Salima Tlemcani: "Claim of Responsibility for the Attack on a Barracks in Mauritania: Mokhtar Belmokhtar Brags About His Allegiance to Al-Qaeda"

On its Web site, the Salafi Group for Call and Combat [GSPC] has just published quite an interesting interview with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the amir of the Sahara zone.

The latter not only claimed responsibility for the attack that was carried out on a barracks in Mauritania but also revealed that the majority of the perpetrators were Algerians from the GSPC. Going into extensive detail Belmokhtar, nicknamed Belaouer (the one-eyed), or Khaled Abou Al Abbes, who was born in Ghardaia in 1972, told how he organized and directed the operation, called ghazouat Badr (invasion of Badr). "I insist on telling you that there is a strong American presence in the Sahel region and in the Algerian Sahara. That presence has been reinforced since the Americans learned that there were contacts with Al-Qa'ida, particularly following the death of our brother Abou Mohamed Al Yamani. US camps exist in Gao, in Mali, in Agadez, in Niger, and another that is in the process of being set up in Naama, in Mauritania, and in Tamanrasset, in Algeria. The activity of those troops with those of the armies of those countries has become intense. We have often skirmished with them, just as we laid ambushes against those troops, like the one that targeted the Nigerien anti-terror forces. We have noticed that the Mauritanian [P]ouvoir has sworn allegiance to the Americans and the Israelis and waged a war against the brothers from the Islamic movement, particularly following the visit by the Israeli foreign affairs minister and the military maneuvers that were conducted jointly with the American troops in the Lemghiti region, which saw the same maneuvers take place two years earlier. So we decided to attack that military zone to show those forces that we cannot stand about idly given what is happening. That was a victory and the operation was the cause of the fall of Ould Tayaa's regime." Returning to how that attack was organized, Belmokhtar said that the latter had required three assault groups and two other mobile ones in charge of support. "The encircling and the attack occurred simultaneously, at about 0630 hours, at sunrise. First there was intense fire from heavy armaments, emphasizing transmission stations to avoid any arrival of reinforcements, and then an assault on the very center of the barracks. Which greatly disturbed the soldiers to the point that they were not even able to use their weaponry, which was quickly confiscated. The attack lasted a maximum of 15 minutes, at the end of which we lost six of our men, Abou Ishak Ibrahim, the head of the assault group; Assem Abou Said; Abou Doujana; Abdelhakim; Bachir Abou Al Barra; and Abou Mohamed Al Jinki (a Mauritanian). The operation nonetheless resulted in the deaths of 15 soldiers, the barracks chief among them, as many injured, and we took 30 soldiers, one of them an officer, hostage. With respect to weaponry, we recovered an SPG9-type mortar, an anti-aircraft cannon (14.5 Douthka (12.7)), 58 Kalashnikovs, two RPG7's, close to 50,000 cartridges, and seven Toyotas." Regarding the hostages, Belmokhtar indicated that the idea of abducting them had been very carefully studied. Advice was even solicited "from the Mauritanian brothers" before deciding to release them. Belmokhtar paid tribute to all jihadists, in particular citing Bin Ladin, his right-hand man Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, whom he said he had known in Afghanistan; and Mullah Omar, the head of the Taliban. In
Belmokhtar revealed that he had gone to Afghanistan in the early 1990's with three of his neighbors, where he remained for a year and a half. During that period, he underwent guerrilla training and received military training in the Khalden and Jihadwal camps as well as at Al-Qa'ida's camps in Jalalabad. "I met many well known jihadists and it must be recognized that Afghanistan was a veritable reunion of fighters from the entire world, from Morocco to Indonesia and the Philippines. I traveled a lot among the Kardiz, Jalalabad, and Kabul regions. After the events of June 1991, many fighters came to the country, among whom was Abderrahmane Abou Siham, the amir who conducted the Guemmar operation and who put forth a great deal of effort to convince the troops of the necessity of the jihad in Algeria..." Belmokhtar left Afghanistan toward the end of 1992 to return to Algeria through Morocco and settle down for six months in the east of the country with Mossaab Khatir, who at the time was the amir of the east for the Armed Islamic Group [GIA]. "I returned to my home town, where, with my neighbors, I established the first core of the Achahada katibat, whose activities subsequently spread to the entire Sahara and the countries of the Sahel. Our attacks were directed not just at Algerian targets but also foreign ones, among which there was the assassination of five Europeans working on behalf of an American petroleum company. At that time, Abdelbaki (the zone's amir) and I had been appointed by the leadership of the emirate to make contact with the members of Al-Qa'ida who at that time were living in Sudan. Because of this, many letters were exchanged toward the end of 1994 and early 1995. Following Abdelbaki's death, I was appointed to head up the Sahara region. At that time, the differences within the leadership of the GIA began, which had strayed from its strategy, notably following the death of Abou Abderrahmane Amine, its national amir. We decided to switch our allegiance to the new leadership (...). We made contact with a great many fighters to meet and then founded the GSPC..." This was the first time Belmokhar has spoken about his career and openly declared his hostility toward the Americans on a site which, as an irony of fate, is hosted in the United States of America.