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The unclear fate of Mokhtar Belmokhtar

At the end of November the Wall Street Journal reported the killing of the leader of the al-Murabitoun terrorist organisation, Mokhtar Belmokhtar. Speaking on condition of anonymity, security sources confirmed that the wanted terrorist was targeted in an airstrike in southern Libya carried out by French aircrafts, saying that they were highly confident about the neutralisation of Belmokhtar. The US intelligence reportedly cooperated in the operation, gathering significant intelligence to locate the leader of al-Mourabitoun.

Further details emerged on 16 December, when The New Arab confirmed the killing of Belmokhtar, saying that it was severely injured during an airstrike in Gardah (near Sabha, Libya) that killed one of its closest associate, Abu Tahla al-Libi, responsible for the recruitment of foreign fighters heading to fight in Syria. Belmokhtar was allegedly in the area to negotiate arms deals funded in part by the ransom obtained from the kidnapping of two Italians and one Canadian abducted in Ghat on 19 September and released on 4 November. Earlier reports said that local authorities blamed the kidnapping on local criminals.

According to this report, Belmokhtar died of his injuries and was buried near Obari. However, French and US official sources refused to confirm the news, probably waiting for further confirmation. Indeed, it was not the first time that Belmokhtar was considered dead. The most recent attempt to eliminate him before November 2016 was in June 2015 when Belmokhtar's convoy was targeted by a US airstrike in Ajdabiya, Libya. Despite earlier reports seemed to confirm his death, Belmokhtar resurfaced months later, further confirming his nickname ('the uncathcable') and raising suspicions about the real capabilities of intelligence agencies in carrying out effective counterterrorism operations in the Maghreb and Sahel areas.

An Algerian national, Belmokhtar was among the Algerian foreign fighters who, during the 80s went to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. After his return in Algeria and the start of the civil war, he was part of the Islamist armed groups that fought against the Algerian military during the black decade. First a member of the Group Islamique Armée (GIA), he became member of the Groupe salafite pour la predication et le combat (GSPC) and later a senior leader of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the local branch of al-Qaeda in the region born from the ashes of the GSPC.

The organisation rose in prominence adopting an elaborate strategy, relying on the kidnapping of foreign nationals in the area (in particular from Western countries) and taking advantage of the smuggling activities along the porous borders of the region, controlled by relevant criminal rings and gangs. However, the Arab Spring in 2011 acted as a springboard for AQIM. Instability in Libya and later in Mali created the premises for the strengthening of the organisation, which took advantage of weakened or failing States.

Despite all these advantages, two factors undermined AQIM's leadership in the jihadist ranks: internal rivalries and the emergence of the Islamic State group, also known as Daesh. Personal rivalries between Belmokhtar and the leader of AQIM Abdelmalek Droukdel caused a split inside AQIM. Belmokhtar formed its own group in 2012, Les Signataires pour le sang, and moved to Mali, where he eventually merged his organisation with the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique occidentale (MUJAO). The new group was dubbed al-Mourabitoun, soon famous for the attack against the Tigentourine gas plant in In Amenas, where in January 2013 militants stormed the facility taking hostages and killing at least 37 workers.

Al-Mourabitoun itself suffered an internal division in 2015, when a senior commander of the group Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged allegiance to Daesh. Sahrawi's statement was rejected by Belmokhtar who confirmed his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri and, later that year, returned to be an integral part of AQIM, claiming attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast.

It is likely that the reconciliation between Droukdel and Belmokhtar was forced not only by the increasing expansionism of the Islamic State in the area, but also by the weakness of both leaders. The pressure of the Algerian army allegedly forced Droukdel to move to Tunisia in October 2016, when there were reports of a meeting between Droukdel and Belmokhtar in Libya to reconcile. The merge could be useful to both groups to counter the penetration of Daesh in the area, but the unclear fate of Belmokhtar cast a shadow on AQIM/al-Mourabitoun's future perspectives.

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