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Reports

Al-Qaeda and its allies in the Sahel and the Sahara



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The arrival of the first militants of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which would later be renamed Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, at the beginning of the second half of 2003 was the starting point of the wave of jihadist Salafist penetration of the Azwad region of northern Mali. Among those at the forefront of the new arrivals to the region were two eminent leading figures of the organization, Ammar Alsaifi also known as 'Abdul Razzaq El Para' and 'Mokhtar Balmokhtar' also known as 'Khaled Abu Abbas' (who also holds the more commonly used nom du guerre 'Bal'ur'). The two leaders rose to prominence after they kidnapped thirty-four western hostages from the Algerian desert. After this operation, El Para left the north of Mali to carry out an exploratory expedition in the Great Sahara, seeking a safer base of operations and an easier life. During his travels he and a group of his fighters were captured by the rebel 'Movement for Justice and Democracy in Chad' and were handed over to Algeria through Libyan mediation.

Meanwhile, a little while before the beginning of 2005, Bal'ur (who had become Emir of the ninth region the Sahrawi region) decided to set up camp in the Azwad desert bordering Algeria, Mauritania and Niger. He followed a carrot and stick policy, bestowing gifts to those who supported and kept the peace with him, and striking with all brutality those who were hostile or tried to harm him.

Bal'ur sought to propagate the jihadist Salafist message to both segments of the Azwad society, the Tuareg and the Arabs, as well as to black African communities such as the Songhay who were the recipients of much of Bal'ur's proselytizing efforts. Facilitating Bal'ur's work in this area was the absence of all types of other proselytizing and ideological activity. It had a low level of religiosity and a lack of theological interest among the people, largely due to the difficulty and harshness of desert life. Bal'ur and his supporters spread their jihadist Salafist ideology to the people as the 'true' religion, and his gifts and handouts spread as far as Sufi elders and other spiritual leaders in the area.

Bal'ur pursued a policy of appeasement with the Malian government under whose sovereignty the Azwad region lay at the time. He held back from carrying out operations against the Malian military, except for a few operations carried out in retaliation against military actions from Malian territory against his organization. As such, the cases of friction between him and the Malian military remained limited. Bal'ur also took advantage of the widespread corruption and cronyism within Malian state institutions to build relationships with some of the state's senior officials and officers. He intentionally tried to create connections with the local community through marriage and kinship ties; he himself married into the prominent Arab Barabich tribe, and directed his fighters to marry women from the region to increase his movement's connections and ties within the local populace.⁽¹⁾

Al-Qaeda in Azwad: The Beginnings

Bal'ur set out to establish the foundations for a jihadist Salafist entity, one that would later be known as the Sahara Emirate of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. This part of Al-Qaeda has come to be classified as the part that is 'larger than the whole'. Dozens of Mauritians, Malians, Nigerians, Algerians and people from other nationalities from around the Maghreb and the African continent have flocked to it. The 'Emirate of the Desert' became the base for the organization in Algeria, ensuring the supply of weapons via the black market across Africa and the Great Sahara, and transferring this supply to Algerian territory, in addition to the recruitment and training of militants. The 'Emirate of the Desert' also took on the task of expanding the reach and scope of the organization's activities, turning it from a solely Algerian organization in late 2006 (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) to a regional organization with global reach (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). The Emirate thus carried out operations throughout the region.

The nucleus upon which Bal'ur set up his military structure in the desert was the 'Masked Battalion' (katibat al-mulathamin), a reference to the name by which that region of the Sahara Desert was historically known (bilad al-mulathamin, land of the masked-men). The 'Emirate of the Desert' continued to grow, greatly facilitated by the area's relaxed security situation, away from military and police prosecution. Bal'ur set up his bases, trained his fighters, and held on to his hostages. Indeed, Al-Qaeda members have referred to the Azwad desert in telling ways, including such designations as the 'Land of Glory' the 'Tora Bora of the Islamic Maghreb,' and the 'desert of Islam.'

Bal'ur's relationship with Mauritanian border authorities remained relatively good, and there was no clash between the two sides before the attack on the Lemghayti garrison in June 2005. As far as Mali and Niger were concerned, the relationship between Bal'ur and their authorities could be described as a type of truce, whereby the forces of the two states were not subject to attack except as retaliation, and their armed forces generally did not carry out attacks against Bal'ur and his fighters. At times, there was even a level of cooperation with the officers and administrative personnel of these states; largely as a function of widespread bribery and corruption in the administrative and military organs of those countries.

After more than three years of continuous effort to build the 'Emirate of the Desert,' Bal'ur's relationship with the Emir of Al-Qaeda in Algeria 'Abdul-Malik Dorkdal' also known as Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, was characterized by apathy and occasional tension. Dorkdal saw Bal'ur as working more for himself than for the organization, and so he delegated his friend Abdel-Hamid Abu Zayd to the area, assigning him the task of leading a new military group in the desert under the name of the 'Tariq ibn Ziyad battalion.' Differences between Bal'ur and Abu Zayd grew, and Dorkdal used these differences as a pretext to appoint a new Emir at the helm of the organization in Bal'ur's place, demoting the latter from the rank of Emirate head to that of battalion commander. In late 2007, Dorkdal sent his personal friend, the Al-Qaeda military commander 'Yahia Djouadi,' also known as 'Yahya Abu Ammar,' to the Sahara and appointed him the Emir of the region's Emirs. The new leader proceeded to restructure the Emirate of the Sahara as the numbers recruited into the organization continued to grow. It finally settled into four formations (two battalions and two squadrons), namely: the Masked Battalion; the Tariq ibn Ziyad battalion, the al-Firqah squadron and the al-Ansar squadron. 'Yahia Djouadi,' however, had become party to the internal conflict after his alignment with Abdul Hamid Abu Zayd, and he was removed from his position. The Emirate of the Sahara was assigned its third Emir, 'Nabil Abu Alqamah,' he is thought to have a good relationship with Bal'ur.

The **Masked Battalion** comprised of the veteran militants of the Emirate of the Sahara, and is headed by the previous Emir, Bal'ur, mentioned above. Bal'ur's jihadist credentials began when as a young Algerian born in 1972 in the city of Ghardaia he joined the jihad in Afghanistan - before he had turned twenty. There, he received training in Al-Qaeda and Taliban training camps. He was wounded by a grenade explosion in which he lost the use of one of his eyes at which time he was given the name Bal'ur. His battalion is considered to have been behind the kidnapping of a number of Western hostages, particularly the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to Niger, the Canadian Robert Fowler, and his assistant, former Canadian Ambassador to Gabon, Louis Guay, who were both kidnapped in Niger in December 2008. The battalion also carried out the first of Al-Qaeda's attacks on Mauritanian soil, in June 2005, when Bal'ur personally led dozens of his militants in an attack against the Lemghayti military garrison in the north of the country killing seventeen Mauritanian soldiers and taking quantities of weapons and ammunition. The battalion also claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of two French citizens in Niger in January 2011, later executing them as French Special Forces carried out a military operation to free the hostages. Emir Bal'ur also planned an operation to kidnap three Spanish nationals on the road between the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in Mauritania at the end of November 2009.

Bal'ur went on to establish a nucleus for the organization in Mauritania that was later known as the 'Allah supporters stationed in the lands of Shanquit' group. This group attacked the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott in early February 2008, and before that had carried out an armed robbery operation in which they stole a large amount of money from the port of Nouakchott in October 2007.

The **Tariq ibn Ziyad Battalion** is led by the Algerian, Abdel-Hamid Abu Zayd, whose real name is Abdul Hamid al-Sufi, and is considered one of the 'hawks' of the organization. This battalion is considered to be behind many killings and kidnappings, most prominent of which are the kidnapping of an Austrian couple in the south of Tunisia in February 2008, and the kidnapping in September 2010 of five French nationals, a Togolese and a Malgashi who worked for the French Areva company for whom they were mining for uranium in Niger. Four of these hostages remain in captivity, held by the organization. The Tariq bin Ziyad battalion also carried out an attack on the town of Turin in northern Mauritania, killing 12 soldiers, and has also claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and murder of Briton Adon Dyer in late May 2009 after the British government rejected the demands of the organization.

The **al-Furqan Squadron** is led by the Algerian Jamal Akasha, also known as Yahya Abu al-Hamam. The squadron is mostly made up of Mauritanian and Malian fighters, and operates in the North-West Frontier of Azwad, specifically north of the city of Timbuktu along the Mauritanian border. This squadron is attributed with several operations, notably the kidnapping of an Italian national and his wife, who was from Burkina Faso, from the outskirts of the town of Kubni on the Mauritanian-Malian border in late 2009. The squadron also launched an attack which killed three Mauritanian soldiers in the northern Mauritanian town of al-Ghalawiyah at the end of 2008. The Furqan squadron also confronted the Mauritanian army during its incursion into northern Mali in a clash that involved several battles. Furthermore, the squadron is responsible for the abduction of a Mauritanian gendarme from the centre of the city of Adl Bakr in eastern Mauritania in December 2011. Fighters from this squadron also carried out an assassination operation in which a US citizen was killed in the centre of Nouakchott in July 2009. One member of this squadron carried out a suicide operation targeting the French embassy in Nouakchott in August 2009.

The **al-Ansar Squadron** is led by Abu Abd al-Karim al-Tariqi who is the only non-Algerian to hold the position of Emir, or formation commander, in the organization. His squadron mostly consists of Malian and Nigerian Tuareg. The squadron has carried out several operations in northern Mali and Niger, notably its participation alongside the Tariq ibn Ziyad battalion in the 'Battle of Alwasra' at the beginning of the month of July 2009 against the Malian army and the militias of one of the Arab tribes in Timbuktu. Sources from within the organization say that Abu Abd al-Karim al-Tariqi is behind the killing of the French hostage Michel Germaneau at the end of July 2010 in response to the joint attack by Mauritanian and French forces against one of the organization's bases north of Timbuktu, an attack that resulted in the death of seven of al-Tariqi's men.

It is difficult to know the size of the battalions and squadrons described above, and although estimates put their numbers in the hundreds, there are no accurate figures because of the reservation and secrecy maintained by the organizations' leaders, in addition to their distribution across different parts of the desert. Moreover, the top level fighters move between the different formations. The strategy of the organization involves granting the militants annual vacations, sometimes for several months of the year, which has meant that around a third of the fighters are almost always not in the camps.

Sleeper cells

The leadership of Al-Qaeda in northern Mali has been able to exploit the situation in the region over the past two years to their advantage. They sent dozens of fighters to Libya at the beginning of the Libyan Revolution, but they were quick to refrain from fighting alongside the anti-Gaddafi fighters after NATO's intervention against the Libyan regime.

This position was expressed by the founder of the Emirate of Sahara, Bal'ur, in an interview. The organization, however, did set out to exploit the situation in Libya to smuggle arms and recruit fighters. Observers believe that Al-Qaeda was able to recruit dozens of sleeper cells across Libya, in anticipation of an opportunity to make use of them at the right time, when there will be necessity to call them out of hiding. The same applies to Tunisia, to which the organization had already sent a group of fighters near the end of 2006 as a vanguard that would seek to recruit fighters and form cells. The Tunisian security apparatus, however, uncovered the group and attacked them, killing all of its members and dealing a severe blow to the organization at the time. The organization, however, took advantage of the disorder in Tunisia over the past year to return to its earlier recruitment activities. This has manifested in clashes between Tunisian security personnel and armed militants that are described as Salafists.

In Mauritania and Morocco, the organization has sought for many years to recruit fighters and establish sleeper cells but security forces have managed to discover and dismantle them. It is believed that there remain some groups that retain their loyalty to the organization and that have managed to remain beyond the grasp of security apparatuses pending the issuance of orders to take some form of action.

The Tawhid and Jihad Group in West Africa: Division followed by reunification

This group first came to the attention of the world in October 2011, when its members carried out an operation in which three Western hostages were kidnapped (two Spaniards and an Italian) from Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf in southern Algeria. The establishment of the Tawhid and Jihad Group in West Africa came after its leader Sultan Ould Baddy, also known as Abu Ali, split from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, after the organisation rejected Ould Baddy as the leader of Al-Qaeda and his demands to create a squadron made up of Arab Azwad, akin to the al-Ansar squadron headed by Abu Abd al-Karim al-Tariqi which is composed of Tuareg fighters. The Tawhid and Jihad Group carried out a suicide attack on a security post in the town of Tamanrasset in southern Algeria in March 2012, killing a number of Algerian security personnel.

Ould Baddy is from the Arab tribe of al-Amhar who are settled in and around the town of Ghawah in Azwad. He was formerly active in the field of smuggling in the Great Sahara, before joining Al-Qaeda. When Ould Baddy announced his split from Al-Qaeda, he was joined by the Mauritanian activist Hamada Ould Mohamed al-Khair, also known as Abu Qaqa. Together they were able to attract dozens of young fighters belonging to the al-Amhar tribe from the ranks of Al-Qaeda. The first few weeks of the split witnessed significant tension between Ould Baddy and his group and Al-Qaeda. This led the head of the Masked Battalion, Bal'ur, to enter into negotiations with them, leading to an agreement to maintain the Tawhid and Jihad Group's autonomy and committed to coordinate with both Al-Qaeda and the Azwad group Ansar al-Din led by the Tuareg leader Iyad Agh Ghali. According to an Al-Qaeda media official, there is agreement between the groups of a uniformed direction and vision, and that the organizational frameworks will not prevent joint action to achieve the higher goals of jihadist groups in the Sahara.

In the negotiations between the Tawhid and Jihad Group in West Africa, Al-Qaeda and the Ansar al-Din group, the organizations agreed upon a distribution of tasks between them within the framework of waging a united war effort to take control over the major towns and cities of the Azwad region. The responsibility of taking control of the town of Ghawah fell to the Tawhid and Jihad Group, given that most of its leaders and fighters are from that town. The fighters arrived in the city at the end of March 2012, alongside fighters from the secular-oriented National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad. Both groups have since shared control of the town.

Ansar al-Din, or the Taliban of Azwad

Former leader of the Tuareg rebels Iyad Agh Ghali', known as Abou El Fadl, founded the Ansar al-Din Group. Iyad Agh Ghali is a traditional leader from the Tuareg al-Fughas tribes. His current deputy at the helm of the group, Sheikh Osa, fought alongside him in the early 1980s against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon, among the dozens of Arab and Tuareg fighters sent by the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Iyad Ghali moved on to lead the 'Popular Front for the Liberation of Azwad' who were active in the early 1990s. After the Algerian-sponsored signing of the peace agreement with the government of Mali in 1992, Ghali joined the Malian government, and helped to subdue remaining rebel movements that opposed the peace agreement, after which he was appointed to the post of Consul General of Mali in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

During the ten years from 2000, Ghali belonged to the Jama'at al-Da'wa wa al-Tabligh, which is active across the globe in proselytizing activities. However, this group refrains from involvement in politics and matters of difference and division among the adherents of Islam. The Tuareg leader's Tablighi inclinations were only a bridge which he crossed over into jihadist Salafist ideology.

Iyad Ghali waited until what he considered to be the right time to make his move; the departure of the Gaddafi regime in Libya. This regime had formed an obstacle in the face of attempts by the Tuareg to rebel against the Malian government. At this point, Ghali returned to Azwad, where he set up his headquarters in the Oghergar mountains in the far north of Azwad. There he gathered hundreds of Tuareg fighters and large quantities of weapons and ammunition, announcing the formation of a movement called 'Ansar al-Din.' According to its leader, the choice of the movement's name, which means 'supporters of the religion', was not haphazard, but took careful consultation and consideration. It was decided to call the movement 'Ansar al-Din' because its primary goal is to establish Islamic law (shari'a), restore respect for the religion, and create an Islamic society in accordance with the vision of jihadist Salafist ideology. The objectives of the movement are not limited to the establishment of Islamic law in Azwad on its own, but extend to the rest of the territory of Mali, and whatever can come under the movement's control in the future. Due to its jihadist ideology, the movement does not believe in boundaries or borders between Islamic peoples.

After its establishment in November 2011, the Ansar al-Din group coordinated directly with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, similar to the coordination between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Ansar al-Din was also able to bring the Tawhid and Jihad Group in West Africa - that had recently split from Al-Qaeda - into a similar coordination agreement. It was this coordination to which Iyad Ghali referred in his first speech to the people of Timbuktu on 4 April 2012, after his forces took control of the city. In that speech he stated that "... your brothers from the mujahideen and the Ansar al-Din organization have come together and vowed to uphold what is right, to implement the religion, to lift injustice off of the oppressed, to reunify the Muslims, and to unite their efforts around Tawhid [the monotheistic message], there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah."

Iyad Ghali has outlined the broad strokes of his movement's political programme and the strategy with which it shall achieve its goals. According to Ghali, these include proselytizing with wisdom, adding that one of the greatest means with which the movement will seek to achieve its objectives is the "Jihad against those who abstain from the shari'a, fighting them until there is no dissention and sedition, and the religion belongs to no one but God."

The Ansar al-Din organization's armed operations in Azwad began with an attack on the city of Oghok west of Kidal in late January 2012, in which the group seized control of a military base there. The group's fighters were able break into the Amshesh military base near the city of Tsalit, from which they took large quantities of weapons and military vehicles. Iyad Ghali used well the military experience he had acquired from his previous rounds of rebellion in the region. His group's operations were directed at, and focused on, military bases and strategic locations, leaving the cities and villages to the fighters of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad (the movement that unilaterally declared the independence of the Azwad region). In the wake of the collapse of the

Malian army as a result of the military coup that toppled the Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré on 22 March 2012, Iyad Ghali was quick to develop a plan with his allies in Al-Qaeda and the Tawhid and Jihad movement to take control of the major Azwad cities. Ghali's group took it upon itself to besiege and storm the city of Kidal, exploiting the tribal dimension of the city, inhabited mostly by people from the al-Afoghas tribe to which most of Ghali's fighters also belonged. Ghali's allies in the Tawhid and Jihad movement in West Africa headed to the city of Ghawah, as most of that movement's fighters and leaders come from that city, and were able to take control of most parts of the city, including the military base, which was also the headquarters of the Malian army in the north of the country. As for the historic city of Timbuktu, Iyad Ghali took advantage of the negotiations that were taking place between the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad and fighters belonging to the militias of the city's Arab tribes to carry out a surprise attack with a large military force led by a legion from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb that, in turn, was led by the Emir of the al-Furqan squadron, Yahy Abu al-Hammam. Hammam was later rewarded for 'liberating' the city with his appointment as its governor.

Open Possibilities

In the face of the development of events in the region, the states of the Sahel and the Sahara face a difficult challenge as they choose between a series of options, all of which will prove costly:

- The first option is that the states in the region may choose to coordinate their efforts to undermine the jihadist Salafist project in Azwad and return the area to Malian sovereignty through military intervention. This is the preferred option for the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). This will pit these states against the coordination coalition of all the armed groups in Azwad, including the secular National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad. As such, what this option entails is the eruption of armed conflict in the region, sparks from which can easily fly to the boundaries of the Azwad region and beyond.
- The second option arises with the possibility that the states of the region fail to reach a united decision for concerted military intervention in northern Mali. In such a scenario, countries such as Mauritania and Niger may act on their own initiative to undertake adventurous intervention in the region. In this scenario, these states will have to be prepared to pay a heavy price for their actions, as their military intervention will bring on the enmity of all of the armed groups in the region, at a time in which the armies of these countries, and the security of their regimes, suffer a fragility that makes them unable to withstand successive, painful blows.
- The third option is the formation of militias from the Azwad region itself to confront the armed groups. This option is indeed on the table, especially since the most prominent of Mali's military commanders in Azwad, Alhaji Agh Ghamo and Abdel-Rahman Ould Amido, continue to maintain their loyalty to Bamako and to oppose the armed groups' control of the region. Furthermore, each of these two commanders continues to enjoy the loyalty of dozens, maybe hundreds, of their soldiers and both are members of Tuareg and Arab Azwad tribes.

Also important to note is that dozens of Arab fighters have gathered at the border between Mauritania and the Azwad. These fighters are led by a former officer in the Malian army, Sidi Mohamed Busharwaitah, and have declared their readiness to fight Al-Qaeda and the other insurgents. Many are worried that Bamako and neighbouring countries may back these militias, potentially sparking a civil war in Azwad, the consequences from which these state sponsors in the Sahel and Sahara may not be able to insulate their respective states. Indeed, such a civil war could easily take on an ethnic

character given that it may deepen ethnic sensitivities between the different population groups in Azwad.

- The fourth option is for the states of the region to leave these armed movements to their own devices. This is very unlikely because of the states' shared fears of the birth of a jihadist Salafist entity at their doorstep. An entity led by people who only recently carried out operations in their countries and have abducted Western nationals, a number of whom continue to be held hostage by these same organizations. The area could easily become a haven for those wanted for terrorist activities from around the world and those who have committed to hostility against the West and its allied regimes in the Muslim world.

Other commentators have posed another possibility, one in which France and the United States opt to carry out air strikes, in a strategy similar to that adopted by the US in the Waziristan region of Pakistan.

A number of observers, however, believe that in entering in the alliance with the Ansar al-Din and the Tawhid and Jihad Movement, and in taking on the responsibility of administering towns and cities, Al-Qaeda is heading for a strategic revision of its jihadist orientation, a revision that will be imposed upon it by new realities. These realities have seen the transformation of the organization from several groups of insurgents at the tops of mountains and in the depths of the desert, to groups responsible for administration of entire towns and cities populated by tens of thousands of people. In seeking to establish themselves as viable and desirable alternative to their predecessors and challengers, it will be imperative for Al-Qaeda to focus their efforts on securing such things as the supply of food, healthcare and other basic services. Many believe that these new responsibilities pose a real challenge to Al-Qaeda and its allies, imposing upon them a degree of pragmatism and realism that may push them to cease hostile activities against neighbouring countries as they work to live up to their new responsibilities. This is in addition to what is known about the leader of the Ansar al-Din movement, Iyad Agh Ghali, now a high ranking Salafist official in the Azwad region whose reputation is one of pragmatism and deeply imbricated relationships throughout the region. This may lead him to call upon Al-Qaeda and al-Jihad wa al-Tawhid to develop their alliance that offers sanctuary to their fighters and implements their vision of Islamic law, in return for giving up actions that would alienate neighbouring states, even if just for a while.

Until such time as the states of the region determine their positions and the course of action they will take to deal with new situation in Azwad, all options remain possibilities. These range from external military interventions, to a regional civil war in which France and its allies, particularly Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Algeria, find themselves involved.

Endnote:

(1) To date, there has been no studies on the subject of Jihadist Salafist organizations in the Sahel region that is worthy of mention. Most of the texts to which I have referred—alongside my close observation of developments in this field over the past ten years—for the most part lack accuracy and credibility. This is largely due to the fact that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has, until recently, remained far from the limelight, and has no relationship to journalism and academic scholarship. If such a relationship has existed, it has been one of hostility because of the remnants of the campaign of the Algerian Islamic Fighters Group (from which the Salafist group emerged) against journalists and intellectuals in the 1990s.

*Among the worthwhile texts to which I have referred are two important studies, although they are of a mostly theoretical nature. These are the brief and focused English language study by the former Mauritanian minister of foreign affairs Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou (Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould Mohamedou: *Understanding Al-Qaeda, Changing War and Global Politics, Second Edition, Pluto Press, June 2011*); and the French language book by French journalist originally from Benin, Serge Daniel (*Serge Daniel, Aqmi, l'industrie de l'enlèvement, aux Editions Fayard, 2012*).*

Most information that is available about them is from security reports which, for the most part, contain misleading information. For most of this research and information gathering, I have relied largely on myself, my own research efforts, and what I have been able to gather from militants and leaders from the organization and those who are well acquainted with it, as well as on material that I have gathered for a book that I am preparing on this subject.

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