

The consequences of the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the supreme emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) for the North African-Sahelian jihadi insurgencies

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Introduction

On June the 5th, Florence Parly, the French minister of defence announced, that the French army had eliminated in Northern Mali Abdelmalek Droukdel aka Abou Moussab Abdel Woudoud, the supreme emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), one of the most wanted men in the world. Head of what was considered in the second half of the 2000s the most powerful Al Qaeda affiliate, Droukdel's death raises many questions, both in terms of the circumstances and consequences. Indeed, given the presence of AQIM not only in Algeria but also in Tunisia, Libya and the Sahel, Droukdel was a major figure of both international and regional jihadi organisations. To that extent, many consider that his demise could constitute a major turning point in combating terrorism. More specifically, and given the ongoing conflict between Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM), led by Iyadh Ghali and under the theoretical authority of AQIM, and the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (ISGS), several rumours posit that Droukdel presence was motivated by his will to mediate between the two organisations. Furthermore, Iyadh Ghali has been engaged in negotiations since the start of the year with Malian authorities, while Droukdel always rejected any kind of dialogue with local governments, whether Algerian or any other. Moreover, his death occurred in the context of a near collapsed AQIM in Algeria itself and the absence of a 'natural successor' of equal stature. Thus, this paper addresses several questions, including: what will be the impact of Droukdel's death on AQIM in Algeria itself? What will be the impact of his death on the GSIM, currently one of the most powerful and active Al Qaeda affiliates, and its relationship with AQIM? How will this impact on the GSIM-ISGS conflict? What are the possible scenarios on the succession of Droukdel?

Abdelmalek Droukdel and the rise of AQIM

Droukdel joined the Algerian Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) in 1993 before rallying to the Salafist Group for Predication and Combat (GSPC) in 1998,² then led by Hassan Hattab, another central figure of Algerian Jihadism. Over the years, Droukdel rose in the ranks of the GSPC to the point of becoming a key figure in an insurgency that by 2000 had become the most powerful still active in Algeria. However, a major split occurred in GSPC regarding two significant issues. In early 2001-02, a deep debate took place regarding the overture for a dialogue made by the Algerian Authorities within the framework of the strategy of National Reconciliation which was structured around an offer of amnesty and socio-economic reintegration of terrorists in exchange of their renunciation to the Jihad. While Hassan Hattab was in favour of this policy believing in his own words that the time of the Jihad had passed,³ Nabil Sahraoui, another central figure in GSPC and Droukdel, rejected any kind of negotiation and reconciliation with the Algerian government, believing that the Jihad had to continue until the fall of the regime.

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²- According to the eulogy given after his death by Abu Abdellah Ahmed in a video of AQIM: 'In lamentations for the Commander Mujhid Shaykh Abu Musab Abdel Wadud' (June 24th, 2020). Available on: <https://jihadology.net/2020/06/18/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-shaykh-abu-abd-ilah-a%e1%b8%a5mad-in-lamentations-for-the-commander-mujahid-shaykh-abu-mu%e1%b9%a3ab-abd-a/>.

³ See Camille Tawill, *Brothers in Arms* (London: Saqi Book, 2011), p. 182-183.

Explaining this kind of stand observed in some jihadi groups, a former Al Qaeda ideologue from the Sahel reflected that *why stop, the prophet was defeated in Uhud, It did not prevent him from taking Mecca, a few years later.*⁴

The second split occurred in 2003, shortly after the US invasion of Iraq. Sahraoui and Droukdel had been pushing for the internationalisation of the GSPC and the joining of Al Qaeda since the 9/11 attacks, a position rejected by Hattab who believed the GSPC should remain an Algerian focused insurgency. Under pressure, Hattab was forced to 'resign', and eventually surrendered to the Algerian authorities in 2007. He was replaced by Nabil Sahraoui while Droukdel in effect became number 2 in GSPC. However, while Sahraoui was in favour of 'improved relations' with Al Qaeda, he was not a supporter of full integration.⁵ It was Droukdel, after succeeding Sahraoui killed in 2004, who formally started this process.

Indeed, immediately after ascending the leadership of GSPC, Droukdel accelerated the strategy of rapprochement with Al Qaeda and thus the internationalisation of GSPC. Therefore, and following Al Qaeda recommendations, he sought and successfully managed to unite all the remaining Jihadi insurgencies in Algeria under his banner. This included the Salafist Group for Predication and Djihad (GSPD) and the Protectors of the Salafist Predication (Humat Al Daawa Al Salafiya).⁶ By early 2006, GSPC had become the sole jihadi insurgency still active in the country. He also established links with other Jihadi rebels in North Africa. The Libyan GICL was instrumental in helping Droukdel to get closer to Al Qaeda, given that the Libyans were well integrated into Al Qaeda leadership, and that the GICL historically had good relations with the GSPC ever since it was created by Hattab, since both insurgencies were led by major figures of the Afghan Jihad of the 80's.⁷

Regarding the strategy of internationalisation, the GSPC started from 2005 to send fighters to Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) led then by Abu Mussab Al Zarqawi while also conducting attacks against western interests in Algeria, but also against neighbouring countries especially Tunisia, Mauritania and Mali. Furthermore, from 2004 onward, the GSPC formally expanded into the Sahel where it gradually became a very powerful jihadi insurgency, multiplying attacks there and taking tens of westerns hostages. A business which generated nearly 200 million euros between 2003 and 2012 making it one of the wealthiest jihadi organisations in the world.⁸

However, the mishandling of his rivalry with another major figure of the GSPC in the Sahel, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, threatened the very unity of the organisation. Indeed, in 2004, shortly after the death of Sahraoui, Belmokhtar, as one of the oldest and most prominent figures of the GSPC aspired to become the new leader. However, Droukdel managed to assemble the Majliss Al Shoura of the GSPC before the arrival of Belmokhtar, becoming its emir instead. Ever since then, the rivalry between the two men increased dramatically, and reconciliation never really took place until much later. Droukdel removed Belmokhtar in 2005 from the leadership of the GSPC in the Sahel and replaced him with first an obscure emir from the North a certain

⁴ Interview with a former jihadist, by Djallil Lounnas, Nouakchott Mauritania, November 2011.

⁵ On these events, see, Mathieu Guidere, *Al Qaida a la conquête du Maghreb* (Paris: Edition du Rocher, 2007), p. 70-73.

⁶ See Mohammed Mokkedem, *Al Qaida au Maghreb Islamique: Contrebande au Nom de l'Islam* (Algeria: Casbah, 2010), p. 150-151.

⁷ Interview with a Mauritanian Official, Djallil Lounnas, Nouakchott Mauritania, November 2011.

⁸ Interview with Serge Daniel, Journalist and specialist of Jihadi organisations, Djallil Lounnas, Bamako, Mali (February 2017).

Mohamed Nokia and then Yahia Jouadi, an important leader from the North, which only fuelled the rivalry. Droukdel then sent a certain Nabil Makhloufi who managed for a time to appease the tensions between the two men. However, these events pushed Belmokhtar to become more independent from the central leadership, and mutual vexations only increased over time. The sudden death of Makhloufi in 2011 in a car accident precipitated the ‘rupture’ between the two men and in December 2012, Belmokhtar split from what had then become AQIM and created the Al Murabitoune.⁹

Despite the rivalry with Belmokhtar, Droukdel seemed successful enough for Al Qaeda to accept in September 2006 his allegiance and formal joining of the organisation. In February 2007, the GSPC officially changed its name to AQIM and in April of the same year, conducted a wave of suicide bombings in Algeria, confirming the full integration by adopting Al Qaeda war methods. Over the years, AQIM continued its expansion in the Sahel and took advantage of the Arab spring to further expand its presence to Tunisia where it created a powerful brigade the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade. AQIM also managed to deploy itself in western Libya where it created several camps. Thus, according to a Libyan official, at least 300 Algerians have joined AQIM in Libya over the past few years consolidating the presence of the organisations there.¹⁰ Moreover, in 2017, all the Salafi-jihadi insurgencies of the Sahel, including Al Murabitoun of Belmokhtar with whom Droukdel had managed at last to reconcile, united their banners under a single organisation the GSIM and the leadership of Iyadh Ghali who then pledged his allegiance to Droukdel.

Thus, over the years, Droukdel who managed to survive and evade several military operations against him, wrongly held for dead several times as well, became a central figure, almost a mythical one, of Jihadism not just in Algeria, but of global level as well. This status was further increased by the death over the years of most the preeminent North African Jihadi leaders such as Yahia Abu Humam and Abu Iyadh Al Tunisi many of whom were close associates and in many cases friends of Droukdel, making him certainly the last North African major jihadi leader.

The impact of Droukdel’s death on AQIM in Algeria-Tunisia

At the time of Droukdel’s death, AQIM in Algeria was considered marginalised and by some even ‘a quasi-extinguished insurgency’ with the exception of a few pockets here and there. Thus, the question is whether his death signs the operational end of AQIM in Algeria or a reconfiguration of the terrorist group? To answer this, we first need to conduct a review of what remains of this organisation in Algeria and by extension in Tunisia.

Estimating the strength of AQIM is a challenging exercise, given that since 2012, it has opened several ‘new fronts’ for the Algerian fighters, such as in Tunisia, Iraq-Syria and the Sahel. The unexpected happening of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and the crisis in northern Mali, acted as magnets for the terrorists who understood that it was no longer possible to contest power or even to obtain the support of the local population in Algeria and preferred to migrate to Northern Mali. This, in turn, threatened the very survival of what remained of AQIM as scattered groups in Northern Algeria, reducing their recruitment capabilities to almost ‘nil’ and complicated their

⁹ Interview with several Mauritanian officials, Djallil Lounnas, in Nouakchott, Mauritania (November 2011 and August 2014).

¹⁰ Discussion with a Libyan official, Djallil Lounnas Tunis, Tunisia (2019).

logistics. Thus, and according to experts and sources, AQIM's fighting force ranges from 200 to 700 men, including fighters and logistical groups.¹¹

By referring to the age and identity of the terrorists who have been either killed or captured in the last ten years, it is possible to determine the following elements: in Northern Algeria, the average age of the terrorists is 45 years while in the *maquis* coexist two distinct generations of diehard jihadists: the ones who joined the insurgency between 1993 and 1998 and the one who joined between 2001 and 2006. This indicates a major problem for AQIM ability to absorb its losses as the youth do not join it anymore. On the other hand, in southern Algeria, the situation is radically different. Based on the data available from jihadi who surrendered or who were captured by the Algerian authorities,¹² the average in the terrorist groups is 35 that is much younger than in the North and whose motivations are directly linked to the situation in the Sahel. More specifically, these men joined the Azawad freedom movement of the Tuaregs in North Mali between 2011-2012 and later on the jihadi insurgencies in the Sahel.¹³ This second figure confirms that AQIM is facing a major crisis of recruitment as those who joined jihadi groups in the south did it mostly for other reasons than adhering to AQIM creed and which could be fatal to the organisation.

Thus, in northern Algeria, AQIM consists of three *Jound* (armies), each consisting of three *Katibas*, i.e. brigades themselves broken down into three to four phalanxes or *Saraiya* sections, a section is generally composed of six to twelve fighters. One should note that AQIM was very much weakened due to the attempt of the Islamic State (IS) to deploy itself in Algeria, and thus many of AQIM fighters migrated to IS groups between 2014 and 2016. However, Algerian authorities reacted swiftly and managed by 2016 to suppress and prevent any deployment of IS groups. This eliminated a potential competition but did not lead to re-strengthening of AQIM. In fact, it is the opposite that happened as AQIM suffered massive losses after the major military operations conducted by the Algerian army between 2013 and 2018 which killed hundreds of its fighters while many other were captured or forced to surrender.

Currently, the few remaining AQIM *Katibas* are struggling to bring together more than fifty fighters. In fact, and by all accounts, the most powerful of these remaining *Katiba* is AQIM's supreme Emir praetorian guard, the so-called *Al Katiba al-Khadraa (Green Brigade)* composed of about fifty men. However, AQIM still benefits from a logistical network composed of hundreds of men spread all over the country, which in turn facilitates the movement of these remaining groups. Finally, AQIM still has a limited number of fighters who keep moving back and forth between Southern Algeria and Northern Mali-Niger in addition to those in Northern Algeria. Thus, under extreme pressure, Droukdel who had fought for a long time in the *maquis* of Sid Ali Bounab near Algiers and then in Kabylia, where he remained for years, withdrew in 2015-2016 to the Algerian-Tunisian borders, around the cities of Tbessa-Khenchla where he is likely to have remained until recently.

Thus, while he remained the head of AQIM, he was leading a near collapsed insurgency. In 2017 in an interview he gave to the *Al Qaida Inspire* magazine, he explained this situation and the difficulties that AQIM was facing in Algeria and blamed the decline in recruitments on the black decade of the 1990 and the civil strife during this period. For him: *that particular phase ... was very dark and painful in its own right, and also because of the negative imprints it left*

¹¹ According to the Algerian security services estimations, for each fighter, three men of support group are needed to support him. Thus, the estimates are of around 200 fighters in addition to 500 members of support groups.

¹² El Djeich Magazine, bilan de la lute anti-terroriste December 2018.

¹³ Ibid.

*on the innocent victims of the crimes committed by the despotic regime or the deviant extremist remnants of [GIA.]. In the same interview, he further explained that ... the Algerian front, which has been bogged down by a long-drawn war ... suffers from a rarity – and at times almost complete absence – of those willing to support and assist, whether internally or externally. So, this has had its impact (in Algeria) ..., confirming the extreme weakness of his organisation.*¹⁴

Indeed, during Droukdel's lifetime, and as Geoff Porter puts it,¹⁵ AQIM in Algeria had become an 'old, sick man.' However, AQIM core leadership and fighters were unwilling to abandon Algeria and to move elsewhere. For Porter, *one possible explanation is that Algeria was the birthplace of both national Jihad in the Maghreb and the transnational Jihad associated first with al-Qaida and then later the Islamic State.*¹⁶ Furthermore, and as Porter explained, Algeria is a central part of AQIM's origins story, and abandoning Algeria would mean acknowledging its total defeat. Finally, he also argues that *jihadi groups are at their very core nostalgic, pining for a time that they imagine to once have been: the very notion of Salafi Jihad is to return to the past or to recreate the past in the present. Arguably, AQIM is nostalgic for Algeria, for when the group was predominantly Arab, for when the group operated in its members' homeland, for when the group was vibrant and feared.*¹⁷ However, many believed then that as AQIM was not able to seize power, it could have turned Algeria to a target of choice for spectacular attacks which could attract more international media coverage than those conducted in the of Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, for Porter, *were AQIM to return to Algeria and be able to carry out a significant attack, however, its reputation as a force to be reckoned with would be restored.*¹⁸

In this context, a major risk for the survival of AQIM in Algeria would be its definitive demise in the context of the death of its founding and charismatic leader, and thus the temptation for the remaining fighters to answer calls from the Algerian government to negotiate and surrender. Indeed, the Algerian authorities have kept the measures of the National Reconciliation in place which offer generous terms including amnesty in favour of terrorists who opt for surrender. The lack of effective leadership to succeed to him could thus accelerate this process of disintegration of the organisation in Algeria. Another seemingly possible outcome of Droukdel's death could be a total abandonment of Algeria as a territory of conquest by AQIM, by its last remaining fighters, and a shift towards the Sahel where the ongoing jihadi insurgency is seemingly unstoppable and thus could be perceived as a 'landing spot' where victory is achievable.

The absence of both an official announcement for a replacement of Droukdel over forty days after his death and, of condolence from the head of GSIM, Iyadh Ghali point out to a very complicated succession and a possible power struggle. Already on the verge of collapse in Algeria and rolled back in Tunisia, under the relentless pressure from both the Algerian and Tunisian security services, AQIM very survival and future are now at stake. This, in turn, posits a major challenge of Al Qaeda central command and the need to keep AQIM alive at all cost. One option for Al Qaeda of doing this would be by reinforcing the links between AQIM remaining groups in Algeria and those in the Sahel, especially through the GSIM. However, this

¹⁴ See 'AQIM leader describes "misery" of Muslims, calls for Algerians to take up militant jihad', *SITE Intelligence Group*, January 26, 2017.

¹⁵ See Geoff D. Porter, 'AQIM Pleads for Relevance in Algeria', *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 3, March 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸-Geoff D. Porter, 'AQIM pleads for relevance in Algeria', *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 3 (March 2019).

seems unlikely due to both an important Algerian military deployment and the efforts of the so-called international Takuba coalition in the Sahel, which prevent any kind of operational junction between the two groups. In fact, compatibility and cohesion and interoperability between the two organisations is nearly impossible given that they are in all truth extremely different, one purely Algerian and the other one almost purely Sahelian. Also, and regardless of this, the vast geographical distance between the two groups makes any junction impossible.

This leads to one of the core issues regarding the consequences of Droukdel death and that is the impact of this event on the GSIM and its leader Iyadh Ghali. Indeed, it raises many questions on the relations between the GSIM and the post-Droukdel AQIM leaderships and more generally the relationship between the two groups.

The impact of the death of Droukdel on the GSIM

In March 2017, and answering to the wishes of Ayman Al Zawahiri, supreme leader of Al Qaeda, all the Jihadi organisations in the Sahel close or affiliated to Al Qaeda merged together and created a new one: the Group to Support Islam and the Muslim (GSIM) more commonly known under its Arabic acronym the JNIM (Jamaat Nusrat Al Islam wal Muslimin). Thus, Ansar Al Dine led by Iyadh Ghali, AQIM in the Sahel led by Yahia Abu Houmam a close associate of Droukdel, Katibet Mecina led by Amadou Kouffa and Al Murabitoune led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the long-time rival of Droukdel before their reconciliation in 2015, came together and created what has become the most powerful jihadi organisation in the Sahel, currently led by Iyadh Ghali. This new insurgency pledged allegiance to Ayman Al Zawahiri, clearly indicating that it belonged to Al Qaeda in a context of the intensification of the competition with IS. However, it also pledged allegiance to Droukdel, thus putting the GSIM under the authority of AQIM.

In theory, this move could have only strengthened the position of Droukdel. Indeed, Belmokhtar had likely been killed in late 2016, although no confirmation on this has ever surfaced, while Yahia Abu Houmam a close associate of Droukdel became *de facto* number 2 in GSIM. Thus, the dramatic expansion of the GSIM in the Sahel should have played in favour of Droukdel. However, this would not be the case. In fact, as we saw, this expansion went in parallel with the dramatic decline of AQIM in both Algeria and Tunisia, especially between 2013 and 2018 when most of the remaining AQIM brigades had been shattered. In the Sahel, while the GSIM grew in power, this was not without losses and the death of many of its leaders, including Abu Hassan Al Ansari and Yahia Abu Humam. In fact, between 2013 and 2018 most of the North African emirs of the Jihadi insurgencies in the Sahel who had been killed, had either been appointed by Droukdel or he had known them personally. By 2019, almost all of these had been replaced by younger Sahelian leaders with whom Droukdel had no relationship which in effect confirmed the ‘Sahelisation’ of the GSIM. Consequently, although he retained nominal command over the GSIM, in effect, he had little authority over the group led by Iyadh Ghali if any.

This became clear as the dialogue initiated by Bamako and accepted by Iyadh Ghali in 2020 contradicted the most basic principles of Droukdel stance on the governments in place whether in Algeria, Tunisia or anywhere else which he deemed as *Tawaghit* (unbelievers) and subordinated to the western countries. Droukdel had always rejected any form of truce or reconciliation, a reminder of the GIA creed - ‘no truce, no dialogue, no reconciliation’ – where he had started his career in 1993. In fact, when rumours surfaced in late 2019 of a possible

dialogue between Ghali and Bamako, Droukdel released an audio recording in which he repeated his stand stating ‘victory or defeat’, an implicit rejection of this process, a stand reprised in the eulogy made for him after his death which further raises the questions whether the two organisations have any future together. Above all, it could be an indication of major divergence between Iyadh Ghali and Droukdel whose relations have been described as rather cordial despite recurrent tensions in 2018 and 2019 when some rumours surfaced of the will of Droukdel to replace Iyadh Ghali with Yahia Abou Houmam.¹⁹ Another element that needs to be considered is that until recently, it was highly unlikely that the two men had ever met in person before which helped maintain somehow courteous relations and allowed Ghali to control the organisation according to his views rather than those of Droukdel. Thus, the possible arrival of Droukdel in late 2018 or early 2019 in the Sahel may have changed the dynamics between the two men.

Indeed, an analysis of his speeches given in the past two years reflects his increased focus on the Sahel region and the little comments he made over the situation in Algeria including on the Hirak tend to confirm this. This is illustrated by the fact that the comments related to the Algerian Hirak were left to Abu Oubeida Al Annabi and other less important figures of AQIM while he rarely made any kind of comments and when he did, it was related to the situation in the Sahel at the exclusion of all the others. To that extent, the hypothesis of Droukdel presence in Southern Algeria - northern Mali from late 2018 and early 2019 seems likely. Several factors could explain this. One of these would be that the maximum pressure exercised on AQIM in Algeria, and the fact that most of his close associates had been killed between 2013 and 2018, left him only with Al Annabi, an individual with whom he historically had bad relations. Indeed, by all accounts, Al Annabi and Droukdel have had difficult relations ever since 2003 and the ousting of Hattab with whom Al Annabi shared the opposition to the strategy of internationalisation of Sahraoui-Droukdel. The differences between the two men only increased over the years and could thus have pushed Droukdel to leave towards Southern Algeria-Northern Mali where by late 2018-2019, Yahia Abou Houmam,²⁰ the number 2 in GSIM and a personal friend of his, one of the few he had left, was by then still alive. Thus, according to a knowledgeable source *the hypothesis of Droukdel, isolated and retreating to Northern Mali to escape the Algerian army is plausible, as many of his predecessors have done that and we still have a lot of Algerians in Northern Mali who indeed fled Algeria.*²¹

However, according to other sources, there is the hypothesis that Droukdel was very sick and may have had cancer by 2018, which limited his ability to lead the organisation and thus explains the rising importance of Al Annabi since 2018. According to those sources, Droukdel may have left for Libya to receive some treatments for his cancer which explains his long silences and his comments on the situation in the Sahel rather than on Algeria.²² Thus, Droukdel’s arrival in southern Algeria would have taken place rather in May 2020 and is unrelated to the situation in Algeria itself nor his difficult relations with Al Annabi, but rather to an effort to end the ongoing conflict between the GSIM and the Islamic State in the Grand Sahara (ISGS)

¹⁹ Discussion with Serge Daniel, journalist at RFI (November 2018).

²⁰ Yahia Abou Houmam was killed in February 2019.

²¹ Discussion of Djallil Lounnas with a person close to those issues, June 2020.

²² Interview of Djallil Lounnas with Akram Khariief, June 2020.

Whatever the reasons and circumstances that surround his arrival in southern Algeria, Iyadh Ghali by all account remained in charge and in full command of his men with little input from Droukdel if any.²³ Also, and while many questions remain on his exact whereabouts and reasons for his presence in Northern Mali, it is unlikely that his death will change anything to the GSIM. Indeed, this group has been operating as an independent Sahelian insurgency ever since it was created, and his death would in all likelihood confirm the operational split between AQIM and the GSIM. Another factor that is likely to precipitate this is the lack of a leader in AQIM with the same aura as Droukdel and capable of commanding the loyalty and imposing his authority, even a nominal one, over the GSIM and Iyadh Ghali who has by now emerged as a major figure of Jihadism on the regional scene and thus unlikely to accept the authority of anyone but his own.

The competition between the GSIM and ISGS vs the death of Droukdel

The creation of the GSIM in 2017 took place in the context of answering to the wishes of Ayman Al Zawahiri who called the various jihadi groups of Salafi–jihadi obedience to unite their ranks but even more in the context of the intensification of the competition between Al Qaeda and IS everywhere and, in this case, the Sahel was no exception. Indeed, since May 2015, IS has deployed itself in the region with the creation of a local affiliate, the ISGS, in fact, a splinter from Al Murabitoune, led by Adnane Abu Walid Al Sahraoui, ex right-hand man of Belmokhtar. While very weak in the early years, the ISGS had grown in power and directly threatened the ‘hegemony’ of Al Qaeda linked organisations in the Sahel. Thus, when the GSIM was created, Iyadh Ghali announced, unsurprisingly, that the organisation pledged allegiance to both Al Zawahiri and Droukdel however, he also announced that it pledged allegiance to Haibatullah Akhundzada, leader of the Taliban and dubbed as Amir Al Muminimns (Commander of the Faithful) a title recognised by the GSIM thus a direct response to Al Baghdadi and to the ISGS proclamation of the caliphate, rejected by Al Qaeda.²⁴

However, and while the tensions and rivalry grew over the years between the GSIM and the ISGS, and up to late 2019, no major confrontation had ever taken place between them. In fact, in early 2018 there were even negotiations between the two for a possible rapprochement or even a merger. Thus, a certain Amar, spokesman for the ISGS declared that *Our brother Iyad Ag Ghali and the other mujahedeen defend like us Islam. [...] To defend Islam we give help to each other and will continue to do so.*²⁵ Several rumours emerged in early 2018 about meetings between Sahraoui and Iyadh Ghali and their associates to formalise this rapprochement.²⁶ Eventually and while the two never merged, however, patterns of cooperation between them emerged with several attacks being committed together. The fact that ideologically, the two organisations were not dissimilar in spite of their belonging to otherwise intensely rival organisations which obeyed to two different radical schools of thoughts (Salafism jihadism vs Takfirims) and that they operated geographically away from each other helped to maintain a certain peace between them. Indeed, the GSIM operated essentially in central/ Western Mali in

²³ Discussion of Djallil Lounnas with a person close to those issues, June 2020.

²⁴ Interview of Serge Daniel by Djallil Lounnas in Bamako, Mali (February 2017).

²⁵ See AFP, ‘Union des jihadistes contre la force du G5 Sahel, selon un groupe se réclamant de l’EI’, in *L’Orient-Le Jour*, 13 January 2018, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1094189>

²⁶ See ‘Sahel: Iyad Ag Ghaly tente-t-il un rapprochement avec Abou Walid al-Sahraoui ?’ *Jeune Afrique* (March 18, 2018).

addition to the south-west of the Sahel, while the ISGS operated in the border areas between Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso

Things changed by late 2019 when the ISGS and GSIM started trading blows in central Mali. Indeed, ISGS had been growing in strength and influence, feeling secure enough to expand to central Mali, and thus came directly into competition with Katibet Mecina led by Amadou Kouffa at first and then with the rest of the GSIM. The early fighting was very localised and about both territorial control and money. Only local fighters were involved rather than the whole organisations as such.²⁷ However, by the start of 2020, this turned into a full-scale war between the two with the divergences turning into political ones. Indeed, by early 2020, while the GSIM agreed to the principle of dialogue with Bamako to end the war in Mali, this was ostensibly rejected by the ISGS which positions had hardened over the years and whose fighters had become relentless and extremely hard, including towards the civilians, at the opposition of those of the GSIM.²⁸ All this was further heightened by attempts of the ISGS to expand its presence in Northern Mali, the stronghold of the GSIM.

In this context, some put forward the hypothesis of Droukdel presence in Northern Mali was linked to this conflict and that he was in fact acting as a mediator. The presence of a member of the ISGS with him at the time of his death could support this hypothesis. Other rumours surfaced also claiming that Droukdel had contacted the Islamic State in Libya (ISL) so that this organisation would pressure the ISGS into a compromise with the GSIM.

Those rumours, however, do not consider several factors and raise further questions about Droukdel's motivations and presence in Northern Mali. Indeed, by June 2020, the GSIM had succeeded in pushing back the ISGS from central and northern Mali and inflicted heavy losses on Al Sahraoui's organisation. While the conflict continues, it is unlikely that the GSIM, victorious needs any mediation. Also, none of the declarations and speeches of the GSIM leaders nor its middlemen indicate any such need/requirement for mediation. Furthermore, Droukdel, who had little personal contacts if any with the GSIM leaders, is even less likely to have known anyone from the ISGS thus any mediation on his part would have been very difficult. The fact he would have resorted to the ISL for this, an organisation with which AQIM and other Al Qaeda affiliates in Libya had a history of extremely violent confrontations seems even less likely. This lead, in turn, again to question the relationship between Droukdel and Ghali as the presence of an ISGS man with Droukdel again does point at the existence of some contacts. As one put it, *the circumstances of Droukdel death seem to indicate that a meeting was to take place, possibly a follow-up contact with the ISGS. But in this case, again the question remains, where is Iyadh? That's the key question.*

In any case, the death of Droukdel is unlikely to change anything as he had by 2020 little if any operational control over the GSIM. In fact, the two insurgencies (GSIM and ISGS) have followed their own patterns of interaction ever since their creation and Droukdel never interfered one way or the other in these. His death is thus unlikely to weaken the GSIM stance towards ISGS nor to affect the structure of their relations.

²⁷ Interview with a well-informed source by Djallil Lounnas, May 2020.

²⁸ Discussion by Djallil Lounnas with the head of an NGO operating in Northern Mali, April 2020.

Possible scenarios for the future of the succession

Over 40 days after his death, no successor has been yet designated and thus the future of the organisation which by now is threatened strongly depends on his successor. In that context, three likely scenarios are likely to emerge

Scenario 1: AQIM appoints an Algerian leader, its oldest veteran at the highest rank. In this case, the shortlist will include Youcef al-Annabi and Hassan al-Boulaidi, both of whom are members of Madjiliss Echoura (command counsel) and both have sufficient seniority in the Jihad to claim the position. None of them has a direct relationship with the wars abroad, except perhaps Tunisia or to a lesser extent Libya. The fact that none of them can claim any kind of ascendancy over the GSIM could provoke a split with AQIM, but not automatically. It would depend on how the new AQIM leader interacts with Iyadh. Thus, a possibility would be that Iyad Ag-Ghali, will not be bothered by such distant guardianship while he is waging two wars, one against the international coalition in the Sahel and the other against the ISGS. In this case, the GSIM could keep a symbolic relationship with AQIM in Algeria to benefit from the advantages of belonging to the international network and as a bet on the future in case of a regional reorganisation of Jihadi groups. Indeed, the intensification of the fight against the Islamic State could require a tightening of the GSIM -AQIM alliance. It is possible to foresee in the future the emergence of a front line between IS and Al Qaeda in Africa, going from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and towards the Atlantic Ocean, and to face this, they will need manpower and cohesion.

On the other hand, the succession could lead to split as the other AQIM affiliates would refuse to pledge allegiance to the new leader, especially if he attempts to effectively exercise any kind of leadership. This split, if it takes place, could however severely affect the Tunisian franchise of AQIM from its central command in Algeria even if the organic links on both sides of the border are still strong. On the other hand, in this case as well, Iyadh Ghali could refuse to recognise the AQIM leadership and the GSIM will in effect, make official a situation that already exists on the ground and split from AQIM and become an Al Qaeda affiliated organisations in its own right.

In this case, AQIM would regroup the remains of its fighters in Algeria which could sign at some point its disappearance or, possibly push its new leader into dialogue with the Algerian authorities. The second scenario is possible in the sense that a lack of strong leadership and an extremely weakened almost marginalised AQIM could push some of its fighters to leave Algeria for other hotspots of the Jihad either in Libya or the Sahel or even to discreetly return to normal civilian life as it has been observed in some case. In this context, a near totally collapsed AQIM leadership could be convinced to lay down its weapons and sign the disappearance of the organisation on the medium-long term. This possibility cannot be discarded as over 204 terrorists have surrendered in the past three years to Algerian authorities.

Scenario 2: AQIM appoints a non-Algerian emir, Iyad Ag-Ghali, or Abderrahmane Talha al-Azawadi. This would lead to a major shift of focus on the part of this new leader, and in all likelihood the abandonment of Algeria as a focal point of the Jihad as it is too distant from him. As this Sahelian leader would not know anyone there nor the country he would be incapable of exercising any authority there. This will either cause an absence of strategy and command on an already weakened front or worse, have poorly executed or poorly given orders.

This could, in turn, lead to the opening of negotiations with the Algerian authorities for a conditional surrender of the remainder of AQIM fighters in Algeria or their fleeing to other

countries like Tunisia or Libya. In this case, Al Azawadi or Iyadh Ghali would benefit from the advantages of the Al Qaida 'Franchise', such as an efficient propaganda system, an international logistics network and secure funding without having to bear the costs of the fight in Algeria itself.

Scenario 3: AQIM is definitively absorbed by the GSIM which could create a split inside what remains of the organisation in Algeria and therefore its weakening and eventual collapse. This scenario is improbable in terms of image as it would mean the death of the once powerful Al Qaida Franchise in North Africa, a significant setback for the organisation.

Conclusion

The death of Abdelmalek Droukdel certainly signs the end of an era in North African Jihadism and violence as he was the last remaining leader of the Jihad linked to the Black decade, i.e. the Algerian Civil strife of the 1990's in addition to his 'international stature' acquired over the years. Beyond that, the decline of AQIM marked his own decline as a leader of Jihadism. The younger generation of Jihadists, including the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq made no references to his death. Among Al Qaeda affiliates, only Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula released a eulogy in the form a communique. Al Qaeda central for its part and Al Zawahiri did not release any audio- or video-recorded statements, instead merely a eulogy in the form of a communique praising Droukdel. Iyadh Ghali for his part has remained silent, and the GSIM did not issue any comment. Whomever the successor will be, AQIM may survive in the short-medium term, but by all accounts, his death could be very much the final blow for this once powerful Al Qaeda affiliate. In terms of operational impact, it seems that Droukdel had little control over AQIM sparse remaining groups in Algeria in addition to the fact that he was only nominally the leader of the GSIM thus neither will it impact the situation there. Aside from being symbolic, his death is unlikely to affect the course of the events