

**The Notebook of Abd al-Malek Droukdel:
A Treasure Trove from Northern Mali**

During the first half of January 2013, France embarked on a military campaign to prevent northern Mali from falling into the hands of militias, some of them jihadist affiliates of Al-Qaeda. During an assault on Timbuktu, fleeing jihadists left behind a treasure trove: a notebook, containing guidelines from the leadership of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), headed by Abd al-Malek Droukdel, to its affiliate in the Sahara and the heads of its Shura Council (governing body).¹ The notebook addresses matters of policy and strategy, and sheds new light on relations within and among the various branches of Al-Qaeda. The following is a brief review of the contents of the notebook.

Chapter One

The first chapter of the notebook reveals that the jihadists who conquered the Azawad region of northern Mali saw it as much more than a new base of operations. In effect, they wished to make it the locus of an “Islamic project”, which would ultimately lead to the establishment of an Islamic emirate. The first chapter presents a strategic analysis of the situation in northern Mali after the Islamist takeover, and predicts the international attempt to intervene and use political, economic and propagandist means to foil the project. The chapter also makes direct reference to the “nearly certain” possibility that opposition to the project will involve a military incursion.

The chapter then notes that the time is not yet right to realize the dream of establishing an Islamic state. It therefore recommends using the present time to win the hearts and minds of the residents of Azawad, both to facilitate fulfilment of this dream at a later time, and to bridge the rifts among Arabs, Tuareg, Africans, and members of various militias. According to the notebook’s authors, the prestige of the mujahideen will benefit from their mediating among the residents of Azawad, and will help them become integrated into its society, thereby staving off alienation and social isolation. The value gained from having recruited local residents to the project will not be lost even if the project fails: Like a seed planted in fertile ground and enriched by compounds in the soil, it will later hasten to grow.

The first chapter also addresses military affairs, insisting that AQIM should avoid taking hold of regional political and military mechanisms and instead concentrate on uniting the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (a Tuareg group) and the Arabic Islamic Front of Azawad, and involving them in the Islamic project. This, too, will benefit AQIM and

¹ This document has hewed to the original as closely as possible, and therefore may reflect a certain vagueness, which may or may not have been intentional.

its allies, by spreading the burden for any potential failure of the project. The chapter clarifies that AQIM does not by itself have the economic and military capability to meet regional and international challenges – yet another reason to recruit additional movements to the project.

This first chapter also discusses what it calls “erroneous policies” for implementing shari’a [Islamic law] in Azawad. According to the authors of the notebook, shari’a was implemented too rapidly in Azawad, without bearing in mind that the region is plagued by religious ignorance, the result of shar’ia not having been used there at all for hundreds of years. Past experience in other areas proves the folly of ignoring a region’s religious orientation: Hasty and unconsidered implementation of shari’a can arouse anger and hatred toward the mujahideen, and lead to an outright rejection of Islam that would jeopardize the project. Consequently, the authors recommend first preparing the ground for the imposition of shari’a, using da’wa [missionary efforts] to educate and persuade the population. The chapter presents a number of examples which the leadership of AQIM feels are the fruit of excessively rapid implementation shari’a in northern Mali: the destruction of temples, the imposition of the Qur’anic laws governing adultery [al-had] (e.g., public lashings), the prevention of women from leaving their homes and children from playing. According to the authors such acts, whether perpetrated by an individual or made a matter of policy, contradict salafism; those in charge must “control themselves”, and command their underlings to do so, as well.

Chapter Two

The second chapter of the notebook deals with the dilemma facing the leadership of AQIM inherent in trying to establish a framework for cooperation with the Salafi-jihadist group Ansar Al-Din. On one hand, AQIM is called upon to persist in global jihad, and on the other, it must maintain the front in Azawad. Integrating these two tasks is “a true dilemma” in the eyes of the authors, which must be treated with the utmost seriousness and addressed through extensive consultation.

The writers then present two alternatives, which they apparently devised in consultation with a number of prominent members of Ansar Al-Din, including its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly (aka Abu al-Fadl):

1. The first alternative is only partially preserved in the notebook. Nevertheless, it is clear that Al-Qaeda is proposing shared leadership with Ansar Al-Din, as follows:

- a. The emir of AQIM will obey and support the leader of Ansar Al-Din in all joint “internal activity” concerned with liberating lands within the Emirate of Ansar Al-Din.
 - b. Al-Qaeda will act independent of Ansar Al-Din in all matters of global jihad.
2. Certain mujahideen from AQIM will be “appended” to Ansar Al-Din. They will be subordinate to the absolute power of its leader, and will help administer the affairs of the liberated cities. The writers also propose that, in time, these fighters would have the right to become part of the nation of Azawad, whose constitution (if there is one) would grant them the benefits of citizenship and affiliation. The remaining mujahideen of AQIM will remain independent of Ansar Al-Din, and will engage only in jihad outside the area under the control of Ansar Al-Din.

Chapter Three

The third chapter opens with a parable: The Islamic project in Azawad should be treated like a newborn baby who faces immense challenges on the way to maturity, and efforts should be made to help it along and lighten (or remove) its burden. The chapter stresses the importance of avoiding rivalry and provocation, striving to gain allies, and being willing to exercise some flexibility, provided doing so contributes to the overall effort. The writers anchor these recommendations in a comment made by Osama bin Laden. The comment referred to the historic precedent of the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah (as it is most commonly interpreted), in which the Prophet Muhammad agreed to a cease-fire with pagans in Mecca, until he could amass enough force to defeat them.

The authors, who quote Bin Laden at length, in effect wish to stress the lesson inherent in this historic precedent: Not every concession is a capitulation to apostasy or the forbidden. In fact, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, which represented a judicious balancing of jihad with temporary alliances, enabled the Muslims to gain much more than they initially conceded.

The third chapter also hints at differences of opinion within the leadership of Al-Qaeda regarding cooperation with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad. The authors of the notebook explicitly state that the decision to wage war against the Movement just when negotiations with it had almost led to agreement was “a huge mistake”. This step hampered the Islamic project, they write, adding that the apparent crisis in the relationship could have been addressed without resorting to war.

Chapter Four

The bulk of the fourth chapter is missing, making it difficult to extract valuable information from it. It appears that the chapter covered the details of an agreement between Ansar Al-Din and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad. However, the principles underlying the agreement, which were apparently presented in the complete notebook, were not recovered.

Two Obscure Chapters

In addition to the four chapters cited above, the notebook contains two "obscure" chapters. The first of these discusses Al-Qaeda's plan to involve the entire Muslim Nation in its vision of establishing an Islamic regime based on shari'a. In this context, it calls the mujahideen "the beating heart in the body of the Muslim Nation".

More crucially, this chapter appears to address what it defines as "foreign policy", including the formulation by AQIM of rhetorical guidelines for its colleagues in the Sahara. These guidelines advise behaving and speaking with particular caution and moderation, so as to give their audience a sense of calm and certitude. The chapter states that the most auspicious thing for their image and rhetoric is to "sit quietly" and pretend to be a local movement with local goals and concerns, while downplaying any jihadist or Al-Qaeda-like orientation.

The second obscure chapter is fragmentary; consequently, it is impossible to determine with any certainty whether its intended readership was Saharan affiliates, persons of authority within AQIM, or both.

The chapter first discusses the manipulation of Muslim public opinion worldwide. Rather than making accusations of tafkir [declaring a fellow Muslim to be an apostate], rather than fomenting sectarian divisiveness that would be misconstrued by young people, effort should be put into formulating a discourse about defending the Muslims from those who wish to do them harm. This may be accomplished, according to the authors, by expanding the conflict with the enemy to the utmost.

The chapter also contains recommendations as to how the mujahideen should comport themselves in the cities of Azawad. For example, the authors advise them to become integrated into society, and particularly with the loftiest, most fair and talented members of

the urban population. They compare this to crossing a minefield of tribal loyalties, conspiracy, vengefulness, corruption and arrogance, and suggest that the mujahdeen must work diligently and with perseverance to tether Azawad society to the Islamic project. Creating an Islamic system is "an immense undertaking", they caution, one beyond the ability of any one group or movement no matter how large. It is therefore imperative that the entire Muslim Nation be involved in the endeavor. The chapter nevertheless reiterates that the mujahideen are best suited to inculcating the proper message.

Lastly, this fragment states that "it is no mean feat to secure an area whose population supports us and provides us a safe haven" – especially as the enemy is trying with all his might to prevent the mujahideen from accomplishing this.²

Summary and Evaluation

During the first half of January 2013, France embarked on a military operation against a series of AQIM targets in northern Mali. The operation killed many of the Islamists who had taken over the Azawad region, and forced others to flee. In their haste to retreat to the hills, the jihadists left behind a notebook, apparently written by the leadership of AQIM and addressed to their comrades in the Sahara and the Shura Council, containing guidelines concerning the future of the Islamic jihadist project in Azawad. The notebook was found buried under a pile of papers and garbage, in a building in Timbuktu that had been controlled by mujahideen for nearly one year. It was signed by Abu Mus'ab 'Abd al-Wadud, better known as Abd al-Malek Droukdel, the leader of AQIM.

The contents of the notebook, which were first published by the Associated Press, shed light on the behavior of the leadership of Al-Qaeda in general and AQIM in particular. The notebook clearly reflects the high hopes that Al-Qaeda had for the Azawad region.

Although the French onslaught appears to have achieved its aims, it offers no guarantee for the future of the region. Although Al-Qaeda and its allies have lost the current round, it is reasonable to assume that they will attempt to reassert their presence in Mali by the same means they have used in the past.

Given reports of the flight of Islamists from Mali to the rest of North Africa, weak regimes there and in the Sahel, like Chad, will yet have to meet this Islamist threat. Increasing

² http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaida-manifesto.pdf.

collaboration between Boku Haram, a Nigerian Salafi-jihadist Al-Qaeda affiliate, and other Islamist groups poses a similar threat to East. Lastly, the regime in Mali itself will have to bear the consequences of its protracted neglect of “the Tuareg problem”, which may again provide fertile ground for the renewed outbreak of conflict.³

³<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/08/world/africa/mali-analysis>; <http://thinkafricapress.com/mali/why-hardest-part-yet-come>.