

Why Terrorist Groups Dismiss Dissident Leaders

Despite a wide-spread popular opinion that terrorists are mentally ill, individuals with behavioral and personality issues rarely make it into the ranks of stalwarts, and, if they do, their commanders are not tolerant of self-serving antics, a lack of discipline, and oppositional and defiant behavior. Two examples of individuals who were once high-ranking leaders in their respective terror groups are Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau, showing why terrorist groups dismiss dissent leaders.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar



Belmokhtar is best known for the hostage crisis he masterminded in January 2013 at the Ain Amenas gas facility in Algeria, where more than 800 people were taken hostage by his newly formed terrorist group, al-Mulathameen (Masked) Brigade.

Thirty-nine of the hostages were killed before the rest were rescued.

A few months later, Belmokhtar's group attacked a French-owned uranium factory near the town of Arlit in northern Niger, an attack he later said was retaliation for France's intervention in Mali.

"He is among the most significant terrorist leaders in Africa because of his operational range from Algeria and Libya to Nigeria and his long-time loyalty to al-Qaida, despite his record of being an independent-minded terrorist who has clashed with AQIM leadership and hierarchies," said Zenn.

Born in northern Algeria, Belmokhtar traveled to Afghanistan in 1991 to fight with the mujahadeen against the pro-Soviet government following the withdrawal of Soviet Union troops. Following participating in the Algerian Civil War, Belmokhtar became a commander in the Mali-based Islamist Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Belmokhtar's reputation as a hardened fighter, leader, and financier in the Sahel gained him standing with the emir Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, the founder and (then) leader of AQIM. As Belmokhtar's power and prestige grew, Wadoud began to view him as a threat to his own power. Wadoud gave more responsibility to Belmokhtar's rival

commander, Abdelhamid Abou Zeid, to deflect Belmokhtar's growing authority in Algeria and Mali. Apparently disapproving of Belmokhtar's criminal trafficking activities for years, and strained relations with Abou Zeid, who controlled Timbuktu, Wadoud ousted Belmokhtar in favor of the latter.

Belmokhtar used the opportunity to form and command his own jihadist group, the Islamist al-Mulathameen (Masked) Brigade, or al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam (Those who Sign with Blood) Brigade. Like Wadoud, he continues to pledge allegiance to and take direction from al-Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri.

According to John Campbell, a former US ambassador to Nigeria, Belmokhtar presents a particular challenge as a terrorist leader.

"He's a very good example of how a person can be a criminal (a smuggler or a kidnapper), can be a jihadi radical, and can be a revolutionary all at one time, and depending on what the circumstances are," he said.

Jacob Zenn, an expert on extremism at the Jamestown Foundation in Washington, DC, said Belmokhtar's real contribution to jihadism has been his ability to bridge insurgent elements all the way from Nigeria and other parts of the Sahel to Algeria and Libya. He has extensive connections with the local tribes in the Sahel through marriage.

According to a source, a rapprochement is also reportedly at work between IS and AQIM in the Sahel.

"There isn't yet talk of a merger, but we note that the two groups, each with their own zones of influence, have evolved from hostility to non-hostility," the source said.

Abubakar Shekau

Another terrorist commander whose position suffered because of erratic leadership, undisciplined followers, bitter in-fighting, and harsh treatment of civilians is Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau.

Due to the continuation of Shekau's extremism, in declaring takfir on the Muslims and killing them, in August 2016, ISIL appointed Abu Musab al-Barnawi as the leader of the group in place of Shekau. Shekau refused to recognize Barnawi's authority and split off part of the group under its original name of Jamaat Ahlus Sunnah li Dawah wal Jihad , while Barnawi, whose father Mohammed Yusuf founded Boko Haram, lead the Islamic State's West African province. While Shekau continues to lead his group, he has only 1,500 soldiers, whereas Barnawi has 3,500.

In an interview, Falmata Abubakar, Shekau's mother, she said that Abubakar left the village of

Shekau as a boy to pursue Islamic studies in Maiduguri, where he became an almajiri, a young boy sent by their parents to the nearest town or city where they typically beg in the morning and study the Quran in the afternoon. In Maiduguri, he met Mohammed Yusuf, the late founder of Boko Haram. Yusuf, Falmata says, “brainwashed” her son, and after he was murdered by police in 2009, Shekau became the head of Boko Haram.

Organizational Qualities

In many ways, an effective terrorist organization functions the same as other well-run organizations. Having a central vision, mission, and plans to achieve it, the founders and leaders build a network of resources and people that are aligned with their vision and facilitate success. They expect discipline and a consistent execution of plans from everyone to maximize success. Wayward views and actions, especially insubordination, are not tolerated. Members are expected to set aside their personal differences and invest in the shared ideology and vision of the organization.

Brand-building is another important aspect of modern terror groups, which they develop and exploit to win over new recruits and sponsors and keep the interest of current followers. A strong brand has a central theme and message, which dissident commanders often erode and weaken by following their own whims and self-interests.

Non-sanctioned violence against local populations has also proven to lose support, attract unwanted attention, and heighten security measures unnecessarily. Both Belmokhtar and Shekau are a testament to the harsh opposition that violence against civilians can attract. Arguably, this has also been one of the largest prompts of reaction against the Islamic State's governance and control of land and people. A terrorist organization increases survivability by carefully balancing the intensity and frequency of violent events, with local support, land control, and consistent governance, i.e., political participation, consistent leadership, financial management, and operational effectiveness. There is no place for dissident commanders or members unless they have a very short-term role to play and are therefore expendable.