

# Key figures in al Qaeda's North African branch

**Author: Leela Jacinto, France 24**

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Unlike other al Qaeda affiliates, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has few media stars. But al Qaeda's western front is gaining in notoriety, making it imperative to understand who's who in the terror group.

In the clamorous post-9/11 world of proliferating Islamist groups, al Qaeda functions as a sort of global conglomeration, with regional affiliates fronted by iconic leaders, all of them vying for attention in the [jihadist media market](#).

Many al Qaeda leaders – especially in the central command zone of Pakistan and Afghanistan – are international household names. Others, such as the prolific Yemeni-based American “preacher” [Anwar al-Awlaki](#) – have fans across the Muslim world.

But all is not quiet on al Qaeda's western front, with the terror group's North African branch now entering the international stage. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) was officially launched in 2006. “Maghreb” is the Arabic term literally meaning “land of the sunset” or the West and refers to the Western-most outpost of the Arab world, a loosely defined region stretching across Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania and the remote transition belt between the Sahara desert and the African savannah called the Sahel.

A hostile, forbidding terrain that straddles national borders, the Sahel has historically been Africa's badlands, affording shelter to smugglers, traffickers, insurgents and militants of various stripes.

The chronic political instability in impoverished West African nations such as Niger, Mali and Mauritania make it a militant haven. The region is sometimes described as having “a coup here, a coup there and cocaine and militants everywhere”.

The remote terrain is partly to blame for the shroud of secrecy surrounding AQIM. The group occasionally makes the headlines when it claims the kidnappings of Western diplomats or tourists in the region. Sometimes, gruesome messages of hostage executions follow. More often though, the hostages are mysteriously released with news reports citing million-dollar ransom payments, but governments stoutly denying the reports.

And yet, as the executions of British tourist [Edwin Dyer](#) and French aid worker [Michel Germaneau](#) show, AQIM is a potent threat.

So who are the men behind these kidnappings and executions?

AQIM was born out of the remnants of Algerian Islamist groups that waged a bloody insurgency against the Algerian security services in the 1990s. The big move came in 2006 when the Algerian group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (known by its French acronym GSPC) officially declared its merger with al Qaeda to become the terror group's North African affiliate.

Divided into "katibas" or brigades, AQIM is basically a clustered movement of different militant cells, many of them autonomously funded and run.

Here is a look at some key AQIM figures:

**The 'emir': Abdelmalek Droukdel**

**Aliases: Abu Musab Abdul Wadoud**



With his flowing dark beard and penetrating eyes beneath a securely tied turban, Droukdel is the best-known face of al Qaeda's North African branch.

A university mathematics graduate, he shot into international fame following his July 2008 interview with [The New York Times](#), which was accompanied by photographs of the AQIM chief wading through streams in the lush woodlands of eastern Algeria.

Born in 1970 in the northern Algerian town of Meftah, Droukdel is believed to have fought in the Afghan civil war as a young man. An explosives expert, he returned to his native Algeria where he joined the GSPC, a splinter of the Armed Islamic Group or GIA.

He shot into prominence following the March 2004 capture of charismatic GSPC leader Nabil Sahraoui, also known as "El Para" since he had trained as an Algerian paratrooper.

According to [The New York Times](#), following El Para's capture, Droukdel contacted Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then leader of al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, to enquire if Zarqawi could capture French citizens to trade for El Para's release.

He played a critical role in merging the GSPC with al Qaeda to form AQIM.

Based in the AQIM's so-called northern zone, Droukdel is the 'emir' or supreme leader of the group. But given the vast terrain of AQIM operations and the relative autonomy of various katibas, Droukdel's operational control of the outfit is probably minimal.

### **The 'hardliner': Abdelhamid Abou Zeid**

**Aliases: Abid Hammadou**

**Leader of "Tareq Ibn Ziyad" or "El Fatihine" katiba**

The most dreaded of AQIM figures, Abou Zeid is known to be violent, brutal and fanatical.

Abou Zeid heads the "Tareq Ibn Ziyad" or "El Fatihine" katiba, one of the most radical AQIM branches responsible for the execution of British tourist Edwin Dyer and French aid worker Michel Germaneau.

His group is believed to be behind the recent abduction of five French nuclear and construction workers in northern Niger on September 16, raising fears about the hostages' safety.

In an interview with the French weekly magazine Jeune Afrique, Pierre Camatte, a former hostage, described Abou Zeid as a "tiny, rickety man with a goatee in his '50s". Camatte was released in February 2010 after three months of detention. But Abou Zeid's other captives have not been as lucky.

Born in the Algerian town of Touggourt, located about 600 km south of Algiers in the Algerian Sahara, he was a member of FIS, the Algerian Islamic party that was denied an election victory in the early 1990s, triggering the brutal Algerian civil war.

He later joined the GSPC where he served under Mokhtar Belmokhtar (see profile below) before rising up the insurgent ranks.

Experts say that Abou Zeid, unlike Droukdel, is not very well-educated and does not speak the erudite Arabic of many respected al Qaeda figures. But what makes him more dangerous, according to French counter-terror experts, is his ambition and his need to distinguish himself to al Qaeda central command leaders in Pakistan.

### **The 'one-eyed one': Mokhtar Belmokhtar**

**Aliases: Khaled Abou al-Abbas, Laâouar ("one-eyed" in Arabic), Mr. Marlboro**



Born in 1972 in Ghardaia, Algeria, Belmokhtar is an alumnus of al Qaeda's Afghan training camps at Khalden and Jalalabad as well as a veteran of Algeria's jihadist violence during the 1990s.

Nicknamed laâouar, or one-eyed, after he lost an eye handling explosives, Belmokhtar is considered less fanatical and largely in it for the money. His areas of command are the lawless border zones of the Sahel, which gives him ample opportunity to deal with local Tuareg tribes who survive on smuggling networks. His involvement in smuggling operations is notorious enough to earn him the nickname "Mr. Marlboro".

Just as senior Arab al Qaeda leaders integrated into Afghan and Pakistani tribal society by marrying local women, this Algerian national has forged close links with the Tuareg by marrying women from notable Tuareg families.

Belmokhtar's excellent local networks enable him to conduct his jihadi business in a culturally foreign terrain.

While the Tuareg are impoverished and often lawless, they are not known to be ideological hardliners. Belmokhtar's success lies in using local mercenaries to travel to urban areas in the Sahel, where a northerner would attract attention, to conduct kidnapping and smuggling raids.

Hostages captured by Belmokhtar's cell often tend to be released in exchange for a ransom.

### **The 'lieutenant': Yahia Aboul Hammam**

#### **Alias: Djamel Akacha**

The second-in-command and right-hand man to Abou Zeid, Hammam is believed to be in his 30s.

Born in eastern Algiers, the young man joined the GSPC before it merged with al Qaeda.

As Abou Zeid's number two, he is believed to have conducted Germaneau's execution, a killing that sent shock waves across France.

His current whereabouts though are unknown. According to Mauritanian media reports, he was killed in an offensive by the Mauritanian military along the Mauritania-Mali border on Sept. 21. The report has not been confirmed.