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By George F. Ward

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João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço. (Source: "Minister Represents Head of State in African Games," March 9, 2015, Official Portal of the Government of the Republic of Angola, <http://www.angola.gov.ao/VerNoticia.aspx?id=29241>.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

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Prior to his founding of the Khaled Abu al-Abbas Brigade, Belmokhtar was a senior commander in the terrorist group al-Qaida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In this position, Belmokhtar conducted numerous kidnapping operations against Westerners, acquired weapons for use in terrorist attacks, and was involved in various negotiations for hostages taken by AQIM. Belmokhtar, a former Algerian soldier, was trained in camps in Afghanistan.

Excerpt from Rewards for Justice Poster, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar." (Source: [https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/mokhtar\\_belmokhtar.html#](https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/mokhtar_belmokhtar.html#), accessed 13 December 2016.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

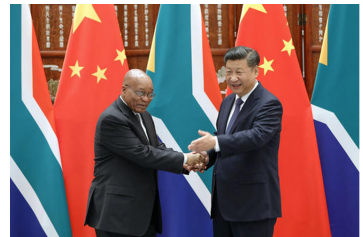
IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

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Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, shakes hands with South African President Jacob Zuma as they meet at the West Lake State Guest House in Hangzhou, China Saturday, Sept. 3, 2016. (Source: Lintao Zhang/Pool Photo via AP.)

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## The Dynamics of Succession

During its decades-long rule in Angola, the MPLA has become synonymous not only with the state, but also with control of the economy, which is based overwhelmingly on the production of oil. Dos Santos has been able to remain at the helm for so long in part due to his skill in balancing the various factions, ethnic groups, and economic interests within the MPLA.

Dos Santos has never designated a successor, and he distributed senior positions in government and business adroitly so as to protect his party leadership while also advancing the financial interests of his own family. Until this year, Manuel Vicente was the most talked-about potential successor to dos Santos. Vicente rose through the ranks of Angola's national oil company, Sonangol. He [chaired the company](#) from 1990 to 2012, acquiring a good reputation in the international petroleum community. Vicente was briefly Minister of State for Economic Cooperation in 2012 before being elevated to the vice presidency of the MPLA in the same year. After that year's elections, he became the country's vice president. Vicente abruptly fell from grace in March 2016, when [reports surfaced](#) that he was under investigation in Portugal for having allegedly bribed a public prosecutor there. Opponents of Vicente were known to view the oil executive as a political newcomer who did not deserve to succeed dos Santos. The press reports concerning Vicente emerged only days after President dos Santos had announced that he would [retire](#) from politics in 2018.

Months later, at the MPLA's congress in August 2016, João Manuel Gonçalves Lourenço was elected vice president of the party, replacing Vicente. Lourenço, variously reported to be [60](#) or [62](#) years of age, is a retired general and the incumbent minister of defense. Before assuming the defense post in 2014, he had been the [secretary general](#) of the MPLA. Following the party congress, reports surfaced that the party's electoral list in the 2017 elections would be headed by Lourenço rather than dos Santos. Were that the case, the succession question would have been effectively resolved.

## If Lourenço, Why Lourenço?

If indeed Lourenço will become dos Santos's successor, his choice could be seen as logical from at least four points of view. First, he has a long record as an MPLA stalwart rather than as a representative of a single faction or an ethnic group within the party. Second, Lourenço has solid military credentials. He rose to [general officer](#) rank in the war of liberation



against Portugal, and he was trained in the former Soviet Union. That record carries weight in a country in which military credentials, especially those stemming from the liberation war, are held in high regard. Third, Lourenço has significant international experience. As defense minister, he has traveled widely and built up a network of connections on the continent and beyond. Angola's relationship with China is crucial, and Lourenço has been entrusted with [significant consultations](#) with the Chinese government. His wife, Ana Afonso Dias Lourenço, currently serves as an [Executive Director](#) of the World Bank Group, representing Angola, Nigeria, and South Africa. Fourth and perhaps most important, Lourenço is viewed as a successor who would be likely to protect the financial and political interests of the [dos Santos family](#). The president's son, Jose Filomeno, chairs Angola's multi-billion-dollar sovereign wealth fund (see November 21, 2013, [report](#) in *Africa Watch*). His daughter, Isabel, often described as Africa's richest woman, is currently is the boss of Sonangol.

### Other Alternatives Lacking

Lourenço has twice before lost favor with dos Santos. He made a misstep in 2003, when he [commented](#) publicly on the possibility that dos Santos might leave office. He was [touted](#) as a successor to dos Santos in 2009, but was then ostracized by the president. Given dos Santos's track record of keeping rivals off balance, it is conceivable that the same might again occur. Just as Vicente fell out of the picture, so could Lourenço. The problem for dos Santos, and for Angola, is that alternatives are not abundant. Dos Santos may have the long-term hope that his children will eventually assume political control of the country, but a move in that direction now would probably be premature, given opposition among MPLA grandees. Whatever the outcome, the end of the succession drama appears near. On December 12, the Associated Press [reported](#) a perhaps indicative, if enigmatic, statement on the succession by Joana Lina, vice president of Angola's parliament and member of the MPLA's central committee: "In the party we know the name of the successor of President dos Santos, and the candidate of the party in the elections . . . The official announcement will be made in a few days."

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## Belmokhtar's Background

Born in Algeria in 1972, [Mokhtar Belmokhtar](#) became a jihadi as a teenager and fought for the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. He became known as “[Le Borgne](#)”—French for “The One-Eyed”—after losing an eye while mishandling explosives. Belmokhtar financed operations in North Africa and the Sahel by smuggling cigarettes (which earned him yet another moniker—“[Mr. Marlboro](#)”), drugs, cars, and diamonds. He also earned millions of euros from [kidnapping and ransoming](#) Western citizens. Belmokhtar fought in the Algerian civil war, aligning himself successively with the Armed Islamic Group (“GIA”) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (“GSPC”)—both Algerian, Islamist insurgent groups. The GSPC pledged allegiance to al-Qaida, and Belmokhtar, a military commander in AQIM, became known as “[Emir of the Sahel](#).” Belmokhtar’s [threats](#) against the West, especially France and the United States, have been consistent: “you will hear from us on the battlefield . . . [and] we will fight you in your own homes, you will experience the heat of wounds in your own countries and we will threaten your interests.”

Frequent disagreements with other AQIM leaders led Belmokhtar to form an autonomous, al-Qaida-aligned group in 2012 called “[Those Who Signed with Blood Brigade](#).” The group merged with another like-minded militant organization to form [al-Murabitun](#) (Arabic for “The Sentinels”) in 2015. Since late 2015, al-Murabitun has been aligned with AQIM. Of note, Belmokhtar consistently sought to outflank the influence of the Islamic State across the Sahara and Sahel.

Belmokhtar escaped death [at least five times](#) before 2016. In June 2015, [for example](#), the United States targeted him when two U.S. F-15s struck a building in Ajdabiya, Libya, near Tripoli. The raid killed 29 likely AQIM associates, but not Belmokhtar.

Algeria sentenced Belmokhtar to death *in absentia* in 2007. He was [sanctioned](#) by the UN Security Council in 2009 and [indicted](#) by the Department of Justice in 2013. The U.S. Government [offered](#) a \$5 million reward for information leading to his arrest and conviction. The State Department [described](#) Belmokhtar as “the greatest near-term threat to US and Western interests in the Sahel.”

Belmokhtar orchestrated numerous terrorist acts throughout the Sahara and Sahel, including:

- 2012–13: Following establishment of a separatist state in northern Mali in 2012, Belmokhtar’s Those Who Signed with Blood Brigade [joined](#) with other groups to implement Sharia law in territory that included Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu. Terrorists and insurgents were driven out by French forces in 2013.
- January 2013: Attack on a multinational energy complex near [Amenas](#), Algeria, with 800 hostages and 40 killed, including three Americans.



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- May 2013: Coordinated attacks on a Nigerien military barracks and French-run uranium mine in [Niger](#), killing 19.
- August 2015: Attack on the [Byblos Hotel](#) in Sevare, Mali, killing 13, including five U.N. workers.
- November 2015: Attack on the [Radisson Blu Hotel](#) in Bamako, Mali, with 120 hostages and 22 killed.
- January 2016: Coordinated assault on restaurants and businesses in [Ouagadougou](#), Burkina Faso, with over 200 hostages and at least 28 killed.
- March 2016: Assault on a beach resort in [Grand-Bassam](#), Côte d'Ivoire, killing at least 16.

## The 2016 Attack on Belmokhtar

The *Journal* [reported](#) that French military aircraft, supported by U.S. intelligence, struck a target in southern Libya, likely resulting in Belmokhtar's death. Based on the caliber of intelligence, U.S. officials expressed "greater confidence" that this strike was successful (compared to the June 2015 attempt). U.S. and French spokesmen provided little official information about the attack.

The *Journal* [suggested](#) the strike took place between November 1 and 26. According to [separate reporting](#), a senior AQIM official—Abu Talha al Hassnawi—was struck by an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) near Sabha, a city in south-central Libya, on November 14. Al Hassnawi and Belmokhtar were close associates; at least one Libyan source [reported](#) that three AQIM seniors, including Belmokhtar, were targeted that day. Seven bodies [recovered](#) in Sabha were unrecognizable.

Given that Belmokhtar was responsible for the deaths of French soldiers and civilians, there is little question that France would target him. It is not surprising, however, that France did not confirm the action. French involvement in Libya is controversial because Libyan officials in the UN-backed Government of National Accord [believe](#) France has been taking sides in Libya's civil war. While Paris denies the allegation, the loss of three French Special Forces "advisors" in a helicopter crash in July 2016 caused French President Hollande to [acknowledge](#) for the first time that France was conducting "intelligence-gathering" operations in Libya. The killing of Belmokhtar would be the [first confirmation](#) of a French airstrike in Libya since the NATO military intervention in 2011.

If the *Journal* article is accurate, the attack on Belmokhtar reflects a U.S.-French intelligence-sharing [relationship](#), which has been expanded since the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. As one expert [commented](#): "Today, the crisis and the threat is so pervasive that it has sharpened and accelerated intelligence sharing between the two countries."

## Impact of Belmokhtar's Death on Terrorism in Africa

Belmokhtar was more than a senior al Qaida decision-maker. He was a ruthless, larger-than-life individual who motivated many to join the Islamist cause. His ability to evade sophisticated intelligence services made him an almost mythological figure in the eyes of his followers. In the near to medium term, it seems unlikely that anyone will be able to fill his shoes fully — especially his knowledge of the terrain and tribes, ability to recruit followers, and ability to generate revenue. [His death likely will](#) disrupt organizational cohesion and alter operational planning. That said, there are plenty of rivals who will seek to assert themselves. Because of Belmokhtar's independent streak and occasional [criticism of AQIM](#), some al Qaida leaders [will not mourn his passing](#).

In 2006, Belmokhtar [said](#), "I dream of only one thing: to die a martyr." A decade later, he may have finally gotten his wish.

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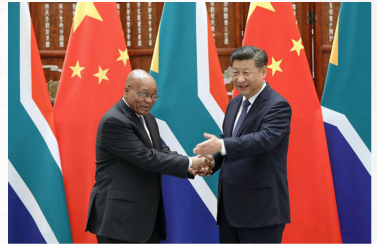
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Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, shakes hands with South African President Jacob Zuma as they meet at the West Lake State Guest House in Hangzhou, China Saturday, Sept. 3, 2016. (Source: Lintao Zhang/Pool Photo via AP.)

## Economic Myths

A [Brookings](#) report published in 2015 studied more than 4,000 investments by more than 2,000 Chinese firms across 49 African countries. The findings pointed to a number of popular misconceptions about the nature of China's economic involvement in African countries.

A common assumption underpinning much analysis of modern Sino-African relations is that Chinese investments are disproportionately clustered in natural-resource-abundant countries. The Brookings analysis found that holding all other things equal, "African countries that are more resource rich attract more Chinese investment . . . [however,] this effect is about the same for [Western investment](#), and it is only one factor determining investment." Further, the researchers found that "in terms of sectors, these investments are not concentrated in natural resources; services are the most common sector; and there are significant investments in manufacturing as well."

Another stereotype in the coverage of Sino-African economic partnership is that Chinese investments target countries with weak [rule of law](#) or autocracy. The same Brookings report found that this is also a misconception and that Chinese Overseas Direct Investment (ODI) flows are "indifferent to the rule of law" measurement the researchers used, but were influenced by the political stability of the receiving African country. They conclude, "Chinese investment is not concentrated in poor rule of law countries . . . But it does mean that China's investment is more visible in the poor rule of law countries because China has invested in those locations whereas Western investment generally stayed away from them."

Chinese investment in African countries is often discussed in aggregate, even though the continent's 54 countries have varying economic profiles. Assessments of bilateral relationships between China and individual countries, such as [Sino-Angolan](#) and [Sino-Somali](#) relations, are often more enlightening than broad-brush approaches to the Chinese involvement on the continent.

Although Chinese economic involvement in African countries has grown rapidly since the 1990s, an [IDA Africa Symposium](#) held in July 2016 noted that in light of the country's 6.9 percent growth rate in 2015—its lowest since 1990, "the popular narrative of Chinese successes in Africa currently faces uncertainties." Yun Sun, a senior associate at the Stimson Center's East Asia Program, observed that this slowdown altered the typical trade balance between China and Africa: "Sino-Africa trade dropped by 18 percent in 2015, but within that, Africa's exports to China decreased about 40 percent while China's exports to Africa increased slightly by 3.5 percent." Vigilant research and analyses of how altered Chinese macroeconomic indicators affect its economic relationship with African countries will be necessary in coming years.



## Soft Power: Understanding Public Opinion

Sometimes overlooked in the discussion about the prevalence, growth, and characteristics of Chinese engagements in African countries is the perception of this involvement by African citizens—and the variation between countries. Understanding citizen perceptions is critical to measuring Chinese soft power in Africa. Survey data collected by [Afrobarometer](#) finds significant variance among African countries' perceptions of China and its development model: "In Southern and North Africa, China matches the United States in popularity, and in Central Africa, China takes the lead (35 percent vs. 27 percent for the United States). In five Southern African countries (Lesotho, Swaziland, Namibia, Malawi, and Zimbabwe), South Africa is the most highly regarded development model." In Cameroon, Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, Tanzania, and Zambia, "China is the most popular model for development."

When citizens were asked to elaborate on which aspects of Chinese involvement in Africa contributed to a "[positive image](#) of China in their country," the most frequent responses were "China's investments in infrastructure and other development projects (cited by 32 percent of respondents), the low cost of its products (23 percent), and its business investments (16 percent)." Conversely, 35 percent of those polled asserted that the "poor quality of Chinese products damages China's image," and 14 percent were concerned about Chinese investment taking jobs away from Africans.

These attitudes have informed African politics and contributed to the platforms of a number of candidates across the continent. The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) observed, "in September 2011, Michael Sata won Zambia's presidency largely by tapping into anti-Chinese resentments after Chinese managers shot protesters at a large coal mine in southern Zambia one year prior." Similarly, an *Africa Watch* [article](#) in August 2015 documented how the political opposition in Angola used Chinese influence as a rallying point. Homogeneity cannot be imposed on the nature of Chinese investment in African countries or on the impact that such investment will have on African political economies.

## Soft Power: Spread of China's Development Model?

Chinese influence has not only animated some political opposition movements but also potentially served as an inspiration for incumbent parties. A chapter that Francis Fukuyama and the author contributed to [Beyond Convergence: World Without Order](#) discusses the emulation of the Chinese model of development by sub-Saharan African countries. This work argued that China's successful economic growth has inspired countries to imitate the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "model." The authors characterized this model as "a political economy centered on a hegemonic ruling party that subsumes the state through the manipulation of investment, suppression of dissent, and delivery of impressive economic growth records," and observed that it "has both endogenous appeal to leaders attempting to retain power in their respective countries, and exogenous momentum, as China gains international clout and becomes an increasingly important source of aid and investment." This pattern was also observed in [Ethiopia and Rwanda](#), two African countries notable for their high rates of growth and underwhelming human rights records.

The spread of this model, whether by Chinese promotion (through Confucius Institutes or other cultural outreach programs) or African emulation, could be problematic for those hoping to promote liberal democracy in Africa.

## Conclusions

Despite much coverage of Sino-African engagement, there is insufficient analysis of the significance of China's increasing presence on the continent. Data-driven studies of the characteristics of Chinese investment in the continent, especially in light of the country's recent economic slowdown, can provide crucial insights into the characteristics and future of Sino-African relations. Examining not only China's economic engagement but also its political influence and public perception is important for understanding the emerging relationships between China and African countries.

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