

UPDATE ON THE SITUATION IN AMENAS

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Friday, January 18th at 13:00 GMT, the utmost confusion still reigns over the drama that has been unfolding since Wednesday in Amenas, in the south of Algeria.

This situation, in the taking of this magnitude of hostages which includes dozens of foreigners and hundreds of Algerians, is relatively new and can be explained by two reasons. First, the area Amenas is in a desert, more than 1300 kilometres from the capital and it is impossible to get there without permission or escort. No journalist or outside observer is present on site. Therefore, one is obliged to settle with the traditional opacity of the official Algerian "communication", some bits of information, which have been difficult to verify, have been collected from families of hostages who say they have had recent contact with them and some statements from officials of countries affected by the crisis.

As noted by Alain Juillet, former Director of Intelligence of the DGSE, "it will take a fortnight to a month to begin to have an inkling of what really happened."

In the early afternoon, however, the French and British Prime Ministers, Jean-Marc Ayrault and David Cameron confirmed that their Algerian counterpart had told them that the military operation, which was triggered 24 hours earlier, was still on-going.

Let us try to trace the course of events before trying to draw the first conclusions from them.

1) The course of events

- On the night of Wednesday, an unknown number of terrorists, probably belonging to the dissident movement al-Qaeda led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, arrived near the facilities in Amenas (in the province of Ilizi, in the south-east of Algeria, close to the Libyan border), operated in a joint venture between BP, Statoil and Sonatrach.

- After a brief confrontation with local security officers, the terrorists - between 20 and 30 men from several "pick-ups" - took control of the "Basic life" gas field, that is to say the area of residence of the staff employed on the site.

- On Wednesday at 12:00 GMT, it was established that the terrorists held in one or more buildings, "dozens of hostages," apparently all Westerners, but had left Algerian staff free of their movements. They claimed to have taken over the premises and emitted three main demands: an end to the French operation in Mali, the release of a hundred Islamist prisoners held by Algeria and the provision of vehicles to enable them to leave with their hostages. It was obvious that the Algerian authorities would refuse to negotiate.

-On Thursday in the early afternoon, according to the fragmented testimonies collected from families of hostages, the terrorists have placed some of their prisoners in vehicles to leave. The assault was immediately given and helicopter gunships reportedly bombed five vehicles involved, four were destroyed and their inhabitants killed.

- On Friday at 12:00 GMT, the Algerian authorities reported that 18 terrorists were killed during the assault the day before and the "Basic Life" was now secure, but a "dozen" other jihadists were entrenched, with other hostages in facilities in the operating gas field.

- This last point deserves some clarification: the basic life and gas facilities are separated by about 2 to 2.5 km and a military camp is positioned between the two. It is difficult in these conditions, how the kidnappers could pass from one to another, especially from the point where the base life was supposed to be "surrounded" by the military ...

- A still undetermined number of hostages, perhaps thirty, were also killed in the operation.

- Also on Friday, the "Belmokhtar Brigade", which is also called "Those who sign with their blood" via a Mauritania broadcast issued a statement warning of the imminence of further attacks against "installations and representations" of energy companies in Algeria and against military bases.

2) First lesson

• On terrorist capabilities

- The attack in Amenas is a complex process requiring a long preparation, among other things, the acquisition of the necessary information. It could therefore be opportunistically triggered after the start of the French offensive in Mali, but it was certainly planned long before .

- Note that to find the trace of an operation as important and with such a media impact, it is necessary to go back nearly six years to the attacks of the 11th April and 12th December 2007 in Algiers (respectively against the Government Palace and the Council constitutional and UNHCR).

- In addition, this is the first time that gas or oil installations located in "useful Algeria" in the south, an area specially protected, are aimed at.

- This fully justifies the on-going operation in Mali: the gradual transformation of North Mali into a grey area combined with the influx of weapons looted from barracks and deposited by the Libyan military, allowed the terrorist gangs simmering in the Sahel to move from small unorganised groups to a heavily equipped small army.

• On the Algerian response

- It is obvious that the options left to the Algerian authorities were more than limited. We understand that it was impossible to agree to let the terrorists leave with their hostages or to even negotiate.

- However, it is clear that the procedure decided by Algeria was totally inappropriate. The liberation of hostages is a delicate operation; it is surgery that requires the intervention of

Special Forces of the army or the police. Europeans and Americans, for example, have extensive experience in this field, but not the Algerians.

- The refusal of Algeria to communicate with the countries concerned will leave traces neither London nor Washington or Tokyo or Paris have, it seems, been kept informed of the developments or of an imminent attack . Of course, the Algerians are at home, and everyone understands that it is for them to act. But when foreigners are involved in a hostage situation, it is customary for the authorities to liaise closely with the countries of the hostages and inform them of any movement and any initiative. This was not the case. This is not surprising because the Algerians have often done so in the past, especially with France, but it is very unfortunate.

- **Other attacks to come?**

- The Algerian security was at fault in an extremely sensitive area. One might think that the repetition of such action in Algeria will be difficult but other targets may be referred to in other countries in the region: embassies, other industrial installations, humanitarian missions, tourists ... so yes, there could be more attacks in coming months.

- The usual strategy of Islamist groups is indeed no direct confrontation against superior equipped forces, as are the French forces in Mali, but a strategy combining insurgency tactics (ambushes and reprisal attacks) and terrorism. And it is in the neighbouring countries of Mali and perhaps beyond it that will have the most impact.

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