledged loyalty to al-Qaeda.<sup>122</sup> Despite this, al-Mourabitoun continues to act independently in its Mali attacks.

- **Boko Haram**

Boko Haram has reportedly provided support to MUJAO.<sup>123</sup>

- **ISIS**

Al-Mourabitoun co-founder Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi reportedly pledged the group's allegiance to ISIS in May 2015. A week later, Mokhtar Belmokhtar rejected the pledge.<sup>124</sup>

- **Ansar al-Dine**

On March 2, 2017, al-Mourabitoun and AQIM merged with Ansar al-Dine to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).<sup>125</sup> In the video declaring the merger, two of al-Mourabitoun's top commanders were seated next to Ansar al-Dine's emir, Iyad Ag Ghali.<sup>126</sup>

#### *Ties to Extremist Individuals:*

- **Ayman al-Zawahiri**

Al-Mourabitoun co-founder Mokhtar Belmokhtar has repeatedly sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda leader al-Zawahiri.<sup>127</sup> The two groups that merged to form al-Mourabitoun, al-Mulathamun and MUJAO, are both AQIM splinter groups.<sup>128</sup>

- **Abdelmalek Droukdel**

Droukdel is head of AQIM, from which the al-Mourabitoun predecessors al-Mulathamun and MUJAO originally broke. He is one of the leaders with whom al-Mourabitoun maintains contact.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>112</sup> "Currently Listed Entities," Public Safety Canada, last updated March 24, 2014, <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrmt-lstd-ntts-eng.aspx>; Country Reports on Terrorism 2013: Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, April 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/225886.pdf>.

<sup>113</sup> "Al-Murabitun," Australian National Security, accessed June 17, 2015, <http://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/Al-Murabitun.aspx>.

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<sup>115</sup> "The List established and maintained by the 1267/1989 Committee," U.N. Security Council, last updated May 22, 2015, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/1267.pdf>.

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## Al-Mourabitoun

### Media Coverage:

#### *Al-Mourabitoun's Emergence*

In response to rumors that Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mulathamun Brigade (AMB) had split with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) in early 2013, analyst Aaron Zelin told Reuters that AQIM appeared to have initiated a "controlled fragmentation."<sup>130</sup> The August 2013 merger of the AMB with the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) to form al-Mourabitoun received widespread coverage because of Belmokhtar's infamy as an al-Qaeda commander and the AMB/MUJAO joint attack on a French uranium mine earlier that year.<sup>131</sup> Since its emergence, al-Mourabitoun has specifically targeted French interests in the region, attracting the attention of Western media.<sup>132</sup>

#### *Mokhtar Belmokhtar*

**Mokhtar Belmokhtar** is repeatedly referred to in the media as one of Africa's "best known jihadists."<sup>133</sup> In January 2013, less than two years after the death of Osama bin Laden, Reuters' Myra MacDonald wrote that al-Mourabitoun co-founder Mokhtar Belmokhtar had "burnished his jihadi credentials by showing that al Qaeda remains a potent threat to Western interests despite" bin Laden's death.<sup>134</sup>

The Libyan government reported Belmokhtar had been killed in a June 14, 2015, U.S. airstrike in the country.<sup>135</sup> U.S. media reported the claims with the caveat that U.S. officials had not yet confirmed Belmokhtar's death.<sup>136</sup> Media reports keyed in on Belmokhtar's connection to the 2013 Algeria attack that killed over 20 people.<sup>137</sup> Al-Mourabitoun later denied Belmokhtar had been killed and declared him its official leader in July 2015.<sup>138</sup>

Sean Naylor called Belmokhtar's suspected death a "potentially significant U.S. counterterrorism win."<sup>139</sup> He argued in a June 15, 2015, *Foreign Policy* piece that Belmokhtar's reported death offered the United States an opportunity to target al-Mourabitoun before it regroups from the loss.<sup>140</sup> Al-Mourabitoun's alleged pledge of allegiance to ISIS in May 2015<sup>141</sup> and Belmokhtar's reported death a month later drew media speculation that ISIS had "eclipsed" al-Mourabitoun's infamous co-founder.<sup>142</sup> *Time*'s Jared Malsin wrote in June 2015 that "ISIS and other groups have come to eclipse Belmokhtar and those loyal to him..."<sup>143</sup>

The June 2015 strike was not the first time Belmokhtar has been presumed killed. Chadian forces claimed to have killed him in Mali on March 3, 2013.<sup>144</sup> At the time, Western media eulogized Belmokhtar as a key leader in the global jihadist movement, without whom the movement could collapse. In an analysis piece for Reuters, Myra MacDonald wrote Belmokhtar's death "would be a serious blow to al Qaeda's efforts to recover its cohesion as a force for global jihad."<sup>145</sup> Belmokhtar, she wrote, "proved al Qaeda remained a potent threat to Western interests."<sup>146</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Myra MacDonald, "Belmokhtar burnishes jihadi credentials with Algeria attack," Reuters, January 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/17/sahara-crisis-belmokhtar-idUSL6N0AMC620130117>.

<sup>131</sup> "Belmokhtar's militants 'merge' with Mali's Mujao," BBC News, August 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-23796920>; "Sahara jihadist groups merge, threaten French interests – report," Reuters, August 22, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/22/northafrica-islamists-idUSL6N0GN2OQ20130822>.

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**Rhetoric:**

*Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi, May 18, 2015*

*Offering terms to the Romanian government on the release of a Romanian man kidnapped the month prior:* “The Romanian government will be entirely responsible for the fate of the hostage if it does not take the opportunity given to free its citizen.”<sup>147</sup>

*Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi, May 18, 2015*

*Pledging al-Mourabitoun’s allegiance to ISIS and its self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi:* “We call upon all the jihadi groups to pledge allegiance to the Caliph, to unify the word of the Muslims and align the ranks in front of the enemies of religion.”<sup>148</sup>

*Statement, May 2015*

“The Al-Murabitoun movement pledges its allegiance to the caliph of Muslims Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (IS leader), thereby banishing divisions and dissent within the (Muslim community).”<sup>149</sup>

*Statement, April 2015*

“We, the Mourabitoun group, announce the martyrdom operation that one of our knights, Ibrahim al-Ansari, undertook at the headquarters of the Nigerian forces.”<sup>150</sup>

*Mokhtar Belmokhtar, March 2015*

“[Claiming responsibility for the shootout attack in Mali’s capital that killed five: This attack was a reprisal attack] against the heathen West which has offended our prophet.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> “Islamist group says holding Romanian hostage seized in Burkina,” Reuters, May 19, 2015, <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKBN0041GF20150519>.

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