

France confirms killing of Al Qaeda leader Abou Zeid in Mali

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On Saturday, the French government confirmed the death of Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, the leader of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), in a French-led military operation in Northern Mali last month.

In a press statement of the Elysée presidential palace, French President François Hollande confirmed that Zeid's death occurred "in fighting carried out by the French army in the Adrar des Ifoghas [mountains] in northern Mali, at the end of February."

On February 28, Algerian TV station Ennahar had first reported that Zeid was killed along with 40 Islamist militants on February 25, in fighting near the mountainous region of Tigargara in northern Mali. At the time, Paris neither denied nor confirmed his death, awaiting the results of DNA tests. On March 1, Chadian President Idriss Deby said Zeid had been killed by Chadian troops, who are fighting in alliance with France.

France invaded Northern Mali in January, claiming the operation was part of the "war on terror," aiming to retake parts of northern Mali controlled by Islamist and Tuareg militias since early 2012. France has sent some 4,000 troops into Mali and overseen the deployment of some 8,000 West African troops fighting alongside French and Malian government troops.

Paris has captured Northern Mali's key cities, including Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, with aerial strikes and then ground assaults. The civilian death toll resulting from the French war is still unknown, however, as Paris blocks media reports from the war-torn area. Five French soldiers have been killed.

The Elysée Palace statement claimed that Zeid's death was a victory in the war against terrorism: "The passing of one of AQIM's main leaders marks an important step in the struggle against terrorism in the Sahel."

In fact, the French military intervention in Mali has nothing to do with fighting terrorism. It is a pretext for escalating war in Africa, bound up with geo-strategic interests of the imperialist powers, aimed at undermining the influence of rival powers, particularly China. The war, fought over control of potentially oil-rich regions of Mali located at the centre of the strategic Sahel region, has served as political cover for deploying French, US, and European forces to secure the Sahel's uranium mines, military bases, and other key locations.

Like Al Qaeda and its original leader Osama bin Laden, AQIM's reactionary politics often aligned his organizations on the interests of the imperialist powers.

An Algerian national, Abou Zeid was a member of an Algerian Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Zeid joined the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), whose forces had initially been mobilized by US imperialism to fight the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul in the 1980s and 1990s, then returned to Algeria.

Paris, backed by Washington, sharply opposed the FIS' victory in the 1990 Algerian election, however, backing a military coup. This triggered the brutal Algerian civil war, in which over 100,000 Algerians were killed, and during which the Algerian regime deepened its relations with France, the former colonial power. Many Algerian Islamist fighters took refuge across the border from Algeria, in northern Mali.

In 2007, the GSPC changed its name to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. In another sharp shift, however, these forces were again mobilized by imperialism after the revolutionary working class struggles in Tunisia and Egypt in the winter of 2011.

Having attacked Libya in March 2011, Paris and Washington backed Islamists militias tied to AQIM to

topple the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. In Syria, Western powers and their regional powers, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are still backing the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front, stoking a civil war aiming to topple President Bashar al Assad.

Abou Zeid's death will not put an end to the imperialist violence meted out by France to the northern Malian population, any more than it marks a step forward in a supposed struggle against terrorism.

Amid rising popular disquiet and falling support for the war in opinion polls, the Hollande government is saying that it may begin to withdraw troops starting next month. On March 20, Hollande announced that "the quasi-totality of Mali's territory will again be under Malian sovereignty in a few days."

In fact, fighting is continuing in Northern Mali. On Saturday, clashes erupted after Islamist rebels of the Movement for the Oneness of Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) entered Gao. It was the third major attack on Gao since it was taken by French and Malian troops.

According to Al Jazeera, "the assault indicates that MUJAO remains entrenched and able to attack despite the thousands of French troops who have liberated most of northern Mali's towns from control by the rebels."

As war continues in Mali, Paris is pursuing its imperialist ambitions, promoting French corporations' reconstruction projects in Mali. French and Malian officials held a conference in Lyon, France last week, discussing some 300 local projects.

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said, "We are in the process of winning the war. We also have to win the peace. And winning the peace involved a whole series of acts to help democracy and development. And, of course, local authorities, the French state and Europe, international authorities too, all must aid this development. To put it simply, we must now set about securing the country."



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