

Al Mourabitoun

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY

Formed: August 2013

Disbanded: March 2017

First Attack: November 2013: Al Mourabitoun used an IED to attack a Malian army vehicle near Asongo and Menaka, Mali (4 killed, unknown wounded).¹

Last Attack: January 18, 2017: Al Mourabitoun agents conducted a suicide car bombing at a Malian military base outside Gao, housing Malian soldiers and rival armed groups (60+ killed, 115 wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Al Mourabitoun, meaning “The Sentinels,” is a former Salafi-jihadist militant organization formed in August 2013 by the merger of the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) and the Al Mulathamun Battalion. The group primarily operated in Mali and pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda (AQ) in July 2015. Al Mourabitoun aimed to establish Shariah law in North Africa, to unite Muslims and Islamic movements against secular influences, and to attack westerners and western institutions in North Africa. In May 2015, the Emir of Al Mourabitoun, Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, swore the group’s loyalty to the Islamic State (IS), but Belmokhtar, a founder of Al Mourabitoun, declared that the group’s allegiance remained with AQ, not the IS. Al Mourabitoun maintained close relations with AQIM. By March 2016, the organization had largely come under AQIM authority although it remained operationally autonomous. In March 2017, Al Mourabitoun and AQIM merged with local jihadi groups Ansar al-Dine and Macina Liberation Front to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM).

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Al Mourabitoun, or “The Sentinels,” was a Salafi-jihadist militant organization formed through the merger of the Al Mulathamun Battalion with the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) in August 2013. According to a statement by the two groups, the merger was intended to unify the efforts of Muslims “from the Nile to the Atlantic” amidst ongoing conflict in Mali. The Al Mulathamun Battalion and MUJAO coordinated several attacks

in the months prior to the merger. Both groups had splintered from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) due to objections to AQIM leadership. Many of Al Mourabitoun's fighters were former members of AQIM, MUJAO and the Al Mulathamun Battalion, but others were recruited from all across North and West Africa in Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, Mali and Niger.³

Al Mourabitoun's name refers to the Almoravid dynasty in North African history, whose leadership focused on the search for Muslim unity and the fight against external enemies.⁴ By forming Al Mourabitoun, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, leader of the Al Mulathamun Battalion, and Ahmed el-Tilemsi, leader of MUJAO, sought to strengthen Muslim efforts to establish Shariah law in North Africa and free those in northern Mali "oppressed" by the French government.⁵ Both Belmokhtar and Tilemsi refused the position of Emir of the new organization.⁶ French authorities later identified the leader as an Egyptian named Abu Bakr al-Nasri, who was allegedly recruited by Belmokhtar for his special relationship with AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁷ This relationship was reportedly the reason that Nasri was chosen to lead Al Mourabitoun, as Al Mourabitoun sought an alliance with AQ.⁸ Al Mourabitoun maintained an ideology similar to AQIM and pledged allegiance to AQ; however, AQ never recognized the group as a formal affiliate.⁹

The U.S. State Department released a statement in December of 2013 that claimed Al Mourabitoun constituted the greatest near-term threat to U.S. and Western interests in the Sahel.¹⁰ The group first received media attention when it kidnapped five Red Cross workers from a car in Tabancourt, Mali on February 8, 2014. The attack was part of a larger campaign in Mali against the Malian military and western civilians in February of 2014.¹¹

Al Mourabitoun continued operations despite the deaths of several prominent leaders.¹² Nasri was replaced by Tilemsi, who was killed shortly thereafter by the French military during a special operations raid in Gao, Mali on December 11, 2014.¹³ Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, a former MUJAO spokesperson, allegedly became Emir after Tilemsi's death.¹⁴ Belmokhtar and his fighters viewed Sahrawi's leadership as illegitimate because they believed him to be inexperienced and lacking in strategic and ideological knowledge.¹⁵

Tensions within the group began to rise as Sahrawi increasingly aligned with the ideology of the Islamic State (IS), in contrast to Belmokhtar efforts to reconcile with the AQIM.¹⁶ Conflict within Al Mourabitoun intensified when, in May 2015, Sahrawi released a message swearing Al Mourabitoun's allegiance to the IS. Shortly after, Belmokhtar declared that Sahrawi did not speak on behalf of Al Mourabitoun and reaffirmed the group's loyalty to AQ. Sahrawi left Al Mourabitoun to form the IS-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) following his pledge to the IS. The IS acknowledged ISGS and Sahrawi's pledge in October 2016.¹⁷

In August 2015, Belmokhtar became Emir and worked to strengthen the group's ties with AQIM. On November 11, Al Mourabitoun coordinated an attack with AQIM on the Raddison Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali in response to Malian military operations against the group.¹⁸ The hotel attack cemented the relationship between Al Mourabitoun and AQIM, and on December 4, 2015, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel announced that Al Mourabitoun would merge with AQIM. Al Mourabitoun released statements that the merger was meant to maintain unity against the "occupying Crusader enemy."¹⁹

Despite the merger with AQIM, Al Mourabitoun continued to operate semi-autonomously, launching one joint and two independent attacks.²⁰ On March 2, 2017, Al Mourabitoun and the Sahara branch of AQIM officially merged with local jihad groups Ansar al-Dine and Macina Liberation Front to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen. The new group pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda and has allegedly conducted six attacks in Mali and one in Burkina Faso.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Abu Bakr al-Nasri: (August 2013 to April 2014): An Egyptian national, Nasri was purportedly appointed Al Mourabitoun's first Emir by Belmokhtar due to his connections to AQ leadership. He was killed by French Special Forces in Mali in 2014.²¹

Ahmed el-Tilemsi (April 2014 to December 2014): Tilemsi, whose legal name is Ahmed Ould Amer, was a founding member of MUJAO, which merged with the Al Mulathamun Battalion to form Al Mourabitoun. He served as Al Mourabitoun's Emir after Nasir's death. Previously, he was a commander in AQIM and was well known for his operations in kidnapping and ransom collection. Tilemsi was labelled a Specially Designated Global Terrorist by the U.S. State Department (Dec. 2012) and added to the United Nations Security Council AQ sanctions list (Feb. 2013). The Mali national was killed by the French military during a special operations raid in Gao, Mali in December 2014.²²

Mokhtar Belmokhtar (August 2015 to March 2017): After training in Afghan Al Qaeda training camps in the 1990s, Belmokhtar fought in the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became AQIM.²³ Belmokhtar split from AQIM in 2012 due to disagreements with other leaders and formed the Al Mulathamun Battalion.²⁴ He allegedly served as Al Mourabitoun's Emir from August 2015 until the group's merger into JNIM in March 2017.²⁵ Belmokhtar has falsely been declared dead on several occasions; US officials have not yet confirmed his most recent death account.²⁶

Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi (Unknown to August 2015): A former spokesperson for MUJAO and self-proclaimed Emir of Al Mourabitoun, Sahrawi pledged Al Mourabitoun's allegiance to IS. When Belmokhtar rejected this pledge, Sahrawi split from the group to form the IS-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara.²⁷

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- May 14, 2014: 100 fighters (RFI Afrique)²⁸

D. RESOURCES

Al Mourabitoun funded itself through kidnapping ransoms, criminal activities, and participation in regional drug, cigarette, and arms smuggling networks. It is also likely the group received funding from other terrorist organizations.²⁹ Belmokhtar built a lucrative cigarette smuggling routes all throughout the Sahel in the early 2000s that likely contributed to funding Al Mourabitoun activities. He was allegedly able to do so by capitalizing on his family ties to local Malian tribes, formed through his marriages to four women from the Arab and Tuareg communities.³⁰

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Al Mourabitoun primarily operated in Mali and Algeria. It carried out attacks in Asongo, Menaka, Kidal, Tabancourt, Bamako, and Sevare in Mali, but also expanded its activities to Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire. From 2015, Al Mourabitoun attempted to expand its reach into Libya by connecting with local tribes.³¹

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

Al Mourabitoun was a Salafi-Jihadist militant organization that aimed to establish Shariah law in North Africa. Additionally, Al Mourabitoun aimed to unite Islamic movements in the region against secular influences by carrying out attacks against western citizens and institutions. The organization's name refers to the Almoravid dynasty in North African history, whose leadership focused on the search for Muslim unity and the fight against external enemies.³² Al Mourabitoun sought particularly to secure the freedom of those in northern Mali who were "oppressed" by the French government in the region.³³ The group's ideology and goals were similar to those of Al Qaeda and its regional affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.³⁴

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

There are no recorded political activities for this group.

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

Al Mourabitoun primarily targeted the Malian military, foreign nationals, the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the citizens and military forces of nations who assisted in the French military intervention in Mali in January 2013. Al Mourabitoun has conducted car bombings, armed attacks, and kidnappings.³⁵

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

November 2013: Al Mourabitoun used an IED to attack a Malian army vehicle near Asongo and Menaka, Mali (4 killed, unknown wounded).³⁶

December 14, 2013: Al Mourabitoun bombed the Bank of Solidarity in Kidal, Mali, using a car saddled with explosives, killing UN peacekeepers, MINUSMA troops and Malian soldiers (3 killed, 7+ wounded).³⁷

February 8, 2014: Al Mourabitoun kidnapped five Red Cross workers from a car in Tabancourt, Mali; the hostages were not rescued until April. This was part of a larger campaign of attacks in February against military and civilian targets (0 killed, 2 wounded).³⁸

July 14, 2014: Al Mourabitoun detonated explosives on a vehicle near French military targets in Almostarat, Mali (2 killed, 7 wounded).³⁹

January 26, 2015: Al Mourabitoun attempted to assassinate a Malian military officer, General Mohamed Abderrahmane Ould Meydou in Bamako, Mali (0 killed, 1 wounded).⁴⁰

March 7, 2015: Al Mourabitoun attacked La Terasse Nightclub in Bamako, Mali with grenades and guns to avenge Telemsi's death (5 killed, 8+ wounded).⁴¹

April 4, 2015: Al Mourabitoun fighters opened fire on a manganese mine in Tambao, Burkina Faso and took a Romanian security guard hostage (unknown killed, 2 wounded).⁴²

April 15, 2015: A suicide bomber from Al Mourabitoun detonated a car full of explosives at a United Nations Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) camp in Ansongo, Mali, injuring civilians and 9 Nigerien peacekeepers (4 killed, 16 wounded).⁴³

August 7, 2015: Militants from Al Mourabitoun occupied the Byblos Hotel in Sevare, Mali, taking hostages, who were later released when Malian security forces counter attacked (13+ killed, 2 wounded).⁴⁴

November 11, 2015: Al Mourabitoun fighters, allegedly in cooperation with AQIM, opened fire in the Raddison Blu Hotel in Bamako, Mali and took 170 people hostage, who were rescued later in the day, and demanded the return of detainees held in France (22 killed, 2 wounded).⁴⁵

January 15, 2016: Al Mourabitoun gunmen, working with AQIM, seized the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, firing on local businesses and taking over 200 hostages. The Burkinabe military, aided by French troops, freed 126 hostages in a counterassault (29 killed, 56 wounded).⁴⁶

January 18, 2017: Al Mourabitoun agents conducted a suicide car bombing at a Malian military base outside Gao, housing Malian soldiers and rival armed groups (60+ killed, 115 wounded).⁴⁷

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity: December 18, 2013 to Present.⁴⁸
- UNSC "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List:" June 2, 2014 to Present.⁴⁹
- United Arab Emirates Cabinet Designated Terrorist Organization: April 2, 2014 to Present.⁵⁰
- Government of Canada Listed Terrorist Entity: June 2, 2014 to Present.⁵¹
- New Zealand Police Designated Terrorist Entity: June 2, 2014 to Present.⁵²
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: April 2014 to Present.⁵³
- Australian National Security Terrorist Organization: November 5, 2014 to Present.⁵⁴

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Al Mourabitoun leader Belmokhtar, also known as “Mr. Marlboro” for his illegal cigarette business, built lucrative smuggling routes throughout the Sahel in the early 2000s. This was made possible by of his family ties to the local tribes in Mali, allegedly formed through his marriages to four women from local Arab and Tuareg communities.⁵⁵

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Mokhtar Belmokhtar, co-founder of Al Mourabitoun, was a former commander of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the North African affiliate of Al Qaeda. Al Mourabitoun formed as a merger between the Al Mulathamun Battalion and the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO), both of which were splinter groups of AQIM. The two groups merged in order to consolidate efforts to establish Shariah law in North Africa and free those in northern Mali from external influences. The organization preserved contact with many AQIM leaders, including Yahia Djouadi and Djamel Akkacha, the coordinator for AQIM-affiliated groups in northern Mali.⁵⁶

On June 2, 2014, the UN added Al Mourabitoun to its list of AQ-associated individuals and entities. Al Mourabitoun declared its allegiance to Al Qaeda on July 21, 2015, when it published an online statement declaring AQ-affiliated Belmokhtar as its new leader. After Al Mourabitoun and AQIM launched their first joint attack, on the Raddison Blu Hotel in November 2015, AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel announced Al Mourabitoun’s official merger with AQIM.⁵⁷

In May 2015, self-proclaimed emir Sahrawi released a message swearing Al Mourabitoun’s allegiance to the Islamic State. A few days later, Belmokhtar rejected Sahrawi’s pledge and reaffirmed the organization’s allegiance to Al Qaeda. IS did not officially accept Sahrawi’s pledge until October 2016.⁵⁸

Al Mourabitoun and the Sahara branch of AQIM joined with Ansar al-Dine into the unified organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen on March 2, 2017.⁵⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS

There are no publicly available external influences for this group.

MAPS

- North Africa
- Global Al Qaeda

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⁵ Ely Ould Maghlah, "Terrorisme: les ‘Mourabitoun’ de l’Azawad menacent de s’en prendre à la France et ses alliés," Agence Nouakchott d’Information, 4 January 2014.

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⁷ "Profile: Al-Murabitoun." BBC News, 16 Jan. 2016. Web. 18 July 2016.

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