



# France killed al-Qaeda's leader in the Maghreb

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The leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Abdel Malek Droukdel, and his closest lieutenants were killed on June 3, 2020, during an operation of the Barkhane French forces in Mali.<sup>1</sup> Droukdel was a major strategic target in the fight against terrorism in the region. According to Frédéric Barbry, spokesman for the French military staff, this is an extremely severe blow to the organization, which could be compared with the other very interesting success that the Barkhane force had on May 19, when during another helicopter-borne operation a major member of the EIGS (Islamic State in the Grand Sahara), Mohamed el Mrabat, was captured without exchange of fire.<sup>2</sup> The operation against Abdel Malek Droukdel was based on intelligence and surveillance support of Algeria and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The operation was carried out by French special forces, who arrived in the area by helicopters before taking action on the ground.<sup>4</sup> Droukdel was killed in the fighting along with AQIM's propagandist Toufik Chaib and one jihadist surrendered and was taken into custody.<sup>5</sup>

French Defense Minister, Florence Parly, said that "[French] forces, in co-operation with their partners in the Sahel, will continue to hunt them relentlessly."<sup>6</sup>

Droukdel was not the region's only powerful jihadist. The leaders of a jihadist alliance linked to Al-Qaeda, the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM), are still at large. Among them are Mali's two most notorious jihadists - in the north, veteran Tuareg militant, Iyad Ag Ghaly, and in central areas, radical Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa. The Islamic State group also has a powerful franchise in the region set up in 2015 by Abou Walid Al-Sahraoui, a former AQIM member. The groups led by Koufa and Al-Sahraoui have been highly active in the last years.

## Background

A variety of difficulties contribute to the Sahel region's instability and insecurity. Over the last decade, Islamist terrorism in the Maghreb and the Sahel-Sahara region has been fueled by the chaos that engulfed Libya since 2011, the Islamist takeover of northern Mali in 2012, and the rise of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria.

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<sup>1</sup> France says its army killed al-Qaeda's Abdelmalek Droukdel, *Al Jazeera*, June 6, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Valérie Crova, Djihadisme : pourquoi la mort d'Abdelmalek Droukdel, le chef d'Aqmi, est une étape importante (Jihadism: why the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the head of AQIM is an important step), *France Inter*, June 6, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> John Campbell, French-Led Decapitation Strike on AQIM in Mali, *Council of Foreign Relations*, June 9, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Roger, Farid Alilat, How AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed in Mali, *The Africa Report*, June 8, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Qaeda North Africa Chief Killed: What Next for the Region? *Asharq Al Awsat*, June 7, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Qaeda chief in north Africa Abdelmalek Droukdel killed – France, *BBC News*, June 5, 2020.

The porous borders and the limited security presence in remote and sparsely populated areas allow militant terrorist groups to extend their activities across the region. As they gain control of trade routes, they also engage in illicit activities such as drug, weapons and human trafficking.

The violence is the main problem, but national governments are also plagued by political problems, complaints of government mismanagement and corruption and mistreatment of civilians by national armies.<sup>7</sup>

The semi-desert Sahel region has been plagued by jihadists since militants seized control of Mali's north in 2012. The conflict has since spread to the center of the country, and to neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger. Thousands of soldiers and civilians have been killed to date.<sup>8</sup>

### **Abdel Malek Droukdel**

Abdel Malek Droukdel, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, was born in 1971 in a poor neighborhood of Algiers.

In 1993, he began working with the Movement of the Islamic State (MEI), and then rose through the ranks of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and he took part in the founding in Algeria of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Islamist terrorist organization.

He assumed leadership of the GSPC in June 2004, with the protection of his mentor Abou Moussab al-Zarqaoui, head of al-Qaeda in Iraq and founder of the group that became ISIS, and initiated the merger with al-Qaeda in 2006 to form al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Droukdel has since then been serving as emir of AQIM.<sup>9</sup>

Droukdel played a major role in establishing connections between the local, regional and global jihad, maintaining correspondence with al-Qaeda leadership.

Droukdel was regarded as a charismatic leader with excellent public speaking abilities and was among North Africa's most experienced fighters. He was an explosives expert who built devices that killed hundreds of people. In 2007, he established a unit that specialized in suicide bombings and introduced the tactic in Algeria.

Droukdel has organized dozens of bombings across Algeria against both security and civilian targets. On April 11, 2007, he organized the first suicide bombing in Algeria's history when it attacked

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<sup>7</sup> *Qaeda North Africa Chief Killed.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Baba Ahmed, French forces kill Al-Qaeda's North Africa commander in Mali, *Associated Press*, June 6, 2020.

government offices in Algiers that claimed 33 lives. On December 11, 2007, he planned the attack on the United Nations office in Algiers that killed at least 26 people including 11 U.N. personnel.<sup>10</sup> As leader of AQIM he helped the group to expand its area of activities into Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Tunisia.<sup>11</sup> Since October 2011, Droukdel has provided military, financial, and logistical support to Ansar Eddine, a Malian Islamic militant group, to increase AQIM's territorial influence in northern Mali. Ag Ghaly, the founder of Ansar Eddine, a Tuareg of the Ifogha tribe, was the main ally of Droukdel. After the death of Droukdel Iyad Ag Ghaly, is today one of the main jihadist leaders in the Sahel.<sup>12</sup>

However, besides "almost total absence of internal support [in Algeria]", which even Abdelmalek Droukdel recognized, he competed with new groups: first that of al-Mourabitoune, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, brain of the taking of hostages of the natural gas refinery at Tiguentourine in 2013, who accused him of not having "made" Afghanistan; then by that of the soldiers of the Caliphate affiliated to the Islamic State. In 2014, AQIM, according to Algerian military sources, experienced defections for the benefit of IS. By refusing to join Daesh and reaffirming his allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the emir of Al-Qaeda, Droukdel created against him a front "among those who found him too passive in the face of army attacks and who criticized him that they could no longer mount a large-scale operation".

The years that followed were even more complicated for Droukdel, challenged in his authority and whose room for maneuver became very limited, allowing him only to fix orientations while the jihadists on the ground decided on the options. In 2017, he lost several important executives, such as Bilel Kobi, the special envoy of Droukdel in Tunisia, Béchir ben Néji, emir in Tunisia, Adel Seghiri, responsible for propaganda of AQIM, killed during military operations, some carried out in cooperation with Tunisia.<sup>13</sup>

Droukdel took part in al-Qaeda's takeover of northern Mali before a French military intervention in 2013 drove them back and scattered fighters across the Sahel region. Under his leadership, AQIM formed in November 2015 an alliance with MUJAO (Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en

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<sup>10</sup> Abdel Malek Dourkdel, *Counter Extremism Project*, <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abdelmalek-droukdel>

<sup>11</sup> *Al-Qaeda chief in north Africa Abdelmalek Droukdel killed – France.*

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Roger, Farid Alilat, *How AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel was killed in Mali.*

<sup>13</sup> Adlène Meddi, Sahel : le déclin d'Abdelmalek Droukdel était aussi celui d'Aqmi (Sahel: Abdelmalek Droukdel's decline was also that of AQIM), *Le Point*, June, 6,2020/

Afrique de l'Ouest) to fight against the French and Malian militaries.<sup>14</sup> He also commanded al-Qaeda's Sahel affiliate, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).<sup>15</sup>

In 2012 Droukdel was sentenced to death by a court in Algeria after being convicted in absentia of murder, membership of a terrorist organization and attacks using explosives.<sup>16</sup>

Droukdel regularly issued audio and video propaganda messages. In July 2017 Al Qaeda of Arab Peninsula (AQAP) published an exclusive interview with Droukdel in its 17<sup>th</sup> issue of *Inspire* magazine, where he urged Muslims to wage jihad in Western and francophone countries. Droukdel also justified al-Qaeda's battle against the United States in general.<sup>17</sup>

### **The G5 Sahel Joint force – counter terror policy**

In February 2017, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger agreed to set up a 5,000-member force dubbed the G5 Sahel Joint Force. The G5 has been supported by France and was subsequently endorsed by the African Union's Peace and Security Council and the UN Security Council and has the support of a variety of international partners.<sup>18</sup>

The five Sahel states have been struggling against extremism and lawlessness along the Sahara's southern rim since a jihadist revolt that began with a Tuareg separatist uprising in northern Mali in 2012.

The countries have been hit by jihadist attacks that have steadily worsened in the past years, claiming hundreds of lives and displacing hundreds of thousands of people.

The extremists were largely driven out of Mali in a French-led military operation launched in January 2013, but the war is far from being over and around 4500 French troops, known as the "Barkhane deployment," have been pursuing insurgents across the region since 2014.<sup>19</sup>

The G5 is expected to be at the forefront of transnational security efforts in the Sahel for the near future and it aims to replace the French forces in fighting jihadists and criminal smuggling groups in the vast and arid Sahel region. The G5 is also expected to eventually replace the MINSUMA peacekeeping mission in Mali, which has deployed 15,000 military personnel and police since 2013.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Abdel Malek Dourkdel, Counter Extremism Project*

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Qaeda chief in north Africa Abdelmalek Droukdel killed – France.*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Abdel Malek Dourkdel, Counter Extremism Project*

<sup>18</sup> EU Support to G5 Sahel Joint Force, African Union  
<https://africa-eu-partnership.org/en/projects/eu-support-g5-sahel-joint-force>

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Qaeda chief in north Africa Abdelmalek Droukdel killed – France.*

<sup>20</sup> G5 Sahel Joint Force and the Sahel Alliance, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/>

French President Emmanuel Macron and the leaders of the G5 Sahel group launched in January 2020 a new plan combining their military forces under one command structure to fight armed groups linked to AQIM and the Islamic State group. France has deployed 600 additional soldiers to its "Barkhane force", raising the number of troops there to 5,100.<sup>21</sup>

French Armed Forces Minister, Florence Parly said that about 100 special forces from other European countries would be deployed to the region to support French and regional troops.<sup>22</sup>

## Summary

Abdel Malek Droukdel was one of the most powerful militant warlords in the region and his death is a blow for al-Qaeda. But Droukdel was not the region's only powerful militant leader and the resilience and adaptability of jihadist groups in the region point towards their ability to overcome this blow.

Since 2015, there has been a struggle between AQIM and the Islamic State over the dominance of the jihad organizations in the region. Droukdel's death might change the balance of power between AQIM and IS in favor of the Islamic State group in the region.

Though the killing of Droukdel was an important victory of France and the G5 and a notable blow against the AQIM, the elimination of a terrorist leader can only temporarily impair the terrorist organization's capabilities and violence and terrorism in the region are expected to continue.

"On the ground, today, the groups that act the most (those of Koufa and Sahraoui) are not under the thumb of Droukdel," notes Ibrahim Maïga, of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) in Bamako. "The insurrectionary position will be maintained by these groups, even if the death of Droukdel shows them that no one is safe, that Barkhane can strike in their ranks," he added. "It is a beautiful result, but it does not solve the problem of the Sahel", summarizes an expert in anti-terrorism in France interviewed by AFP, on condition of anonymity.<sup>23</sup>

A variety of problems contribute to the region's instability and insecurity. Terror and violence are the main problems but ethnic and tribal tensions, corruption and complaints of government mismanagement and mistreatment of civilians by national armies are also common in the region.

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<sup>21</sup> *France says its army killed al-Qaeda's Abdelmalek Droukdel.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Mort du chef d'Aqmi au Sahel : un "coup de pied dans la fourmilière" (Death of the head of AQIM in the Sahel: a "kick in the anthill"), France 24, June 7, 2020.*

To address the growing strength of jihadist groups, more is needed than taking out an individual leader and violence in the region will likely continue as long as the fundamental problems of the countries in the region will not be solved.

*With the contribution of Ely Karmon*

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