

Algeria hostage crisis ends in bloodbath

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On Saturday evening, Algerian military forces stormed the Tinguetourine natural gas facility in Amenas, where over 30 Al Qaeda-linked fighters were holding hostages.

Last night, reports indicated that the operation claimed the lives of 48 hostages and up to 32 of the fighters of the Al Qaeda-linked Signed-in-Blood Battalion. They were demanding a prisoner exchange and the end of the ongoing French war in Mali. American, British, French, Japanese, Norwegian, and Romanian workers were among those dead or missing.

Signed-in-Blood Battalion leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who as a youth fought in the final days of the US-led war against the Soviet-backed Afghan regime in Kabul, claimed responsibility for the attack in a video released yesterday. He said, “We in Al Qaeda announce this blessed operation,” adding that roughly 40 attackers had participated in the raid.

Available information about casualties was still provisional and self-contradictory. The Algerian army’s operation was so violent that it was reportedly difficult for rescuers to tell from the human remains how many people were killed or who they were. On Saturday Algerian Special Forces found 15 unidentified burned bodies at the plant.

Algerian Communication Minister Mohamed Saïd said, “I strongly fear that the death toll will be revised upward.”

He also supported the French war in Mali. He announced that Algeria would continue to authorize France, the former colonial power in Algeria and neighboring Mali, to use Algerian airspace to bomb targets in Mali.

Saïd added that Algiers would tighten security at the country’s industrial facilities: “This is an issue that will be addressed in accordance with the supreme interests of Algeria. In this kind of situation, national interest takes precedence and it is the country’s supreme

authorities who will judge whether to authorize or not to authorize such action.”

It appears, however, that the hostage-takers had help from inside the Tinguetourine facility, raising further questions about Algerian security forces. Five of the Islamists reportedly were workers at the plant, including one French citizen. Another spoke English with a North American accent and may have been Canadian.

British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President François Hollande both defended Algiers’ violent response to the hostage situation, which was initially criticized by Japan, as well as Britain and the United States. Cameron commented, “Of course people will ask questions about the Algerian response to these events, but I would just say that the responsibility for these deaths lies squarely with the terrorists.”

The bloody ending of the hostage crisis in Algeria underscores the devastating consequences of the multiple imperialist interventions in Africa and the Middle East, going back to the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s in which Belmokhtar reportedly received his training.

The 2011 NATO war to topple Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya undermined the tenuous equilibrium Gaddafi helped keep among Tuareg and other tribal groups in the Sahara. Together with the influence of regional Islamist groups, which was boosted by NATO’s decision to place numerous Al Qaeda-linked Libyans in positions of power in Libya, this undermined the Malian military’s control over the country’s restive north. Just over a week ago, as the unpopular Malian military junta was threatened with collapse, France began bombing Mali.

The violence has now spilled into Algeria, exposing its vulnerability to the violence that is rapidly spreading throughout the region. Amenas is in the Sahara desert near the border with Libya, in southern Algeria—the

area through which weapons and fighters from Libya transit to reach northern Mali.

The penetration of Algerian energy facilities also underscores the fragile character of the Algerian regime itself. It fought a bloody, 11-year civil war against Islamist groups starting in 1991, after the military intervened to halt the counting of votes in an election which Islamist parties were thought to have won.

Hollande's war in Mali also exposes France to retaliation. Already during the Algerian civil war, Algerian Islamist groups supported by Osama bin Laden tried to hijack a jetliner and crash it into the Eiffel Tower in 1994; in 1995 they bombed the St. Michel regional train station in Paris.

Officials of NATO powers seized upon the hostage crisis to call for stepped-up intervention in North Africa. French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called it an "act of war."

British Prime Minister David Cameron pledged a lasting war in North Africa, modeled on the US war in Afghanistan. He said, "This is a global threat and it will require a global response. It will require a response that is about years, even decades, rather than months. ... What we face is an extremist, Islamist, Al Qaeda-linked terrorist group. Just as we had to deal with that in Pakistan and in Afghanistan, so the world needs to come together to deal with this threat in North Africa."

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on Friday made similar threats to escalate US military operations in North Africa: "We have made a commitment that we're going to go after Al Qaeda wherever they are and wherever they try to hide. We have done that obviously in Afghanistan, Pakistan, we've done it in Somalia, in Yemen, and we will do it in North Africa."

In Mali itself, French forces continued their build-up in central Mali amid heavy fighting with Islamist-led rebel forces. They invaded the towns of Niono and Mopti, near the strategic Sévaré airport, according to French military spokesman Col. Thierry Bukhard.

Some 400 troops from Nigeria, Togo, and Benin arrived Sunday in Bamako, as well as troops from Chad—considered more effective due to their familiarity with the desert-like terrain of northern Mali. African countries are expected to contribute roughly 3,000 troops to French imperialism's war in Mali.

French troops are struggling in combat with rebel forces, however, launching a dozen strikes by fighter-

bombers and helicopter gunships in the last 24 hours. They are still trying to seize the contested town of Diabaly. Le Drian told France-5 TV, "Right now, the town of Diabaly is not re-taken. [But] everything leads one to believe Diabaly is going to head in the positive direction in the coming hours."

Even if French forces and their African auxiliaries succeed in conquering central Mali, however, this will only create the conditions for a war of occupation in northern Mali—a vast region of deserts and mountains, long separate from the central government in Bamako. Islamist fighters are reportedly retreating towards Kidal in the east of northern Mali, preparing a strategy of guerrilla resistance centered on the region's rugged Adrar des Ifoghas mountains.



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