



**COUNTER IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE**

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Subject (REPORT) : Neutralization of Abdelmalek Droukdel consequences

Events:

In a military operation carried out by Barkhane force on 03.06.2020, supported by ISR assets of the US, the AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed along with three other terrorists. One of them was Toufik Chaib, head of the JNIM media apparatus. The counter-terrorism action, which was recognized by AQ in a statement released on 2020.06.18, took place **in the Talhandak area (Mali), very close to its border with Algeria**. French Special Forces participated with the support of armed helicopters.

Few weeks before to his neutralization, Droukdel abandoned his usual refuge in the Djurdjura mountain region of Algerian Kabylia. **Although the circumstances surrounding his displacement to Mali are unknown**, it cannot be ruled out that they **were linked to the important events that are currently happening there, such as the Mali's Government's attempt to negotiate with the terrorist group JNIM**, in which the *Emirate of Timbuktu/AQIM* is integrated, **as well as the ongoing fighting between the main terrorist groups in the region, JNIM and the IS in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)**.

His last public statement was issued in January 2020. In his statement he tried to promote the execution of attacks against international forces deployed in the Sahel.

Assessment:

The fact that Droukdel abandoned his safe haven to move to Mali highlights the very growing importance that the Sahel is acquiring as a theater of operations within al Qaeda. The presence of JNIM in the Sahel is very important. In order to counter such incidence, the counter-terrorism pressure, mainly from the Barkhane force, has been developing significantly since the beginning of 2019. AQ's leadership in Mali has been significantly damaged by neutralizing the last three emirs of the Emirate of Timbuktu. The Macina group, also integrated into JNIM, has also been affected in a significant way. The counter-terrorism impact on JNIM in general has been such that dissatisfaction is causing desertions of combatants in some of its cells towards ISGS, which in turn has also had an impact on the current breakdown of the status quo in relations between JNIM and ISGS.

The neutralization of Droukdel is very important because, since 2017, he was also the third person in charge of al-Qaida after Ayman al Zawahiry, being consequently integrated in the AQ Hittin Committee Shoura Council.

Droukdel's death, however, will not lead to remarkable changes in AQIM. AQ's terrorist action in Libya has faded after the extinctions in Benghazi and later Derna in the summer of 2018 as a result of Marshal Haftar's ANL action. AQIM's Libyan action is currently reduced to supporting Mali from the southwestern desert areas of the great Libyan south. This decline in AQIM's terrorist capability is similarly palpable in Tunisia and Algeria, where DAESH is taking over as much space as possible to the detriment of AQIM, even in the great Algerian south, AQIM's traditional area of action. Emulating a possible pact of the Mauritanian authorities with AQ, some source has even pointed to a possible

agreement from the Algerian authorities with AQIM, which would have led to concealment and sanctuary for Droukdel in Algeria.

Concerning Mali, AQ's participation in the JNIM terrorist alliance operating in Mali and Burkina Faso does not even give AQ control of this terrorist conglomerate in the Sahel, whose command has been held by Iyad ag Ghali (*Ansar e Dine*), since its founding in March 2017.

Little would change accordingly in Sahelian space, despite the fall of Droukdel. However, it's also true that this first half of the year has brought important novelties in that geographical area in which both JNIM and ISGS are very actively evolving: this is the case of the current confrontation between both terrorist groups, as well as an attempt to negotiate with the JNIM by the Malian authorities, which is generating some controversy, even within the JNIM itself, regardless of the difficulties of its prosperity as a consequence of the impossible demand of JNIM for its viability, such as the abandonment of the region by the French troops.

Droukdel endeavored to advance the agreement with the Malian government, trying to emulate the agreement already reached between the US and the Taliban in Afghanistan. **They also tried to contain the JNIM confrontation with the ISGS, prolonging the status quo of both groups in the region**, which had been an important benchmark of cohesion between AQ and DAESH, to be imitated in most of the scenarios shared by both groups, where, on the contrary, confrontation is imposed as reality and not coexistence.

Prospects and recommendations:

If Droukdel left his refuge in Algeria, why did he have to risk being arrested in Mali? Something important led him to the southern border, and **what is most relevant in the region is now the JNIM's attempt to agree with the Malian government, as well as the confrontation between terrorist groups**. Although his neutralization is very important, it should not bring great changes in the AQs operations in the region. Unless some kind of agreement with JNIM is indeed achieved, which, although tremendously difficult, would have value for itself in the present evolution of the Jihad in the Sahel.

From a C-IED CoE perspective, future peace talks between JNIM and the Malian government should be enforced and supported by the international community in order to promote the existing wedge between DAESH and AQ in the region, rather than giving them the opportunity to reconcile and unite common efforts more progressively.

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