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At Least 27 Dead After Al-Qaeda Faction Raids Mali Hotel

By Jason Ditz

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At least 27 people were killed today when a group of militants linked to Qaeda al-Jihad in West Africa (QJWA), a group formerly known as al-Mourabitoun, attacked the Radisson Blu hotel in the Malian capital of Bamako, taking some 170 people hostage and setting the stage for a seven-hour siege with special forces.

The attackers who seized the hotel rounded up hostages, many of them foreigners, and demanded the release of jailed jihadists as a ransom, though special forces quickly raided the hotel and managed to free the hostages.

The number of attackers remains a matter of some speculation, as two were killed in the hostage rescue, but sources initially said as many as 10 had stormed the hotel. Though Malian officials say there are no more hostages in the hotel, a number of attackers were said to be dug in on the upper floors, fighting special forces.

QJWA is a faction led by Algerian Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former figure in al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who split with that group and formed an alternative al-Qaeda affiliate in the same region. The US had claimed to have killed Belmokhtar in a June airstrike, though this was later revealed not to be the case.

There is speculation that the group, which has confirmed its responsibility for the attack, aimed to try to bring some attention back to al-Qaeda as a movement, amid a flurry of attacks by ISIS which have shifted virtually all attention to that rival faction.