

## MALI UPDATE

## The Radisson Blu outrage

***Today's attack on the 5-star hotel in Bamako bears the stamp of a relatively new actor on the jihadi scene in Mali, the so-called Front de libération du Macina (FLM).***

1) The most significant attribute of the Front de libération du Macina<sup>1</sup> (FLM) is that **its field of operation is the south and centre of this enormous country** (482,000 sq. mi)<sup>2</sup> – in contrast to the three movements<sup>3</sup> that occupied the vast northern region<sup>4</sup> for the nine months in 2012/13.

2) The FLM is led by **Souleyman Mohamed Kennen, an AQMI comrade-in-arms of the late Mochtar Belmochtar<sup>5</sup>**, and a spiritual follower of the radical Fulani preacher<sup>6</sup> **Amadou Koufa, who is a close ally of Iyad ag Ghaly, the leader of the Islamist-Touareg movement Ansar Dine.**

3) It is worth noting that one of the group's more spectacular operations before the Radisson Blu attack was **a similar assault in August, launched against the Byblos Hotel in Sévaré**, near Mopti<sup>7</sup>. A total of 13 people were killed in that attack.

4) More significantly, today's operation is taking place less than a month after **Iyad ag Ghaly** publicly endorsed<sup>8</sup> the Byblos attack, and then **declared France "an enemy to be struck down"**<sup>9</sup>. While this exhortation clearly predated the ISIS massacre in Paris last week, it is very possible that those events were a catalyst for today's massacre.

5) Al Mourabitoune, **the AQMI splinter movement set up by Belmochtar have now claimed responsibility for the attack** – via a tweet reported by RFI<sup>10</sup> at 18.10 hrs CET (14.10 hrs ET). Lending some credence to this claim is the fact that one of the hostages rescued from the hotel reported hearing two of the gunmen "speaking to each other in Nigerian-accented English"<sup>11</sup>.

It will be recalled that **Belmochtar's movement absorbed the the pan-regional jihadi MUJAO** which, at one stage, boasted jihadis from every country in W. Africa except S. Leone and Liberia.

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<sup>1</sup> The designation *Macina* evokes a 19<sup>th</sup> century Fulani state that occupied an area of approximately 110,000 mi<sup>2</sup> in the centre of present-day Mali, with Timbuktu and Ségou defining its northern and southern boundaries. Like the caliphates of Sokoto (northern Nigeria), Futa Jalon (Guinea) and Futa Toro (Senegal), the Macina caliphate owed its establishment to a successful jihad.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. More than the size of California, Texas and Pennsylvania combined.

<sup>3</sup> i.e. Ansar Dine, Al Qéda du Maghreb Islamique (AQIM) and Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique Occidentale (MUJAO).

<sup>4</sup> Known as the 'Azawad' in the Touareg language, the northern region actually occupies more than two-thirds of Mali's total land mass.

<sup>5</sup> As AQIM's senior commanders in Timbuktu, he had supervised both the violent enforcement of *sharia* in that city and the destruction of many of its archaeological treasures. Demoted because these excesses were deemed counter-productive, he broke away from AQIM in Jan. 2013 and launched his own movement, *Al-Mourabitoune*, which announced its arrival on the scene by staging the spectacular attack on the In Amenas refinery in Algeria that month.

<sup>6</sup> Koufa is a member of the fundamentalist *Dawa* sect.

<sup>7</sup> Located on the Niger River, 395 miles north-east of the capital Bamako, this provincial center is the town closest to the village from which Koufa hails.

<sup>8</sup> In an audio clip forwarded to news agencies, the Jihadi leader welcomed the hotel assault and several less spectacular actions undertaken by the new movement.

<sup>9</sup> As will be recalled, the French-led *Opération Serval* was instrumental in liberating northern Mali from the Islamist occupation in early 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See '*Fin de la prise d'otages sanglante à Bamako*', posted on [RFI.com](http://RFI.com), Nov. 20, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Guinean artist Sékouba Bambino Diakhité, as quoted in *Le Monde Afrique* « Deux [des assaillants] parlaient en anglais, avec un accent nigérian. Je les ai entendu dire: "Est ce que c'est bon ? Tu t'es ravitaillé ? Il faut partir de ce côté, moi, je vais de l'autre côté" ».

6) However **al Mourabitoun's claim is undermined by the relatively modest scale of today's operation**. The Belmohtar *modus operandi* was to 'go big' and suicidal - as illustrated by the narrowly averted destruction of Algeria's In-Amenas gas plant, in early 2013.

It is worth noting that in May, one of the movement's co-founders<sup>12</sup> announced its allegiance to ISIS, only to be contradicted the same day when **Belmohtar himself declared the purported pledge "invalid"**, as it had not been approved by al Mourabitoun's shura council.<sup>13</sup>

7) In our view, the most likely explanation for today's claim is that, in the wake of the Paris massacres, **the pro-ISIS tendency within al Mourabitoun is trying to capture some headlines of its own** - quite possibly in response to a general call-to-arms by al Bagdadi. Under this scenario, the gunmen's "Nigerian-accented English" would simply constitute the latest evidence of the organic links that have developed between Boko Haram and the Islamist insurgency in Mali<sup>14</sup>.

Tragically, the one certainty is that **today's attack will not be the last such outrage in the West African region** outside the recognized theatre of north-eastern Nigeria.

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<sup>12</sup> i.e. Adnan Abu Waleed al-Sahrawi, head of the now amalgamated MUJAO.

<sup>13</sup> As reported in "Sahara Islamist leader Belmokhtar dismisses ISIS pledge: report", posted by [Al Arabiya](#) on May 14, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, it is worth recalling that in June 2012 as many as 200 Nigerians were identified among the recruits at the military training- camp that AQMI had established in Timbuktu shortly after capturing the town two months earlier.

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