

# **The In Amenas Gas Facility Attack – An Analysis of the Modus Operandi**

**Dr. Michael Barak**

## Introduction

On January 16, 2013 Salafi jihadist militants connected to Al-Qaeda staged a widespread attack on the Tigantourine gas facility near In Amenas, in the desert region of south-eastern Algeria. During the raid, the attackers took captive about 150 Algerians, and dozens of foreigners. Khalid Abu Abbas, aka Mukhtar Belmukhtar, leader of the organization called “Those who Sign with Blood”<sup>1</sup> – which is affiliated with the jihad organization Al-Mourabitoun, an organization active in the Sahara, and which has pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda – claimed responsibility for the attack. He even announced that it was his intention to conduct negotiations for the release of hostages in exchange for an end to French military activity in northern Mali, and the release of Omar Abd al-Rahman, a radical Islamic preacher, and Afiyya Sidiqi, a Pakistani nuclear scientist. Both were prominent figures imprisoned in the United States, and both had connections to jihad militants. The terror attack lasted for three days, and culminated with the deaths of 23 hostages and 32 terrorists, including Algerians, Mauritians, Malian, Egyptians, and other foreign nationals. Three terrorists were captured alive in an Algerian Army operation.

The terror attack earned worldwide news coverage due to the daring and success of the terrorists in penetrating the well-fortified compound, which held a position of both strategic and economic importance. Despite its ultimate failure, the terror attack earned the organization prestige, and led to heightened concern for the personal safety of foreign employees in the gas and oil facilities throughout the Middle East. On the other hand, the Algerian regime lost face due to the inability of the Algerian intelligence authorities to discover the plans for the attack, and due to the military blunder of failing to conclude the crises in a swift fashion. In addition, if the oil wells had been ignited, the ramifications could have been even more destructive and the Algerian economy would have been severely harmed. That is because the aforementioned gas facility supplies approximately 15% of the total amount of gas exported out of Algeria.

Terror organizations attach great importance to their choice of targets. Choosing a target is based upon a combination of four factors: A) The economic factor – damaging critical infrastructure in the country, such as the gas facility in Algeria, with the goal of weakening the country’s economic power, and thereby destabilizing the country as a whole. B) The deterrence factor – attacking strategic targets and penetrating compounds that are well guarded by the country’s authorities is liable to create a state of anxiety among civilians and the country’s leaders, since their environment is no longer safe, and is susceptible to attack. Creating such awareness is liable to undermine the

---

<sup>1</sup> Established on the eve of France’s invasion of northern Mali in 2013.

faith of the civilian populace in the presiding government, due to its inability to ensure public security. This also leads to political instability. C) The ideological factor: For the most part, selecting a target for attack is a direct manifestation of the terror organization’s ideology. Attacking the gas facility in Algeria conveyed a clear message that the organization was not prepared to accept theft by Westerners of natural resources in Muslim territory. Nor was it willing to accept any cooperation between the Algerian government and the West. D) The competition factor – The audacity of attacking such an important strategic site within a country, and the accompanying media reverberations, serve to boost the organization’s reputation opposite other terror groups, and transforms it into a magnet for terrorists.

With the goal of implanting this attack in the public conscience, the Al-Mourabitoun organization published a forty-page document entitled “Tigantourine: A War against French Agents in Algeria”.<sup>2</sup> The document provides a rare glimpse at the thought processes behind the planning of the attack, and includes an extensive description of the modus operandi, oversights and mistakes that occurred during the attack, and lessons learned about how to prevent such mistakes in future operations carried out by Salafi jihad and other organizations. Mukhtar Belmukhtar, leader of the organization called “Those who Sign with Blood”, wrote the document’s introduction.



The cover of the document

<sup>2</sup> The document was first published in the Mauritanian news agency “Al Alakhbar”: <http://www.alakhbar.info/media/files/%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9%20%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9%201.pdf>. The document only reached jihad forums in April 2015.

## **The Tiganourine Document**

In the document's introduction, Belmukhtar lists the factors that formed the basis for his decision to target and attack the aforementioned gas facility in Algerian territory. According to Belmukhtar, Western companies active in Muslim territory were engaging in ongoing theft and looting of natural resources - specifically gas and oil - from Muslim land. In his opinion, these companies acted as emissaries of the "new colonization" that supports global Zionism, which of late has permitted the massacre of Palestinians. He added that there are Muslim regimes that cooperate with the new colonization forces and rake in political and economic wealth at the expense of the Muslims, and thus betray the Muslim people. In order to illustrate how severe the state of affairs was, Belmukhtar wrote about a Muslim who supported his family by collecting and selling camel dung. He claimed that Algeria's oil wells had made the country rich, but that the Algerian people were being robbed – as the story proved. The traitorous leaders had joined forces with the colonialist lords in stealing Algeria's resources, thereby starving the nation and taking advantage of the civilians for the sake of their own limited interests. Belmukhtar explained that therefore, the attack on the gas facility was in response to the ongoing campaign of theft of natural resources from Muslim land by Western companies, and was specifically an act of revenge for the French military campaign going on in Azawad in northern Mali since January 2013.

In Belmukhtar's opinion, the attack also expressed a renewal or change of tactics of the mujahideen, in terms of the location and timing of its activities. The success of this attack improved the mujahideens' image with regard to their ability to collect intelligence and take action. The failure of the Algerian Army and Intelligence forces to discover the plans for the attack and thereby prevent it were proof of the success of the attack's *opus operandi*.

Belmukhtar related that the plan was to film and document the attack, but that wasn't possible in the end due to the death of the person in charge of communications during the attack. However, two years have passed since the attack, and in order to preserve the positive effect it had, the military branch of the organization decided to publicize details of the attack. This decision was motivated by a desire to share with the Muslim people both positive and negative information about the preparations for the attack, with the ultimate goal of educating the mujahideen with lessons learned from that attack – in order to enable them to better plan future attacks.

Belmukhtar went on to discuss the structure of the document. According to him, the writing style was similar to a military report, in that it focused on and analyzed specific events, and then presented security and military conclusions applying to the mujahideen. He added that in the

analysis of the attack, no mention was made of the political, social, and economic influence it had in shaking up the Algerian regime. Part of the documentation was also based on newspaper articles, which bolstered the images of the perpetrators. Finally, Belmukhtar dedicated the document to the shahids who were killed in Azawad, in northern Mali - as they attempted to uphold shari'a while battling against French invaders and their allies - and to all shahids in general.

### **An Analysis of the Attack**

The analysis begins with the organization's military council clarifying that it considers the Sahara to be a major base of operations for mujahideen activity – one that provides them with a strategic upper hand. However, there are several weak aspects of the Sahara, such as the lack of a wide maneuvering area that would enable efficient defense of the Sahara region, which is not the case in mountainous and forested areas. The topographic makeup of the Sahara is not simple, as there is no vegetation to camouflage the activities of the mujahideen, there is very little water, the temperatures in the region are extremely hot, and there are not many inhabitants. But despite those harsh conditions, the mujahideen were still able to carry out the attack, with the help of modern technological innovations. For example, GPS technology was utilized to make better maps of the area, with the help of radio contact and sending coded messages.

Therefore, the following question arose: “Can the mujahideen demonstrate capabilities of endurance, are they able to carry out maneuvers, will they suffer a small number of casualties in the event that military combat occurs, and will they be able to regroup and engage in military activities as a deterrent force?” The response to these questions was that direct military combat, which characterizes traditional warfare, would be the equivalent of suicide. That is because the enemy had a strong military advantage, particularly in the air, as was demonstrated in the previous war when the French made use of various attack aircraft, satellites, and sophisticated surveillance methods such as night vision and electronic eavesdropping from the air. Therefore, a need arose to find other ways of proving military and technological superiority opposite the enemy, and other ways to achieve goals through confrontation. That is to say, an attempt to achieve equality in the realm of deterrence opposite the enemy, by efficient use of force - what is referred to in military language as “economy of force”. And a minimum investment of force for secondary efforts. According to Belmukhtar, the September 11, 2001 attacks were a clear example of the concept of “economy of force”. A mere 19 jihad fighters were employed to destroy the American symbols of power. Modern technology and sophisticated means of communication made it possible to apply

this principle of warfare and achieve an equilibrium with a minimum of casualties.

According to the organization's military committee, the goal was to stage an attack deep inside enemy territory in order to make direct contact and cause the enemy forces to scatter in all directions. Thus, the mujahideen would be able to gain a foothold in a wide area for political and military maneuvering, and would be able to wage a powerful psychological war that would earn lots of publicity: "First of all, it may be that it will be helpful to change the calculations regarding the enemy. And second, it is possible that this might be manifested on the battle facility." That is because the enemy's policy is to take advantage of its military supremacy and its power of attack, with a goal of achieving a swift resolution in the facility.

According to the military committee, this policy of concentrated combat was the basic component of its general military approach for years, in light of the assumption that there would be unavoidable, general combat, and the need to make comprehensive preparations for such combat. Therefore, "We had to focus on three main factors:

- Surveillance of the enemy's essential positions (economic, political, and military) throughout North Africa.
- Preparation of necessary special means for carrying out these types of missions.
- Increasing the capability and training of the mujahideen for these types of special attacks."

Later in the document, the military committee related that after the conquest of Mali and the start of establishing Islamic order, the mujahideen were forced to cope with dangerous internal and external challenges. The most worrisome challenge was the threat that war would break out, or what was referred to as "military intervention" in the area, by the French-American coalition together with African armies or "mercenaries". This challenge created psychological pressure on the local people and was intended to isolate them from the mujahideen, in addition to the economic closure in the area, though the economy was anyway not very developed. In addition, the French and local Intelligence focused their efforts on penetrating armed groups in the area with national and secular attributes, and dragging them into a war against the mujahideen – as occurred with the "National Front for the Liberation of Azawad". Such pressures increased in the final months before the French invasion, and before French President Hollande's visit to Algeria to gain logistic support for French airplanes in the Algerian airports. "All of this made it necessary for us to put a deterrence plan into effect, unlike anything ever implemented in the past, with humiliating political justification - and which was supposed to be the most successful operation from among

those we had planned.” In conclusion, the military council wrote that the document was written to clarify the practical aspects of the operation and its goals.

### Description of the Operation

1. **General Plan:** Surveillance and gathering intelligence. The significance is that every security or military operation must have a database of the enemy’s essential general goals and interests. “This is our starting point, the basis on which we chose to attack this target with strategic importance for the West and the Algerian regime. Particularly since our estimation was correct – the traitorous Algerian government is one of the supporting pillars of this Crusader War, since it opened its air space as a bridge for that campaign, and offered it logistic and intelligence assistance.

“The chosen target was Tiganourine, where there is a concentration of several essential sites with strategic, economic, and political importance. That area is home to the largest concentration of gas owned by a Western company that is flowing to Algeria.

**“Among the reasons related religious law for choosing this site as a target, is its great distance from the cities and inhabited areas. The gas compound is located in a place empty of residents, and thus it was possible to avoid causing injury or property damage to Muslim civilians during the operation. In addition, we tried to evacuate Algerian employees from the sites during the first hours of the attack, to avoid the army shooting at them.”** [bold in original document]

According to the military council, it was therefore clear that gathering intelligence, building a database of information, and studying that information was of top importance. According to the council, there were two ways of collecting intelligence and conducting surveillance:

- a) Surveillance by obtaining information – collecting information from the internet. Studying the structure of the plant and the companies operating in it, the work methods, the production capabilities, the nationalities of the employees. Use of GOOGLE EARTH to study the site and the geography of the area surrounding it, and to draw a diagram.
- b) Surveillance on the ground, in two ways:  
Method one: An attempt to glean information by entering the site itself, in order to determine its actual size, and what security measures were in place to protect it – such as fortifications, barriers, security cameras, the positions of security guards

inside and outside of the sites, the hours the guards were on duty, etc. In addition, the workstations of Western clerks should be mapped out, and in particular the locations of the executive staff offices, as well as the times they work, and any special security measures implemented for them. All of these efforts were intended to prevent engagement with the approximately thousand Algerian workers.



**A security camera used to monitor the sites**

Method two: Focusing efforts on carrying out the attack at an hour when the largest concentration of Western directors and experts were at the site. This effort was successful in the end. According to the military council, the timing of the attack was set for the time of a meeting between the directors of four international companies, headed by the British Petroleum Company, and the Norwegian Site Oil Company. The number of foreigners who were at the site was about 160.

**Another aspect of surveillance and collecting intelligence** – Surveillance of roads and other routes of passage over land, and using GPS technology, maps, and night binoculars to secure routes for movement and verify important coordinates. This was achieved while focusing on the military deployment routes, points of surveillance, and looking for possible security breaches.

According to the military council, two groups were assigned the task of gathering intelligence – one group gathered intelligence in the facility, and the other group carried out the attack.

**The benefits of this pattern of activity:** “It is necessary to renew the surveillance of the possible points and routes of movement for vehicular traffic – especially before and during an attack. That is in order to minimize the changes that might occur for



better and for worse, and to formulate alternatives in order to prevent any unexpected surprise.”

According to the military council, one of the greatest challenges its people had to cope with during the planning stages was the sandy terrain covered with both hilly areas and guarded oil wells and facilities – conditions that might hinder movement. And the plan was to cross this difficult terrain during the night. During the process of coping with this difficulty, “We recruited four drivers with good driving records in sandy terrain. Plans for moving towards the target were kept top secret, out of the desire to complete the mission successfully.”

2. **Exercises/Training** – In the framework of preparations for the operations, two groups were trained, after their members first took theoretical and practical preparation courses.

**Theoretical training:** Theoretical training for the members of the attack cell mainly dealt with the inherent value of self-sacrifice, and with instructions regarding how to cope with nerve-racking and emotionally tense situations opposite the enemy, in order to avoid the possibility of falling prey to psychological warfare. The focus was on the commanders of the operation, due to the fact that they had been trained to lead the operation in accordance with their desires and experience, which included knowledge gleaned from similar attacks – such as those carried out by Palestinian groups in the previous century, and in particular attacks documented in videos. The footage offered insights regarding the positive and negative aspects of each attack, such as tactics, movement, conducting negotiations, retreating while on the lookout for enemy ploys, and concentrating efforts on incapacitating the enemy with snipers or gas.

**Practical training:** An emphasis was placed on physical and mental fitness, and general combat guidelines, such as coordinating movement and open fire. Methods for using and planting mines and roadside bombs was also covered.



**The training camp for “Those who Sign with Blood”**

## **Preparing and Assembling the Forces**

Weapons amassed for the attack included: two 60 mm mortar shells, 2 RPG rockets, 6 PK machine guns, DShK machine guns, and sniper rifles with a large amount of ammunition and shells. There were also Strela ground-air missiles for use against helicopters. “Our plan was to surprise the helicopters with anti-aircraft ground to air missiles, in order to separate them and at least isolate them from the attack area. With regard to the state of the terrain, the Algerian Army is not emotionally prepared for long-term coping under such conditions, and is not strong in battle without assistance from the air, especially in the Sahara. That estimation is based upon experience garnered over a long period of time during battle against the army.”

According to the military council, while the Algerian Army had a lot of soldiers and sophisticated weapons, the mujahideen had proved that they were resilient and were able to conduct a prolonged war of nerves.

The military council went on to say, “What surprised us, after we learned lessons from the attack, was that the operation commander didn’t take any DShK machine gun or ground to air missiles with him. That was very strange, especially since the instructions in the plan emphasized the need to use such weapons during the operation. In our opinion that was one of the most destructive mistakes made by the attack leaders.” The army itself was aided by helicopters, and if the missiles mentioned above were used in the attack, they could have caused a totally different outcome. In addition, the failure to bring the missiles was the main cause of the deaths of most of the members of Abu al-Baraa’s group of fighters. Additional equipment used by participants in the operation included wireless communication radios, satellite telephones, army fatigues, facility binoculars and night vision gear, GPS navigation tools, and 4X4 vehicles.

According to the military council, a measure of division among the forces was maintained: “We determined an assembly location on a road for the forces, which made more than one attack possible. One group remained in a state of alert for two months, awaiting the order to begin the attack. Nobody knew the details of the operation or the intended target except for three people who were chosen as the group’s leaders.”

The meeting point allowed for flexibility, in order to make contact with those responsible for collecting intelligence in the facility, while avoiding direct phone contact. “The contact between us took place far from our area of focus. That is to say, the attack target, in order to stay out of range of the enemy’s surveillance efforts.”

Selecting the leader of the operation – The best, most honest men, who had excellent character

traits, were chosen.

### **The Plan**

After the target for the attack was chosen, the following preparations were made:

1. Renewed surveillance of the target, and gathering of information.
2. Learning about the border crossings, the roads, the breaches, and the terrain along different routes.
3. Preparation of all the logistics for the operation (camouflaged vehicles, equipment, weapons).
4. Determining the locations for picking up the forces, moving fighters into groups, and heading out towards the goal.
5. Camouflaging/hiding movement and maintaining total secrecy.
6. Deciding the zero hour.



**A photograph of the attack site, with a plant on the right side, and the Al-Hayat base on the left.**

According to the military council, the attack group included four cars, three of which were painted with the army colors, and one was open. All members of the group wore army uniforms in order to fool the enemy. In the initial plan, “We wanted to infiltrate the compound in a quiet operation. In the event of an emergency, we planned to switch to an alternate plan which focused on fast movement with massive gunfire.”

According to the plan, the cars were supposed to split into two groups at a distance of five kilometers from the targets:

1. The first group, led by Abd al-Rahman abu D’jana, was supposed to move towards the gas

production plant.

2. The second group, led by Abu al-Baraa al-J'zaari, was supposed to force its way into the living quarters at the Al-Hayat base.

At the beginning of the operation, and during the clashes with the security forces, several members of Abu al-Baraa's group, under the command of al-Tahar Abu A'ash, were supposed to take a few hostages out of the area in order to use them as bargaining chips.

According to the military council, the distance between the gas processing plant and the Al-Hayat base was about two kilometers. Between those two sites were special police forces of about 400 soldiers, divided into patrol groups and observation posts.



**Military forces assigned to guard the foreigners in the various compounds**

The gates and control rooms were taken over in two stages, and the camera and security rooms, as well as the communication rooms were also taken over.

Abu al-Baraa's group raided the living quarters, capturing the Western engineers, and then moved to the manufacturing compound in order to fight alongside Commander Abu al-Rahman's group before sunrise, taking advantage of the confusion and chaos intensified by the darkness.

"After the takeover and reorganization of the two groups in the plant compound, a security plan was put into action based on the following parameters:

- Placing explosives on the bodies of the hostages inside the plant.
- Taking over the central control room.
- Positioning the missiles and mortars in strategic attack positions.
- Establishing a front line.

- Exploding the attack site was planned as a final option in the event of an enemy counterattack.
- Direct negotiations would begin after the security plan was implemented.

### **Agreement Options**

There would be no retreat without fulfillment of the following demands: “Our hostages in exchange for your hostages.” According to the military council, the attackers were faced with two choices in planning the agreement stage: meeting demands or confrontation.

1. **A state of confrontation:** In the event that the enemy tried to attack, then the front line of the brothers was supposed to respond with explosives, mortar shells, and missiles, and by burning or exploding the central control room. If the enemy showed signs of advancing, the forces would be drawn towards a gated area, and then the gas would be ignited in an effort to eliminate and burn the enemy.
2. **A state of retreat:** If the negotiations were successful, retreat would be gradual. The first group of brothers would proceed to an agreed upon location. The other group would remain at the plant with several hostages. The last group would transfer the hostages to a place of safety. The remaining hostages would be released after the last group arrived and handed a map of the mines over to the enemy as a final gesture in the agreement before the retreat was complete.

According to the military council, it was important to remember that in the framework of the options related to the attack plan, military living quarters would also be attacked with a car bomb rigged with tons of explosives, and any elements posing a threat of intervention were to be killed. “What led us to reject this option, which would have been simple to carry out, were two reasons: a) A concern that Muslim workers might possibly be exposed to the dangers of the explosion and fire, due to the proximity of their living quarters to the plant. b) Preventing the possibility of anyone who might exploit the deaths of the soldiers as an excuse to distort the true goals of the attack, which were to damage the interests of Western countries participating in the French invasion aimed at toppling the Asami government in Azawad.”

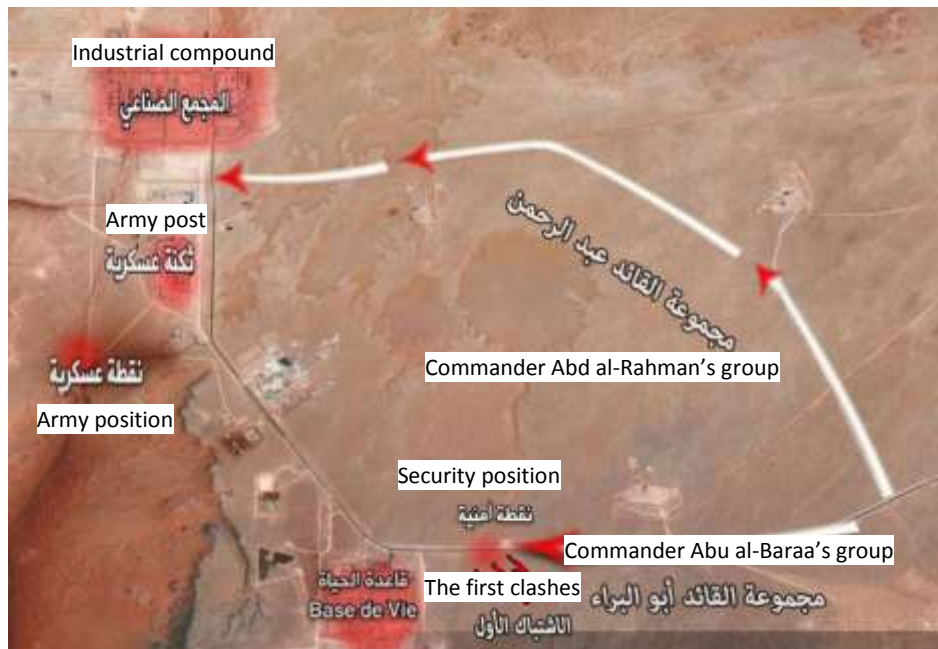
## The Progression of the Operation

- The regiment started out from a point 400 kilometers away from the target.
- The group consisted of 20 men and 4 vehicles.
- Three vehicles bore the symbols and colors of security forces, and one vehicle was roofless.
- Traveling the long distance was done in two stages, along land routes and official roads, disguising the vehicles with military colors to avoid attracting attention.
- The operation had to be completed by 1:00 AM.

Along the way, the group fell behind schedule after encountering several patrols, which delayed the advance of the vehicles. The reason for this was a failure to study the terrain along the route. The first negative factor in implementing the operation was “poor time management”. **According to the military council, one of the factors leading to the success of any military plan is surveillance of the target during defined time periods before an attack – this recommendation should be followed up in the event of a night attack.**

Later in the document, the military council described the travel route of the members of the organization towards the attack targets. For example, the document noted that one of the vehicles got stuck on the road due to a mechanical problem, and there was concern that the cell would be discovered. Thus, aborting the operation was considered due to the time delay. In the end, the two groups leading the convoy returned to pick up the members of the fourth group and their equipment, and split them up between the remaining vehicles. “That was the third and most significant negative factor, which caused confusion among the brothers – specifically regarding the advance of their vehicles – and forced them to take fast action.”

The group was divided into three teams, traveling in three separate vehicles. That was after intelligence information was acquired about the departure of a bus transporting foreign engineers to the Aminas airport. The first vehicle set out under the command of al-Rahman towards the plant compound, along a side route that was determined beforehand. The second and third vehicles set out towards the first gate on the road located 600 meters from the living quarters of the engineers and foreign employees.



**A photograph diagramming the attack on the targets**

The attack by the first group was successful, and the group was able to take control of the gas compound and its main gate. That was due to the confusion at the military compound: “The brothers fired some warning shots towards the Army forces near the plant.” According to the military council, “The military building was located between the manufacturing compound and the living quarters, and was very close to the plant.” At the same time, the second group, commanded by Abu al-Baraa, reached the gate. At the roadblock, a bus carrying a group of foreign engineers was stopped, along with three security vehicles. “Security official” was written on one of the vehicles. In the vehicle was a British national who was killed with another soldier at the beginning of the confrontation. “Two brothers quickly got out of the first car, in order to apprehend the guard, after the latter tried to press the emergency alarm button – he was accidentally killed after being hit by warning shots. The brothers broke through the roadblock using massive fire, in order to confuse he security forces in the car at the front. That was the reason that everyone who was in the bus, including the manager of the British Oil Company, survived – despite the fact that all the soldiers ran away during the chaos, due to the swift attack.”

According to the military council, this was another negative factor – that is to say, the departure of a large number of engineers (a total of 20) and managers. This mishap, “was related to the failure of the brothers to advance at that point. If they hadn’t missed that chance, they would have been able

to leave a small unit of just four people to take control of the bus and return it to the compound.”

According to the military council, “Despite losing the element of surprise (a quiet attack), which was the basic principle of the first attack, the brothers were able to develop their attack and achieve the significant element in the confrontation by carrying out a swift attack using massive gunfire and coordinated maneuvers in view of the Army forces – and this confused them and caused them to stop moving.”

During the implementation of the plan, several things occurred: a delay in implementation, the breakdown of the fourth vehicle, and premature gunfire. The plan for retreating with a group of hostages was canceled (by al-Tahar Abu A’asha’s group), and therefore the general plan changed to some extent. “There were breaches – in particular the time factor - that could have been avoided if the brothers had adhered to the plan’s guidelines, and they had a negative effect on the first stage of implementation.” However, “The brothers were able to carry out the most important mission of all, which was taking full control of all the targets.”



**The perpetrators raise a flag after taking over the compound**

After control was gained over both targets – the plant and the base – the first stage was deemed successful, and the second stage of the operation began. During the second stage, the brothers began to secure the access gates and to concentrate their efforts on several important positions that enabled them to maintain control over the space between the buildings. Later, the mujahideen focused on searching for the foreign experts and engineers, using maps and diagrams indicating where they might be found. “The brothers were able to apprehend more than 37 managers and



engineers from different Western nations. All of the hostages were assembled in the main yard, and the area was rigged with explosives. The brothers became confused by the chaos in the area, as the large number of fighters made the search difficult – there was concern that the foreigners would escape while the Algerian employees were being moved.” According to the military council, dozens of women were assembled in the compound, and later safely left the site. The Algerian employees also left the compound safely in several trips, but the army fired at them in fear, and as a result many of the employees hid in the compound. One Algerian and one Japanese employee were killed by army fire, despite the fact that they raised their arms on their way out of the site. It was also written that the mujahideen fired missiles and mortar shells in order to distance army fire from the site, especially after the employees and civilians were hurt. This took the army by surprise, and forced the forces to retreat five kilometers.

### **The Failings at this Stage with Regard to Abu al-Baraa’s Group**

An insufficient effort at searching for and finding a large number of foreigners, who were able to hide during the chaos. There were not enough mujahideen, and in fact, there were far too few in light of the chaos that occurred at the site. Therefore, they were forced to minimize their guarding of the hostages and their areas of control. Assembling the hostages in the main yard made it easier for the enemy to identify the location of the mujahideen and monitor their movements – something which turned them into clear targets for enemy helicopters. Another mistake was the fact that many of the hostages were able to make contact with their relatives with their cellular phones. This created the impression that the hostages were roaming freely in the compound, which encouraged the enemy in their efforts.

### **The Industrial Area – Commander Abd al-Rahman’s Group**

After taking control of the gate and the central control room, the group went out to look through the offices. The mujahideen were able to capture an important group of American, British, and Norwegian engineers, and transfer them to the location of the turbines in order to put pressure on the enemy. From previous experience, the enemy was accustomed to using drones in order to discover and monitor the sites. Some of the more sensitive areas were rigged with explosives. The mujahideen tried to operate the gas in the plant with the help of several experts, knowing that the flow of gas to the plant would immediately cease when the warning light was turned on at the first security point. When the siren sounded, the flow of gas ceased as part of the compound’s security

measures.

Failings related to the Commander Abd al-Rahman's group: A poor search of the offices and rooms. Twelve engineers were able to hide and were not discovered. The brothers were not able to booby-trap an important section of the gas facility. That was due to the large distances between the production and storage stations. According to the military committee, lessons could be learned from this shortcoming about future attack plans – **it was advisable to detonate explosive materials from a distance, and thereby cover a wider area.** Another shortcoming was related to the small number of brothers – there were not enough to cover such a large compound.

According to the military committee, dividing the combat forces in to two groups was the biggest challenge of all during the planning stage. That was because there were two targets to be attacked: a) the base – which included a large number of Western engineers; and b) the gas compound – which was considered to be the most important strategic target due to the tremendous pressure the enemy was under to protect it.

According to the military committee, those who formulated the attack plans tried to cope with this challenge within several parameters:

- The speed of execution.
- The timing of the attack (midnight) – which was not taken into account during the planning stage.
- The creation of a direct threat resulting from the possibility of a gas explosion.
- Creating a state of confusion among the onsite guards.

According to the military committee, even though the time factor was not taken into account in the plan, the other factors were addressed, and to a great extent were taken into consideration from the start. However, the decision to start moving was reached too late in the game.

Later on in the document, the military committee addressed the psychological pressure created by the threat of what might occur to the region if the gas was ignited. According to the committee, the amount of gas at the site was enough to destroy an area of about 20 square kilometers during an explosion. "This is a positive factor which is likely to prevent any military intervention, since any attacking force was liable to be caught in the explosion and a very big fire." Therefore, the army tried to take over the control room, and attempted to empty the gas out of the storage containers.

## **Confrontation**

During the attack, the mujahideen made contact with the organization's leadership in northern Mali in order to update them with information about the attack. This was despite the fact that the army blocked all cellular phone reception. At the same time, the commander of the group, Abd al-Rahman, made contact with the offices of the BRITISH PETROLEUM (BP) company in order to transmit messages with the help of two of its fighters – Canadian nationals – who spoke fluent English. In addition, several engineers were permitted to contact their superiors in the company, and their embassies. Later, direct contact was made with the satellite channel Al Jazeera, in order to report on the chain of events and to put pressure on the West.

During the attack the organization "Those who Sign with Blood" claimed responsibility and emphasized that it was in response to the cooperation between the Algerian president and the French government. It was also written that the organization was willing to participate in direct negotiations with the West and with Algeria, on condition that the French aggression in northern Mali ceased, and that a prisoner exchange would be part of any agreement.

According to the military committee, the mujahideen asked to move from their base to an industrial compound, and therefore work had begun to armor the cars to protect them from drones flying overhead. The committee stated that this was another factor that accelerated the plans for the attack: "In our estimation, the main factor that led to the decision to begin the attack was a warning from the commander of the group, our brother Abd al-Rahman, sent to the military leadership in the area from a distant location. He left the protected area in order to transfer the brothers to the plant – something that was obvious to the enemy, and helped them to know what the intentions of the brothers were." The Army attack started in a disorganized fashion – random bombing by helicopter, with firing on the compound from outside the prison site. That led to the deaths of many Algerian employees, and the injury of several captives. During the brothers' attempt to put the captives in cars, the commander of the group was injured – an event that caused the brothers to begin moving without any preliminary plan. That decision led to many shortcomings: the vehicles did not spread out in order to avoid fire from the helicopters, there was no plan for traveling at high speed – particularly since the distance traveled was only about 2 kilometers, and nobody provided cover against fire for the moving vehicles despite the threat of the helicopters.

According to the military committee, this failure taught that it was dangerous to travel in a column or in a direct line, or to spread out to the sides without coordination, when there was threat from

the air. An examination of the way the Algerian Army coped with the attack revealed that it did not hesitate to make direct hits on the cars with missiles, even if captives were in those vehicles.

In conclusion, the military committee noted that according to newspaper reports, 32 mujahideen were killed and 3 were taken captive. A total of 29 brothers participated in the attack, and one of them was able to escape the area and return to headquarters. Regarding the employees of the oil companies in the Algerian territory of the Sahara, dozens were injured. In addition, the attack created a deterrent effect that was apparent with the departure of thousands of clerks from Algeria during a period of 72 hours. "By the end of the first three days after the attack there did not remain in the Sahara in Algeria a single foreign clerk." The gas facility ceased to function for more than a year after the attack.

An appendix was attached to the end of the document, written by an Arab researcher named Dr. Akram Hijazi, in which he discussed the achievements of the terror attack on the gas facility:

1. A direct long-term threat on the foreign companies, and in particular in the oil company in Algeria.
2. The direct influence on the economies of the countries battling against Islam, and in particular the Western countries, which were plundering the Muslims' resources.
3. Severing the connection between the Algerian government and its masters in the West, particularly France and the United States.
4. A rejuvenation of the faith in Al-Wala wal-Bara, devotion to Muslims, and rejection of non-Muslims. This was expressed in the demand for the release of Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman and Afiyya Sidiqi, during negotiations held with the enemy.
5. Diverting the attention of the Muslim people to jihad problems in the Maghreb, and in particular the interference of France in Mali.
6. Encouraging young Muslims, and increasing their motivation and morale with heroic acts committed by members of the organization.
7. Frightening the French enemy, even within France itself.
8. Demonstration of the fervent devotion to the ways of the forefathers of Islam. "We love death as much as they love life."
9. Presenting a role model for the mujahideen, for carrying out similar acts.
10. A revival of the spirit of jihad, and the love of death of martyrs.

## **Conclusion**

The publication is very significant in that it is a good source of study, and serves as an operative guide intended to help other terror organizations plan and carry out attacks. It also teaches about the decision making process before the attack, the choice of targets, and the importance of collecting intelligence. The contents of the document indicates a high level of planning for the attack, but in practice, the level of performance was relatively low. The main shortcoming lies in the very minimal allocation of forces for operating in such a large and complex area. Also, the forces assigned to that region were not able to effectively control the entire gas facility compound, and didn't even notice that some of the foreign employees managed to escape. The planning team, which devised the attack plan, did not correctly estimate the scope of the task. The preparations for the mission, the allocation of equipment and the organization of the forces were not carried out in a professional manner. These failings lead to only partial success at the conclusion of the process.

On the other hand, even though the attack didn't accomplish its initial goals, the significance attached to it was an important achievement. As the organization's military council asserted, an attack deep within enemy territory while using economy of force was certainly intended to impede the enemy's ability to respond to the attack. However, it is also an indication of a desire to create a balance of power in the realm of deterrence for the purpose of negotiations, and to thereby strengthen the media impact. Despite the only partial success, the results of the attack achieved many goals: closure of the gas facility compound for a period of about a year, the return of most of the foreign employees to their native countries, and impressing upon Western consciousness the deterrence factor.

## ABOUT THE ICT

Founded in 1996, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world, facilitating international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism. ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy. ICT is a non-profit organization located at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel which relies exclusively on private donations and revenue from events, projects and programs.

## ABOUT THE JIHADI MONITORING GROUP

The Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group (JWMG) is a specialized research and analysis team at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT). Composed of researchers fluent in Arabic, the JWMG monitors websites that support and serve the Global Jihad organizations. The unique characteristic of JWMG publications is the team's integration of diverse materials from a wide variety of Arabic sources. JWMG connects each source to larger trends, providing a complete understanding of events on both a local and a global scale.

[Click here for a list of online JWMG publications](#)

For tailored research please contact us at [JWMG@ict.org.il](mailto:JWMG@ict.org.il).