Since the seizure of northern Mali during 2012, the Malian jihadist figure Oumar Ould Hamaha has emerged from the often formless haze of rarely glimpsed AQIM kidnap groups operating in the Sahel region. From the start of April 2012 in Timbuktu, Hamaha has repeatedly appeared as the aggressive front man for the jihadist groups in Azawad, discharging threatening tirades and bluster through a number of mediums. Previously, the only public image of Hamaha had been brief, blurry amateur video clips filmed by AQIM fighters and later uploaded on YouTube.1) In 2010 he also appeared in a video as one of the main speakers at a jihadist gathering held in an unidentified mountainous area, somewhere in the Sahara.

A more concise portrait of Hamaha had already existed in the written account of one of his former hostages, the Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler’s book A Season In Hell.2) However, Fowler was perhaps unaware of Hamaha’s full identity and named him only as “Omar One” meaning that few automatically connected Hamaha to Fowler’s description.

Having been personally abducted by Hamaha in 2008, Fowler closely depicted his kidnapper as a
zealous and utterly dedicated jihadist orator with an overriding interest in proselytization to the extent of repeatedly attempting to convert his hostages; as a skilled kidnapper nevertheless genuinely concerned with victims well-being beyond their usefulness in attaining specific objectives; as a fanatical, single-minded jihadist whose idea of the perfect assignment was to gatecrash a meeting on women's rights at the UN and blow himself up; as a highly skilled desert driver able to drive 56 hours from Niger to Mali navigating by stars; as a manipulative kidnapper and terrorist who enjoys playing mind games.

The precise contours of Hamaha’s biography remain vague. Hamaha himself states that he was born on 5 July 1963 in Kidal. Other accounts claim that he was born in 1965 into a large family of Arabic berabiches nomads in Bèr, a Malian village 53km east of Timbuktu. Whether Kidal or Bèr, he was born in the desert, and wants to die in the desert. It is his natural environment.

Despite his simple origins, Hamaha has been depicted by peers as "a brilliant student, very pious but he was interested in everything, including philosophy." He is proficient in several languages, including Arabic, Bambera French and English. Although he purportedly attended a French-Arab Lycee, rather than enrolling at a University, Hamaha instead attended a Madrassa in Mauritania, returning to Mali in 1990 as a devotee of Islam, even clashing with the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Timbuktu for the right to preach. He was politely but firmly refused.

His self-depiction is of a well-travelled international preacher who has “preached at the mosque in Saint-Denis, Meaux, Melun… [and] travelled to Pakistan, India, Tunisia, in Morocco, in Algeria, Libya, Ethiopia, in Chad, in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, in Senegal, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Gambia, Mauritania.”

Hamaha even claims to have spent 40 days in France at the end of 2000 using an Schengen visa. Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, but Hamaha states that 2000 marked the beginning of his twelve year jihad. Although a passionate proselytiser, his nickname of "HAKKA", referring to his dexterity in handling the AK-47 rifle, is illustrative of his parallel dedication to the physical jihad.

It should be recognised, however, that Hamaha loathes Western journalists and enjoys manipulating others. One example was his deceiving of the Canadian hostage Fowler of his English language knowledge, which the
victims had assumed was a secure language to speak amongst themselves.

The depiction of his kidnap victims is of a severe Salafist, reinforced by more recent accounts. Hamaha himself does not dampen his extremism, saying of the cessation of Mali’s vibrant music scene since the seizure of Azawad by jihadists: “instead of singing…why don’t they subject themselves to God and pray? We are not only against the musicians in Mali. We are in a struggle against all the musicians of the world.”

He can be vain nevertheless. He reportedly never leaves home without checking the disposition of his famous red-dyed goatee.

Much of the significance of this individual lies in his
closeness to one of the most important jihadist personalities in West Africa: Mokhtar Belmokhtar, until recently commanding the al-Moulathamoune katiba, a part of AQIM’s Sahel zone.

Together with Abu Zaid, Belmokhtar is one of the major kidnappers of foreign nationals in the region. Directed by Belmokhtar, Hamaha conducted the kidnapping of Fowler and his Canadian colleague. In addition to being one of Belmokhtar’s senior lieutenants for a number of years, the two are related by marriage. Belmokhtar has been married to Hamaha’s niece. An illustration of their closeness was seen when information emerged describing the recent removal of Belmokhtar as head of the al-Moulathamoune katiba and was immediately denied
by Hamaha, stating “for the moment, these are echoes. These are echoes you hear, but what is certain is that the jihad continues.”

The career kidnapper

The French journalist Serge Daniel describes in his 2012 book upon AQIM how the kidnap in November 2009 of three Spanish aid workers - Alicia Gamez, Albert Vilalta and Roque Pascual - was conducted by Hamaha. Daniel writes that shortly after the kidnapping Hamaha was himself captured on Malian territory and transported to Mauritania to stand trial accused of abducting the three Spaniards on the road between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. He was accused by Mauritanian justice of having received 15,000 Euros from al-Qaeda for participating in the kidnap.

Daniel alleges that the Spanish government pressured the friendly Mauritanian government to free Hamaha as part of the conditions imposed by AQIM for releasing the hostages. Officially, he was extradited to Mali to serve the remainder of his sentence. Daniel instead claims that upon his release in March 2010, he arrived in Mali and proceeded to Burkina Faso, the intermediary country negotiating the release of Spanish hostages. In this country, together with the mediator, he arranged to free the remaining Spaniards, which he had personally abduced. Having seen Hamaha in person, AQIM finally agreed to release the two male Spanish hostages. The female hostage had been released in March 2010.

MOJWA presently holds three or four Algerian diplomats as hostage. Seven Algerians were taken in April 2012 when the consulate in Gao was overrun

Sanad Ould Bouamama, a Berabiche member of AQIM, and Ansar Dine. Abu Zaid’s shadow man. He was his chief logistics and intelligence.

Oumar Ould Hamaha, in addition to being one of Belmokhtar’s senior lieutenants for a number of years, the two are related by marriage.

Yahya Abu al-Hammam was close to Abu Zaid. Though the new Emir of Sahara, he is still considered an ally of his former leader.

Abu Zaid, Mokhtar Belmokhtar & Yahya Abu al-Hammam – support & allies
centre's note – oumar ould hamaha : a case study of the bridges between three groups

number 3, january 10, 2013

« Celui qui suit bien la guerre de croisade moderne de nos jours réalise qu'elle est différente d'un lieu à un autre selon les objectifs attendus d'elle, et en raison de la grande importance du Grand Sahara, l'un des objectifs majeurs de la guerre est de garantir une mainmise des Puissances du Kafir mondial dans cette région sensible. C'est connu que la Stratégie de l'ennemi croise de prendre maintenant de la politique d'implication dans des organisations dans la production des armes, pays, Sahwas ... pareil à ce qui se passa en Somalie !

Il est historiquement connu que la Nation Musulmane Azawadi a souffert durant de longues décennies de l'injustice, de l'oppression, de la marginalisation, de la privation de leurs droits les plus simples et que la nation a essayé de plusieurs occasions de lever l'injustice pesant sur elle et récupérer ses droits volés, et cela s'est manifesté dans les nombreuses révolutions conduites par cette nation contre le taghat (...).

(...) le leadership d’Azawad n’ait pas changé ; Iyad Ag Ghaly, le leader d’Ansar Al-Din est le leader historique de ces révolutions.

...
seemingly disgraced in the perception of the AQIM hierarchy, may further distance him from the group.

The Chameleon

Just as significant is the insight into the present relationship and interaction of the jihadist groups in Azawad, which an examination of Hamaha provides. Something of an enigma and a chameleon, both figuratively and literally, since leaving the confines of Fowlers hostage account as the AQIM kidnapper “Omar One”, Hamaha has seemingly transitioned and realigned groups in a brief period of months. After years with Belmokhtar’s AQIM Katiba in the Sahel, Hamaha appeared in an AFP video published on 6 April 2012 stating “nous sommes Ansar Dine”.14 However, since August 2012, Hamaha has been consistently referred to as a senior military commander of MOJWA. Quite how and why Hamaha is switching so easily and rapidly from one group to another is unclear. That he can do suggests that he is likely well connected and respected. Hamaha may have been dispatched by AQIM - perhaps at the behest of Belmokhtar personally - to Ansar al-Din to bolster the group and bring a distinctly Malian shape to its leadership. Some reporting has suggested that, together with Iyad ag Ghali leader of Ansar al-Din, Hamaha was assigned by AQIM to rally fighters from the Arab and Tuareg communities to the cause. The same reporting likewise suggests that Hamaha is currently performing the same role with MOJWA.15

His ability to move between the three jihadist groups in Azawad is illustrative of Hamaha’s chameleon-like complexity as a character and the closeness of the relationship between the organisations. AQIM forms the mother group for both MOJWA and Ansar Dine. Many of the commanders of these other groups were formerly AQIM fighters and strong linkages have been retained. Responding to his shift in groups, Hamaha has himself commented that "we are all mujahedeen. Whether a fighter is from MOJWA, Ansar Dine or AQIM, it’s the same thing…We have the same ambition, the application of sharia. Whenever there’s an attack on one of us, it’s an attack on everyone."16 This denial of substantive differences has likewise been repeated by other significant personalities. Yahya Abu al-Hammam has stated that AQIM does not recognise MOJWA's split from the main movement but the two were cooperating and talking to each other.17

Latest information states that Hamaha has assisted in the creation of Ansar al-Shari'ah, a dissident branch of MOJWA and Ansar al-Din. His claimed intention is "to attract all Arabs from the area to form an exclusively Arab front."18 Hamaha’s precise role in the Malian Ansar al-Shari’ah is undetermined. However, given his aforementioned roles in transitioning between newly created groups, his involvement in a fourth entity would be unsurprising. Local media state that “the majority of the leaders of the new group are from the Al Barabiche tribe, which is spread over the region of Tombouctou, and ... some of the families of the tribe have relations by marriage with elements of al Qaeda.”19 Hamaha’s purported Berabiche tribal origins suggest that he is a natural fit for a senior role in Ansar al-Shari’ah.

One member of the Ansar al-Shari’ah is reportedly Sanad Ould Bouamama, a Berabiche member of AQIM and Ansar Dine.20 Having attacked secessionist MNLA positions at Inhallil on the border with Algeria, Ansar al-Shari’ah has reportedly been bolstered by seizures of captured vehicles and ammunition.

Despite the outward changes in group affiliations, the distinctions between the groups in the region are often difficult to determine. The groups acted jointly during the seizure of Azawad in 2012 and continue to do so to varying degrees. They are also dressed and equipped with essentially the same small arms, heavy weapons captured from the Malian army and the ubiquitous khaki coloured Toyota 4x4 pickups all baring the black jihadist flag with the Prophet’s white seal. Local people in northern Mali are themselves unable to determine which group is which.

The nature of the connections between individuals across the
three groups is frequently based upon shared religious ideology, tribal affiliations, camaraderie fostered by years fighting jihad in the desert and reinforced by formal relationships through marriages.

Hamaha’s relationship with Belmokhtar – cemented through Belmoktar’s marriage to his niece - is illustrative of this and is perhaps one of the main factors in the bridges between the jihdist groups in Mali. His vocal support for his former Katiba commander when Belmokhtar’s dismissal from its leadership was reported during a period when Hamaha was supposedly a senior figure of an AQIM splinter faction perhaps underlines the often overriding personal bonds between leading figures in the groups irregardless of internal politics.

Despite the apparent fractures between AQIM, MOJWA, Belmokhtar and others, the case study of Oumar Ould Hamaha suggests that factional politics and rivalries is unlikely to alter the practical relationships on the ground of the jihadist elements in the Sahel region that have operated together in various guises for years.

« They are also dressed and equipped with essentially the same small arms, heavy weapons captured from the Malian army and the ubiquitous khaki coloured Toyota 4x4 pickups all baring the black jihadist flag with the Prophet’s white seal. Local people in northern Mali are themselves unable to determine which group is which ».

Picture 1: AQIM Timbuktu hostages Toyota

Picture 2: Ansar al-Din Timbuktu

Picture 3: escort of a MOJWA commander, Gao
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Footnotes and references:

1) See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2ejGEEzhJk, Hamaha visible at 2mins 50secs


14) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGDzbmA8GbY.


16) Serge Daniel, AFP, “Al-Qaeda main threat as lines between Mali Islamists fade”.


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