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Algeria's pivotal role in countering jihadist groups in North Africa

On 11th October press sources suggested that a terrorist group could be behind the kidnappings of three expatriates in Ghat, Libya. Bruno Cacace, Danilo Calonego and Frank Poccia were abducted on 19th September on the road between Ghat and Tahal. The three were employees of the Italian construction company CON.I.COS, which was awarded several maintenance and building contracts in Ghat. At first, local authorities denied any involvement of terrorist groups and said that the perpetrators are members of a well-known outlaw kidnap group active in the area.

However, after few days, concerns emerged that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) could have been responsible for the kidnapping. Following the fall of the regime of Mu'ammarr Gadhafi, southern Libya became a safe haven for several terrorist organisations, which took advantage of the increasing political instability of the country to infiltrate the Libyan territory, in order to regroup and stage attacks in the region. A perfect example of this strategy was the attack against In Amenas, in Algeria. On 13 January 2013 militants of the al-Mourabitoun terrorist group attacked the Tigentourine gas facility, taking hostages at the local plant. At least 40 staff, many of them foreigners, and 29 attackers died during the following siege by the Algerian security forces.

The attack at Tigentourine was organised by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, leader of the al-Mourabitoun terrorist group. Also known as 'Mr. Marlboro' for its smuggling activities in the region, Belmokhtar was part of AQIM until 2012, when a rift with the leader of AQIM Abdelmalek Droukdel emerged. However, on 20 November 2015 al-Mourabitoun claimed the terrorist attack against the Radisson Blue Hotel in Bamako and it also confirmed it was re-joining AQIM. The move was clearly forced by the expansion of the Islamic State terrorist organisation in the area. In May 2015 the leader of the Saharan

branch of al-Mourabitoun Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Days later Belmokhtar rejected Sahraoui's pledge of allegiance, confirming a split inside the organisation.

The gravitational force exerted by the Islamic State on the jihadist galaxy in North Africa is leading to a complex realignment of alliances. At the end of October the Islamic State accepted Sahraoui's pledge of allegiance, confirming that al-Mourabitoun (or, at least, a faction of it) is now part of the organisation. ISIS' expansion and the increasing pressure of security forces forced the reconciliation or, at least, a marriage of convenience between al-Mourabitoun and AQIM. In this context, it is noteworthy that after recent counterterrorism operations in eastern Algeria, Algerian security sources confirmed that Droukdel fled the country and is now based in Tunisia. Furthermore, rumours of a meeting between Droukdel and Belmokhtar in Libya emerged. These developments raised concerns in Algeria, given the fact that both terrorists are of Algerian nationality and are focused on expanding terrorist activities inside their home country.

Apart from the rivalry between the Islamic State, AQIM and al-Mourabitoun (which could lead to an increasing terrorist activity in the region in terms of attacks, kidnappings, etc.), Algerian authorities are worried about the proliferation of minor groups, which act autonomously and are based near the Algerian borders. One of these groups was blamed for the kidnapping of the three expatriates in Ghat. According to Algerian security sources, the group is led by Abdellah Belakhal. An Algerian national, Belakhal is also considered responsible for the failed terrorist attack against the Krechba gas field last 18 March. On the occasion, mortar shells were fired against the facility, without causing casualties or damages. Algerian authorities believe that Belakhal facilitated the attack, mainly organised by the Katiba al-Fourkane, a group based in Mali and affiliated to AQMI.

Citing Algerian security officers, press sources later revealed that the kidnapers of the three expatriates in Ghat asked for a €4 million ransom to release the hostages. Due to the strict links between Algerian authorities and local tribes of touaregs and tebus on both sides of the borders, it is likely that the Italian government relies on Algiers for locating the hostages and securing their liberation. This strict cooperation confirms Algeria's pivotal role in countering terrorism in the region, given its long-term experience in fighting terrorist groups and the perfect knowledge of the different dossiers.

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