

Lassoing the Haboob

Countering Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in Mali

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Abstract

Since 2013, Mali has been the epicenter of violence in the Sahel region. However, over the last three years, Mali and neighboring Sahel states have seen a dramatic rise in violence and conflict. A significant percentage of this surge has been perpetrated by the group Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) or one of its subsidiary organizations. Another large percentage of Mali's violent attacks is the result of intercommunal conflict, which JNIM and other Islamist organizations often manipulate and enflame.

To develop solutions to Mali's crisis, it is first vital to understand its history and explain how a country that was once held up as an exemplar of democratic success in Africa could collapse with such rapidity. Additionally, the same factors that led to Mali's current disaster precipitated the creation of the extremist group JNIM. Therefore, it is similarly important to characterize and understand the group's history, organization, methods, and narrative. Only once armed with that understanding can one begin to develop possible strategies for countering JNIM and ameliorating Mali's troubled situation.

Introduction

The situation in Mali and the surrounding Sahel countries is dire and worsens by the month. Since 2015, violent activity involving extremist groups has doubled yearly. No other region in the world has seen a more rapid increase in jihadist attacks.¹ In Mali, a combination of ramifications from the Tuareg uprising in 2012, persistent ethnic and tribal conflict, and humanitarian considerations such as hunger and poverty have all led the country to a state of near-collapse. Foremost among the groups carrying out the violence and exacerbating the issues is JNIM, which, since its formation in March 2017, has been responsible for a 300-percent spike in violent attacks and a dramatic increase in civilian targeting. As of late 2018, JNIM had just under 2,000 fighters spread throughout the northern and central parts of Mali, but its attacks continue to increase and evolve in complexity and ferocity.² Understanding the history of the current crisis as well as characterizing its most dangerous extremist group, JNIM, is critical to any proposed method for ameliorating conditions in Mali.

The dangers that Mali's current problems present are potentially easy to understate. Mali may be geographically far from US interests, but despite its apparent isolation, JNIM is a threat to global security. In 2015, the US Department of State called a JNIM subgroup "one of the greatest near-term threats to U.S. and international interests in the Sahel."³ The director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies described JNIM as "Sub-Saharan Africa's most formidable extremist group."⁴ On the level of humanitarianism, the Mali crisis—of which JNIM is both cause and effect—has left 440,000 displaced, 1.8 million facing food insecurity, and 5.1 million in need of humanitarian assistance.⁵ Moreover, the effects of JNIM's growth are not constrained to Mali, having spread to the neighboring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger, which witnessed a 7,000-percent and 500-percent increase in violent attacks respectively.⁶ As the primary al-Qaeda affiliate in Africa, JNIM has the connections, motives, and resources to, if unchecked, create an arc of instability extending west into Mauritania and east across the Sahel into the Horn of Africa, characterized by ungoverned land controlled by transnational criminals.⁷

Analysis of Mali's numerous issues, including the ever-growing threat of attacks by groups like JNIM, makes clear that finding solutions is impossible without first understanding their genesis. It can be tempting to only go back as far as the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, which created advantageous conditions for JNIM; however, doing so fails to address the underlying issues predating 2012. Furthermore, one must ask why a country that was, for a time, considered a model of stability and democracy could so quickly devolve into nation-wide ethnic, religious, and political violence. What are the primary causal factors for the violence and instability in Mali that subsequently gave rise to JNIM? Historically, the principal causes can be attributed to the repercussions of colonization, ethnic tensions, and the conflicts that have torn apart other Sahel countries—all of which served to create ideal conditions for the 2012 Tuareg uprising and subsequent near-destruction of the Malian state.

Colonization

As in so many African countries, the history of its current conflict has its roots in colonization. The colonization of what is today Mali began in the 1850s and was solidified in 1887 with the final annexation and creation of the Colonial State of French Sudan. The French remained in control of Mali until its independence in 1960.⁸ During that time, France saw to it that political and administrative power remained centralized in French hands. As a result, the local leaders' ability to govern atrophied, resulting in weakened governmental institutions leading up to and following independence. "Like other newly independent countries in Af-

rica, Mali faced enormous political, geographic and economic challenges at independence. . . . Unsurprisingly, state level institutions for governance and politics were underdeveloped or absent.”⁹ Like other African states, Mali’s colonial rule institutionalized ineffective governance, resulting in limited control over large parts of the territory, particularly the Sahelian North.¹⁰

Weak governance was not the only negative effect of French colonial rule that would haunt Mali after independence. Though the French sought to weaken Malian self-governance, they simultaneously ensured a political elite controlled what little power the French were willing to grant. The existence of this elite not only guaranteed that those outside the political class were ostracized from participation in the political process but also that those fissures became entrenched in Malian society. A unified national identity was impossible due to “repressive colonial policies, which until 1944-45, denied a political right to Africa except a small minority.”¹¹ These policies of repression and division were effective for maintaining power from the colonial perspective, but once the colonial powers departed in 1960s, they left Mali and other African countries with a debilitated government and divided state.

For Mali, colonial policies were still more divisive, as the elites were often chosen from a single tribe or ethnic group and usually from the cities where the elites congregated. This further disenfranchised “outgroups” like the Tuareg and people in remote areas. Interactions between north and south had been difficult preceding French arrival. However, “The French occupation even exacerbated these resentments. This is due to the attitude of the French during the colonial period, when they decided to educate a ruling class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners.”¹² Ethnic divisions, particularly those that existed between the Malian people and the Tuareg, were useful for French control but damaging to postcolonial Mali.

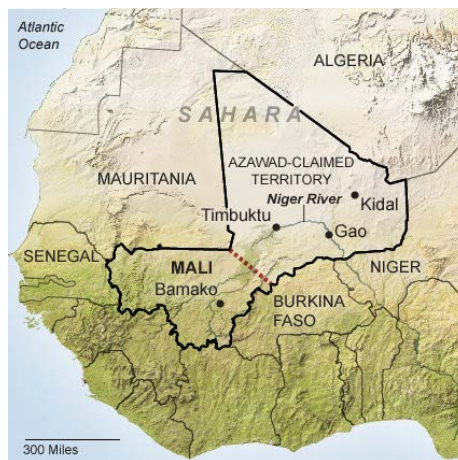
Ethnic Tensions

Ethnic tensions in Mali are the second root cause of today’s problems. Yet, it would be disingenuous to claim that those divisions started with colonization. Instead, the history of ethnic and tribal divisions stretches far into the past with the origins of groups like the Fulani—extending back many centuries—and evidence of complex “caste” systems originating in the eleventh century.¹³ As a consequence of these divisions and societal systems, various ethnicities and tribes have played important roles in Mali’s history even before the arrival of Europeans. However, as this work has already demonstrated, colonization served to exacerbate these divisions.

The most notable of the ethnic conflicts in Mali is the one between the Tuareg and the rest of Malian society. “Although the Sahara-Sahel region contains numerous ethnic groups, the historical migratory range of one particular group, the Tuareg, seems to define its core.”¹⁴ For decades the Tuareg, mostly of North African and Berber descent, have found themselves at odds with sub-Saharan ethnic groups. Historically, the “White” Tuaregs and Arabs have considered themselves superior to other, “Black” Malians—even so far as participating in the trans-Saharan slave trade, enslaving “blacks” and working with European powers when possible. Many also harken back to a (mostly fictional) independent state of “Azawad,” which is comprised of the three modern-day Malian provinces of Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao (fig. 1). However, since independence in 1960, the power has shifted inside Mali’s borders from the Tuareg communities in the North to the southern centers of political power.

The decision to marginalize the north after independence, which has been illustrated by the will of the central state to affirm its territorial integrity all over the country, added to the historical bias between northerners and southerners. Southern populations, indeed, have a profoundly negative perception of the north. . . . The role of some northern nomadic groups in the trans-Saharan slave trade also helps to explain the historic and long-standing distrust between north and south.¹⁵

Since then, this power shift has resulted in racially motivated attacks against the Tuareg and the political and economic marginalization of northern populations.



(image by The Tamoudré, <https://web.archive.org/>)

Figure 1: The traditional location of the Azawad

As a newly independent Mali progressed, so did governmental and societal prejudices against communities in the North. Northerners and Tuaregs struggled

to find a place within the new Malian state. As a result, they were consistently marginalized from positions of power, and “unequal access to state resources can be seen as the result of a divide-and-rule strategy implemented by the Malian government.”¹⁶ These tensions would result in four significant Tuareg rebellions in 1963, 1990, 2006, and most recently, in 2012. Even after the last uprising ended in 2015, the Malian army has been accused of extrajudicial killings of mostly Tuareg and Arab men for alleged participation in rebel groups. Similarly, “Tuareg separatists . . . have also been implicated in numerous serious abuses.”¹⁷ Unfortunately, the reality is that most of these issues have been born of a systemic ostracization of one particular ethnic group.

Despite the multiple Tuareg uprisings, there was a brief time when Mali was considered a paragon of democratic potential. In 1968, a young army lieutenant, Moussa Traoré, took power in a coup d'état and began a 23-year reign. Col Amadou Touré staged another coup in 1991, but rather than hold power like his predecessor, he returned it to the civilian government and allowed Mali to become a functioning democracy. The success of presidential elections in 1992 and again in 1997 and 2002 (the latter of which returned Amadou Touré to power as a civilian) turned Mali into a darling of the West and a symbol for how democracy could look in Africa.¹⁸

Unfortunately, under the surface, the same ethnic tensions still simmered. Even during the 1991 coup and democratic transition, the Malian military was engaged in fighting a Tuareg uprising in the North. Bamako and the Tuareg separatists signed a peace accord in 1996, but the issues at the root of the conflict remained unresolved and were never far from the fore of the nation's political climate. The “succession of crises in the north, alleged preferential treatment and fears of new military involvement fed continuous southern distrust regarding Malian's irredentist north. Meanwhile, people in the north continued to suffer from developmental inequalities and internal divisions.”¹⁹ Mali's “Tuareg problem” was an intractable issue with no clear resolution on the horizon and posed a constant threat of a return to violence.

Though Tuareg marginalization has had the most impact on Malian history and serve as the roots of the crisis today, it is not the only example of ethnic tensions contributing to the violence. Notably, the persistent conflict between the pastoral communities such as the Fulani tribes and sedentary agricultural communities like the Dogon has resulted in a dramatic increase in violence and provided a useful recruitment tool for extremist organizations like JNIM. “In recent months, the incidence of massacres has increased rapidly. Violence is now taking place on a different scale and the (ethnic) nature of these attacks is no longer in

doubt.”²⁰ While the intensity of these clashes may be a relatively new phenomenon, warfare between ethnic groups in the Sahel is not.

Taking the example of the Fulani people, though their origins remain unknown, history does record the creation of Fulani states beginning in the eighteenth century. In fact, these Fulani states were the result of a series of ethnic and religiously based uprisings by Fulani against various West African governments. The most prominent of these states was the Sokoto Caliphate, which was created in 1804 by a Fulani scholar, Usman dan Fodio. To build his Fulani empire, dan Fodio “recruited Fulani nomads into a jihad that overthrew the Muslim Hausa Emirs of the Sahel and attacked the non-Muslim tribes of the region in the first decade of the 19th century.”²¹ As with many of the ethnic groups in conflict in Africa, the Fulani were not tied to national borders. The Sokoto Caliphate was in modern-day Nigeria, but its rise inspired similar Fulani states in Guinea, Senegal, and Mali. One such state, the Macina Empire, gives its name and historical gravitas to a JNIM subgroup, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF).²² All these states brought the Fulani people into conflict with other groups in the region. There are some scholars who claim that some of today’s conflicts are continuations of those begun in the nineteenth century.²³

Bad Neighbors

If conflicts between rival tribes can have a destabilizing effect on a country, violent conflicts in neighboring countries can play a disastrous role as well. Unfortunately for Mali, it lives in a region where conflict is endemic, especially as a result of colonization and lingering ethnic tensions and violence. While any number of wars has had a deleterious effect on Mali’s history, it is the civil wars in Algeria and Libya that have been the most damaging to Mali and that truly lie at the root of Mali’s present-day problems.

Algeria

The 1990s in Algeria was a time of war, terror, and death. The Algerian Civil War was fought between the Algerian central government, represented by the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN), and various rebel groups and militias, starting in late 1991. Since independence from France in 1962, Algeria had been under a one-party dictatorship that funneled money and power to a small group of individuals who comprised the Algerian elite. Unfortunately, the inequality and poor conditions such an arrangement engendered chafed the working classes for 20 years. Throughout the 1980s, the influx of fighters returning from the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan further radicalized Algerian society.²⁴

The same period saw the return of an estimated 1,000 Algerians who had gone to join the Afghan mujahedin in the fight against the Soviet invasion of their country. Overall, it is believed that between 3,000 and 4,000 Algerians had gone through the training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁵

The dissent culminated in severe riots in 1988 that spread throughout the country, giving birth to a host of political, ethnic, and religious opposition groups.²⁶ Most formidable among these new entities was a fundamentalist organization called the *Front Islamique du Salut (FIS)*.

Established in 1989, the FIS was the main opposition group to the Algerian central government, and though it was an Islamist organization, it originally only sought legitimacy via electoral victory. This victory came in late 1991, when the FIS swept many local races and found itself on the verge of political ascendancy in Algeria. However, in January 1992, the Algerian military intervened, nullified the election, and seized power. The new military junta killed or imprisoned many FIS leaders, and as a result, “vindicated those radicals among [the Islamists] who held that the violent overthrow of the secular regime in the tradition of the Afghan jihad would be the only way to obtain the establishment of a government based on Islamic principles.”²⁷ The coup proved to be the spark that ignited the civil war.

The conflict between the FIS and the government of Algeria would quickly explode into a multifront civil war that lasted until 2001 and caused the deaths of more than 100,000 people.²⁸ Despite being an internal Algerian conflict, the Islamic fundamentalist nature of FIS played a critical role in inviting outside organizations like al-Qaeda to play a role. Recognizing the opportunity posed by violence, al-Qaeda moved to support its fellow Islamists: “al-Qaeda’s infiltration of the Algerian Islamists can be explained by the latter’s sophisticated underground organization in Europe. By cultivating their leaders and providing training and finance, al-Qaeda absorbed this ready-made network.”²⁹ However, once it had a foot in the door, al-Qaeda was not content merely to support FIS financially.

The violence and depravity of the war as well as the influence of al-Qaeda began to influence the FIS’ most extreme elements. Notable among these groups was the hardline *Group Islamique Armee (GIA)*. Originally, the GIA was part of the FIS but broke with the latter organization because of its emphasis on electoral politics and its declared uneasiness with violent resistance to the government.³⁰ In 1993, the GIA split completely from the FIS, citing the latter’s willingness to negotiate with the Algerian government and pursuit of limited objectives.

For the GIA, the goals put forth by the FIS were no longer sufficient. Simply regaining power in the Algerian government would not bring about the hardliners’ lofty goals. Moreover, the GIA saw anyone who stood in the way of this ideal as an enemy.

Heavily influenced by returning veterans of the Afghan jihad, the GIA aimed at more than reforming the state along the lines of the Islamist agenda. Rather, it sought the wholesale transformation of society, viewing those who did not share its convictions as apostates from Islam who could be legitimately killed.³¹

In support of this ideology, the GIA carried out a wave of terror and civilian attacks that continued through the remainder of the war. In some cases, the GIA would even find itself pitted against the FIS and its allies, particularly as war wound down and these other organizations began to seek a peaceful resolution.

However, as the war progressed into the late 1990s, the brutality of the GIA's attacks against civilians began to affect the organization's support and popularity. "It's bloody massacres of civilians caused public support for the group to dwindle and persistent rumors of the group being manipulated by the Algerian intelligence agencies further discredited it."³² As a reaction to this loss of prestige and in anger at the indiscriminate targeting of Muslim civilians, al-Qaeda abandoned the GIA and encouraged former GIA commander Hassan Hattab to leave as well. In 1998, Hattab and approximately 100 former GIA members broke away to form the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC). Though not officially an al-Qaeda affiliate, by 2002, the GSPC had maintained links with al-Qaeda and developed into the strongest extremist group in Algeria.³³

The GSPC remained active for the next ten years, carrying out attacks in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, and Libya. In the beginning, the GSPC maintained links to al-Qaeda, but Hassan Hattab saw a declaration of allegiance to be a potential distraction. Though he espoused the Salafi jihadist ideology of al-Qaeda, Hattab wanted to focus all his efforts on what he saw as the true enemy—the Algerian government—and to avoid a struggle against any foreign power. "As a result, . . . Hattab was excluded from the GSPC leadership and replaced by Nabil Sahraoui, who was himself succeeded, after his death in June 2004, by Abdelmalek Droukdel."³⁴ Droukdel immediately applied to be an al-Qaeda affiliate. In 2007, al-Qaeda announced their newest affiliate in the Sahel, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the rebranded incarnation of the GSPC.³⁵

After joining al-Qaeda, AQIM divided into two branches: one in northeastern Algeria and the other in the Sahel. The first branch, AQIM in Kabylia, remained under Droukdel and continued the group's efforts in Algeria. However, the southern command, AQIM–Sahel (also known as AQIM–Sahara), would fall to Mokhtar Belmokhtar, turning its focus south of Algeria to the Sahel, specifically, to Mali. Belmokhtar quickly began to solidify AQIM's hold on northern Mali through alliances with local extremist organizations, integration into local society, and activation of cross-border smuggling routes.

For AQIM–Sahel, alliances were vital to their survival. In 2011, AQIM formalized an alliance with the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) as part of an effort “to accommodate the local population in order to have it join the organization, especially through a strategy of promoting Tuareg leaders to key positions.”³⁶ AQIM's other important ally was Ansar al-Din (AAD). Created in 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali after the failed Tuareg rebellion in 2006, AAD's goal was to impose sharia across Mali. For AQIM, it represented a strong ally with identical religious ideals as well as local legitimacy.

All three groups had different origins and motivations. Yet, together they shared the same goal along with AQIM in Kabylia: to turn northern Mali and the Sahel into a Salafi sharia Islamic state and use it as a platform for the organization's operations.³⁷ With AAD and MUJAO as allies, AQIM had legitimacy from local ethnic leaders and, thus, had the makings of a powerful force with which to pursue its goals.

Not all the Tuareg in northern Mali were as interested in partnering with AQIM as was the MUJAO. The *Mouvement National pour la libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) was a secular coalition of Tuareg militias, all of which sought independence for the Tuareg homeland in Mali, traditionally called Azawad (fig. 1). The MNLA did not share the Salafi jihadist motivations of MUJAO but agreed on Tuareg autonomy and, thus, had some links with the other group: “Though not ideologically aligned, there are shared interests and perhaps a pragmatic alliance, between AQIM and the members of the Tuaregs, including tribal ties and smuggling.”³⁸ AQIM pursued a strategy of assimilation and integration into local societies. This ensured that AQIM could be cast as ally and protector of the local community, thus, bringing MNLA solidly into its sphere of influence.

At the moment of its naissance in 2007, AQIM lacked a consistent source of funding. The group's expansion into the Sahel, however, promised new revenue streams. The region represents a channel for criminal trafficking, which offered plentiful modes by which AQIM could fill its coffers.³⁹ Arms, drugs, cigarettes, and even people were available for trafficking to and from AQIM's bases in northern Mali. With help from alliances that had influence in local operations, trafficking was easier, safer, and far more lucrative. Starting in the early 2000s, AQIM also began kidnappings for ransom operations and established a “kidnapping industry” in the Sahel. Between 2003 and 2012, AQIM earned between approximately 150 million USD in ransoms.⁴⁰ Some of this money funded operations, but much of it was distributed among the population. Stealing from the government and giving to the people served to give AQIM a “Robin Hood” façade and further ingratiate the jihadist groups into Malian society. Still, by 2010, AQIM and its allies did not represent an existential threat.

Libya

Starting in the early 1970s, many of the Tuareg who had been alienated by the Malian government went to work for Libyan dictator Mu'ammar Gadhafi, who, for more than 30 years, hired them as mercenaries and paramilitary troops. However, in 2011 when the Libyan Civil War resulted in the toppling and execution of Gadhafi, those same Tuareg fighters returned to Mali. "Estimates of the number of returning Tuareg mercenaries ran as high as 4,000 . . . these fighters brought arms and military experience with them and by late 2011, had reignited the Tuareg separatist movement."⁴¹ Though this influx of battle-hardened fighters contributed directly to the country's destabilization in 2011, it was not the only problem exported by the Libyan Civil War.

As fighters came back to Mali from Libya, most rejoined militias and armed groups. With them they brought experience, tactics, and often an Islamist ideology that fit in perfectly with AQIM's objectives. However, arguably more important to their cause was not the additional personnel but the weaponry they brought with them. In Mali, "transfers from Libya qualitatively enhanced the military capacity of nonstate opposition groups by supplying military weapons that had previously been unavailable or in short supply."⁴² By late 2011, thousands more fighters had access to armament like antitank weapons, mortars, and heavy machine guns. The alliance of AQIM-Sahel, AAD, and MUJAO along with secular Tuareg groups like MNLA was prepared to launch what would be the most devastating of the Tuareg uprisings in Mali's history.⁴³

With the AQIM, AAD, and Tuareg alliances in place and incited by the returnees from the Libyan Civil War, the stage was set for the Tuareg uprising. The violence began in January 2012, when MNLA and AAD forces attacked Malian army outposts in the northern cities of Kidal, Tessalit, and Aguelhok. The unprepared Malian defense forces put up a token defense but, in the end, were caught off guard by the rebel advance: "the government had failed with the ammunition and other logistical support they needed."⁴⁴ Within two months, most of Kidal Province was under separatist control.

The state of complete disarray into which the rebellion had thrown the Malian government in Bamako did nothing to ameliorate the situation. The Malian government was completely surprised at the speed of the rebellion and the weakness of its own forces. President Touré—who was faced with an incompetent military, a looming presidential election, and many political peers who viewed negotiations with the Tuareg as treasonous—failed to react in any meaningful way as the rebel army continued its march south. Protests erupted outside the presidential palace

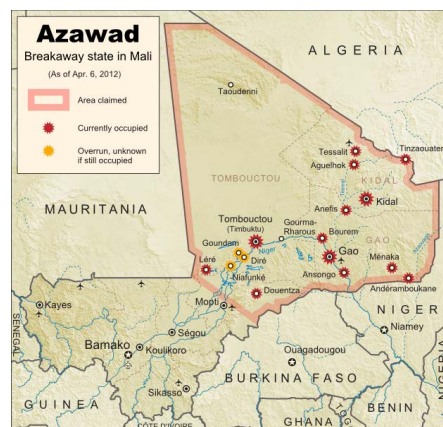
as a result of the people's anger with the government's handling of the situation; yet, the government remained paralyzed.⁴⁵

In response to rising fear and tension in the capital, junior army officers staged a coup d'état and stormed the presidential palace on 22 March 2012. They chased President Touré into exile and declared the dissolution of all government institutions, accusing the Touré administrations of "failing to responsibly combat the growing rebellion."⁴⁶ The international community was swift to condemn the coup and maintained "pressure on the coup leaders and the military to respect civilian leadership, to withdraw completely from politics and to permit the full restoration of a democratically-elected government."⁴⁷ On 6 April, the coup leaders signed a power-sharing deal that brought government leadership back to Mali but, by that time, whatever chances there may have been to respond militarily to the rebellion had been lost.

By April, four months after hostilities commenced, the MNLA controlled 800,000 square kilometers of Mali and 10 percent of the population and had accomplished its goals (fig. 2).⁴⁸

As a consequence of the instability following the coup, Mali's three largest northern cities, Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu were overrun by the rebels on 3 consecutive days. On April 5, 2012, after the capture of the town of Duwenza, the National Movement for Liberation of Azawad, or the MNLA, said that it had accomplished its goals and called off its offensive. The following day, it proclaimed independence of their homeland, Azawad, from Mali.⁴⁹

Ostensibly, the Tuareg uprising of 2012 could have been over. The Malian army was beaten, and the Tuareg finally had their homeland. However, a free Azawad was not the only goal of AAD and AQIM.



(image modified from original by Orionist, Wikimedia)

Figure 2: MNLA declared state of Azawad as of 6 April 2012

Almost immediately after declaring the uprising's objectives accomplished, the MNLA began to lose power over their territorial gains. AAD and MUJAO, backed by AQIM, were not satisfied with merely controlling Azawad but instead began to work toward their real objective, the institution of sharia law. In their drive to establish a sharia state, AAD and MUJAO turned on the secular MNLA. "The first clashes between the MNLA and Ansar Al Dine reportedly occurred on 8 June 2012 in the surroundings of Kidal, triggering a parallel non-international armed conflict between Tuareg and Islamist rebels. By the end of the month, Ansar Al Dine, MUJAO and AQIM expelled the MNLA from major cities in the north."⁵⁰ By December, many of the Tuareg chose to side with the Malian government rather than subject themselves to the harsh rule of the jihadists. With the secular Tuareg out of the way, AAD and its allies saw the opportunity to carry their fight beyond Azawad and on to Bamako itself (fig. 3).



(image modified from original by Orionist, Wikimedia)

Figure 3: Furthest extent of jihadist rebel territory before French intervention

While watching the events of 2012 unfold, the French government was debating intervention and at what level. In December 2012, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed Resolution 2085, authorizing the deployment of what was named the African-led International Support Mission to Mali. The French planned to join the UN mission in February 2013. However, on 8 January 2013 the jihadist forces advanced further south, passing the Niger River bend, taking the town of Konna and, for the first time, threatening Bamako. As the paradigm had now officially changed from "another Tuareg uprising" to a full-scale jihadist assault, France chose to intervene.⁵¹

French forces, along with remaining Malian personnel, executed Operation Serval in three phases from 11 January to 1 May 2013 (fig. 4). Phase 0 was a de-

fensive maneuver to block the jihadist advance and retake Konna. Phase 1 involved pushing jihadist forces back to their pre-2013 positions north of the Niger River bend, and Phase 2 was clearing the Gao region up to the Ifoghas Mountain. By May, French forces had pushed AQIM almost to the border with Algeria and were prepared to relinquish military control. Both French and Malian troops were to be integrated into the larger stabilization force of the UN *Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali* (MINUSMA). French forces have remained in Mali since 2013 as Operation Barkhane augments and assists MINUSMA as a quick reaction force.⁵²

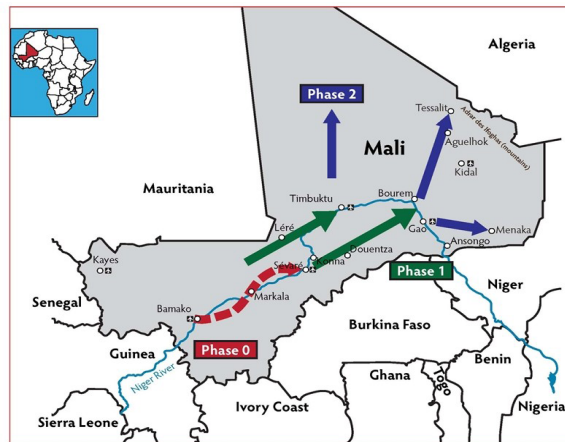


Figure 4: Operation Serval

Since Operation Serval ended, the international forces in Mali have taken on two military missions: UN peacekeeping under MINUSMA and regional French-led counterterrorism operations. Despite the success of Operation Serval and the continued presence of international forces, the jihadist situation has festered since 2013. The vastness of ungoverned reaches of northern Mali means the MINUSMA, the French, and the nascent refashioned Malian security forces have limited ability to respond to attacks. On 20 June 2015 a peace deal was signed between the Government of Mali (GoM) and the umbrella secular Tuareg organization, the Coordination of Movements for Azawad. However, the terms of the agreement have been seen as foreign-imposed, and thus far, the GoM has proven too weak to enforce the provisions.

All the major provisions had yet to be implemented: the application of decentralization measures, the establishment of interim authorities or the restoration of state authority in the north, the launch of mixed patrols, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process, and security sector reforms (SSR) have not produced meaningful progress beyond symbolic gestures.⁵³

Even after Operation Serval, and as time went on, the GoM showed itself unable to maintain governance in the northern parts of the country and unable to enforce or implement the provisions of the 2015 peace accords.

The events of 2012 revealed Mali for what it really was. What had been held up as a model for how African democracies could be, instead proved to be a façade behind which were weak institutions, mismanagement, “big man” interests, and deep-seated racial and ethnic cleavages.⁵⁴ The chaos caused by the crumbling of this façade proved to be the perfect launching pad for the jihadist groups that, in time, would compose JNIM. Partially as a result of government inability to preserve security, attacks by jihadist groups rose steadily after 2015. In 2016, there were 257 attacks attributed to jihadist groups and 276 attacks in 2017.⁵⁵ Notable among these attacks were those directed at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Bamako and other hotels in Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire. AQIM and its allies claimed responsibility for those attacks, which killed 66 people. In 2017, those jihadist groups, most of which had been involved in fighting since the early 2000s, united under a single banner: that of Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin.⁵⁶

Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin Today

As discussed earlier, JNIM is an alliance of four al-Qaeda-linked Salafi jihadist groups. The unification was declared via a video released 2 March 2017, which featured leaders of the four groups—all of whom announced the creation of JNIM. In the video (from left to right) are Amadou Diallo (alias Amadou Koufa), leader of the MLF; Djamel Okacha (alias Abu al-Hammam), leader of AQIM–Sahel; Iyadh Ag Ghali (alias Abu al-Fadhel), leader of AAD; Muhammad Ould Nouini (alias Hassan al-Ansari), deputy leader of al-Mourabitoun (under Mokhtar Belmokhtar); and Abderrahman al-Sanhaji (alias Abderrahman al-Maghrebi), deputy leader of AQIM–Sahel.⁵⁷



(screen capture by Alwatan News)

Figure 5: Video of 2 March 2017, announcing the creation of JNIM

In the video, Iyadh Ag Ghali, who also stepped into the role of JNIM's leader, spoke and declared the existence of JNIM and declared allegiance both to AQIM and al-Qaeda Central. "On this blessed occasion, we renew our pledge of allegiance to our honorable emirs and sheikhs: Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (aka Abdelmalek Droukel), our beloved wise man Sheikh Ayman Zawahiri (head of al-Qaeda Central), and from him to the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Haibatullah (leader of the Afghan Taliban), may Allah preserve them and grant them victory." With this declaration, Iyadh Ag Ghali and the rest of the terrorist leaders present in the video solidified their place in the overall al-Qaeda structure. JNIM, as a union of four other groups, remains under the authority of AQIM, which is, in turn, under al-Qaeda Central.⁵⁸

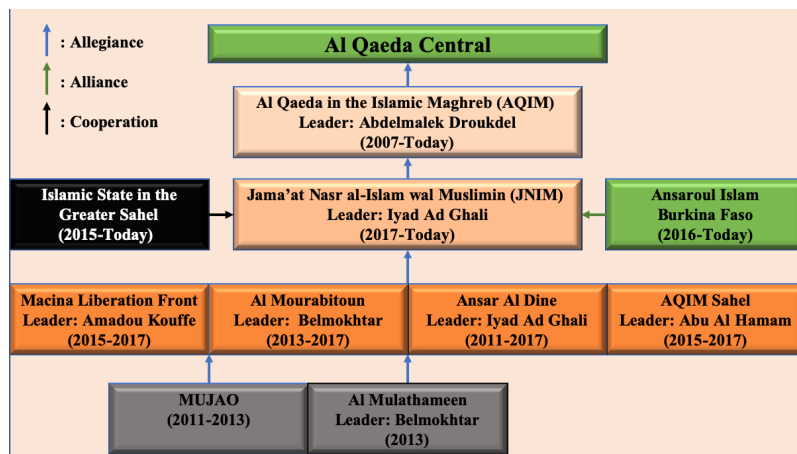


Figure 6: Al-Qaeda and JNIM organizational structure

Al-Qaeda's Grand Strategy

To effectively strategize methods for countering JNIM, it is first important to investigate the group's goals, motivations, and resources. There must be a clear understanding of how the organization has been successful since its creation in 2017 and how its component groups were successful previously. Yet, it would be negligent to first analyze JNIM or any of its subgroups without looking at the bigger picture and analyzing its "parent" organization: al-Qaeda. It is only with a clear understanding of al-Qaeda's history of success that we can effectively frame JNIM's contemporary effectiveness.

Over the last 20 years, al-Qaeda has been the most recognizable and infamous terrorist organization on the planet. The group has authored thousands of violent attacks, spurred dozens of offshoot affiliates and copycat groups, and even created rival Islamic extremist organizations. Despite all this, and subsequently spending

the last 20 years at war with the world's most effective militaries, the group continues to carry out its operations. Moreover, the success of foreign al-Qaeda affiliates illustrates that the group has become a global threat. Analyzing the tools that the organization has used to succeed will also give us a better understanding of how to combat al-Qaeda. Perhaps more importantly, it may help intelligence agencies recognize what strategies they will likely employ in the future. This article argues that the main factors contributing to al-Qaeda's continued global success are decentralization, effective narratives and propaganda, and the specific targeting of locations with a preexisting history of instability and violence.

Before we can discuss how al-Qaeda has achieved its success, we must first define *success*. If the term is to be defined as the completion of each organization's stated goals, none of these groups have yet succeeded. For example, "For al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb . . . the goal is to overthrow regimes in North Africa, especially Algeria, and replace them with an Islamic regime."⁵⁹ Moreover, if one takes the global end state as described by al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri: "It is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory,"⁶⁰ then al-Qaeda has not even come close to accomplishing its goal.

As of today, the regime in Algeria remains. AQIM and AAD came close to toppling the government in Bamako, but it remains (with Western support), and al-Zawahiri is still far from restoring his fallen caliphate. Thus, to examine al-Qaeda's successes, I will need to define it in my own terms. For the purposes of this article, *success* is defined using three criteria: (1) relative freedom to carry out violent attacks with low probability of state interference, (2) steady sources of recruitment and resupply, and (3) high probability of continued survival of the group and its leaders. I will show that due to the success factors listed above, al-Qaeda, as a global organization, has been successful.

Decentralization

The first key to al-Qaeda's success is its ability to operate in a decentralized fashion. Currently, it has a global network of affiliates, allies, and supporters across the planet, including at least five major regional affiliates and more than 14 allied terrorist groups.⁶¹ However, this was not always the case. Before 2001, al-Qaeda was a more centralized organization with most of the operational control falling under Osama bin Laden. Then, as pressure from the United States and its allies mounted, the organization was forced to adapt and change how it did business: "In the following years (after 2001), al-Qaeda adapted to increased pressure, especially from the U.S. military in Afghanistan and Pakistan, by further decentralizing its decision-making and operational planning. Bin Laden recognized regional groups that became their own centers of operation."⁶² As it evolved, the organiza-

tion's focus naturally shifted to a more decentralized operational model. It began to create affiliates like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), AQIM, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and allowed these subordinate organizations to conduct attacks autonomously, establish interactions among themselves, and set up further alliances in still more regions and countries.

Before continuing, it is important to identify the nature of the connections that largely comprise the global al-Qaeda network. Broadly, the organization can be split into four categories: al-Qaeda Central, affiliates, allied groups, and inspired networks. al-Qaeda Central is the group's leadership nexus, commanded by al-Zawahiri and primarily located in Pakistan. One can argue as to which organizations fall into the categories of affiliated groups and which are merely allies; however, in general, affiliates are formal yet geographically separated branches of al-Qaeda. AQIM, AQIS, AQAP, and al-Shabab all fall into this category. Third are the allied groups "that have established a direct relationship with al-Qaeda but have not become formal members. This arrangement allows the groups to remain independent and pursue their own goals, but to work with al-Qaeda for specific operations or training purposes when their interests converge."⁶³ Lastly, there are the inspired groups, which do not have any formal contact with al-Qaeda but have been inspired by the message, actions, or branding of al-Qaeda as a whole.

All these entities have ties of varying degrees to al-Qaeda Central. Furthermore, all these organizations, particularly the affiliates, contribute to the overall success of al-Qaeda as a whole by virtue of their links to the organization. AAD falls into the third category of al-Qaeda allied groups. Though al-Qaeda would classify AAD as an ally rather than an affiliate, according to the US Department of State, "AAD is an organization operating in Mali which cooperates closely with AQIM, a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization . . . AAD has received support from AQIM since its inception in late 2011 and continues to maintain close ties to the group. AAD has received backing from AQIM in its fight against Malian and French forces."⁶⁴ This means that AAD has autonomy to carry out its own main objectives—fighting the French and local Malians—while still receiving training, funding, and legitimacy from its links to al-Qaeda.

How does this translate into a tool for success for the global al-Qaeda enterprise? In addition to making worldwide operations possible, decentralization can be effective in spreading the al-Qaeda brand: "What gives al Qaeda its global reach is its ability to appeal to Muslims irrespective of their nationality, giving it unprecedented reach. It can function in East Asia, in Russia, and the heart of Europe, in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout Canada and the US with equal facility."⁶⁵ Working with allies like AAD means that the al-Qaeda brand is being carried to many countries and peoples. Furthermore, it is heightened by local in-

dividuals who carry the message to their own towns and villages. This gives al-Qaeda global reach and influence that translates into recruitment potential and local support; thereby, providing AAD and, by consequence, al-Qaeda with one of the criteria of success: a steady source of recruitment and resupply.

However, arguably the greatest benefit of decentralization, whether through allies like AAD or regional affiliates like AQIM, is simple strength and resilience. By having a solid global network, al-Qaeda is stronger, harder to fight, and more tactically and strategically effective: “al-Qaeda’s expansion is made much more dangerous by the existence of such relationships . . . It is now sharing finances, fighters, and tactics across large geographic areas . . . the entire network is stronger.”⁶⁶ This means that not only does decentralization aid in recruitment and spreading narrative but also gives the group more freedom to carry out attacks in myriad locations, while simultaneously making the al-Qaeda leadership more protected from the consequences of those attacks.

Conflict Locations

The second manner in which al-Qaeda has found success also stems from decentralization. In its need to establish geographically distant alliances, al-Qaeda consistently chooses locations where there is a preexisting history of instability and violence: “al-Qaeda has flourished in an environment of weak or quasi-states that are undergoing disruptive political or social change. Vast swaths of political instability in many parts of the world—particularly in Africa and Asia—have provided a breeding ground for al-Qaeda and its analogues.”⁶⁷ These locations are rife with poor governance, armed groups, and militias not tied to the state but which are supplied with unregulated weapons. These conditions make for the perfect foundation of al-Qaeda success as defined above.

If one examines al-Qaeda’s main affiliates—AQAP, AQIS, AQIM, and al-Shabab—as well as most of its allies, like AAD, they all came into being amid conditions of conflict and unrest in their respective locations. This is not to say that al-Qaeda has not set up cells and alliances in places that are more stable. However, it is in conflict zones that the local al-Qaeda affiliates flourish. Thus, due to widespread war and civil conflict, postcolonial Africa has presented a perfect growth environment for al-Qaeda Central and has been its breeding ground for nearly 30 years.

I have already shown in detail how AQIM and its subsidiary AQIM–Sahel began thanks in large part to the devastation the Algerian Civil War caused. From that conflict and due to the simple geographic fact that vast swaths of the Sahel are ungovernable, AQIM’s presence in the region represents one of al-Qaeda’s greatest successes. The Sahel grants AQIM and AQIM–Sahel relative freedom to

conduct violent attacks as evidenced by the dramatic increase in the number of and countries in which they have been able to strike. The war provided the GIA and, subsequently, the GSPC and AQIM with a steady source of angry and violent recruits as well as access to the Islamist networks of North Africa and Europe. Finally, until recent military operations by Western countries, the vast deserts of the Sahel have provided ample protection that further enhanced the probability of the continued survival of AQIM and its leaders. Thus, one can safely say that using the Algerian Civil War to establish an African affiliate was a highly successful move for al-Qaeda.

Propaganda and Narrative

The third and final method by which al-Qaeda is able to succeed regularly is the use of effective narratives and propaganda networks. We have already seen how al-Qaeda used the preexisting hatred and rivalries during the Algerian Civil War to gather recruits to its name. We also saw how AAD used its affiliation with al-Qaeda to gain prestige and legitimacy, while al-Qaeda Central used AAD to spread its brand. However, the propaganda networks are not limited within the bounds of war nor are they static in their growth, evolution, or distribution: "Over the years, al Qaeda and its fellow travelers have transitioned to new platforms and mechanisms as circumstances have changed . . . in late 2012, the extremists' migration to social media such as Twitter and beyond accelerated."⁶⁸ Al-Qaeda and its allies and offshoots made use of its already decentralized structure to quickly and poignantly spread its narrative globally.

In the case of JNIM, each of the groups that make up the organization have unique narratives (to be discussed later) but also simultaneously have signed on to support, propagate, and make use of the overarching al-Qaeda narrative. JNIM has consistently propagated "its intention to destabilize local governments in favor of their interpretation of sharia law . . . JNIM's ideology aligns with that of all al Qaeda affiliates, preaching vehement antipathy toward the West and local governments that collaborate with western countries."⁶⁹ While in the Malian context, narrative may translate to specific objectives like attacking French or UN forces, the fundamental ideology remains connected to al-Qaeda.

There is not an affiliate that has not participated in the pervasiveness of al-Qaeda propaganda, though some have done so with greater success than others. For example, AQAP has been the most prolific affiliate, with products that range from magazines to Twitter accounts, targeting anyone who may be vulnerable to radicalization, all with the goal of attracting recruits and support.

al-Qaeda uses a combination of “written and audiovisual messages that [transcends] both technology and literacy barriers.” Most recently, al Qaeda added online magazines such as Inspire, launched in 2010 in several languages... The ease of disseminating the magazine via the Internet, it has become a vital recruitment method for al-Qaeda.⁷⁰

These tactics have been absolutely fundamental in spreading al-Qaeda and building its recruitment base. Narrative as a tool for motivation, recruitment, and group identity builds upon the other keys to success, is by far the most shareable, and, thus, represents the most formidable of al-Qaeda’s global strategies.

Al-Qaeda’s keys to continued global success have been decentralization, effective narratives and propaganda, and a focus on locations where there is a preexisting history of instability and violence. With this model, al-Qaeda has relative freedom to carry out violent attacks with low probability of state interference, steady sources of recruitment and resupply, and high probability of continued survival. Moreover, given the efficacy of these strategies, it would not be difficult to assess that al-Qaeda will continue using them to prolong its achievements. Those same strategies, particularly when applied to affiliates like JNIM, take a slightly different shape as the organization both uses those strategies and benefits from them.

Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin: Strategic Estimate

Narratives and Objectives

Because JNIM is an alliance of four separate groups, any analysis of its objectives must, by necessity, consider JNIM as a whole and simultaneously examine each groups’ unique goals as well. Similarly, when dissecting the groups’ narratives and propaganda efforts, it is important to view JNIM’s united narrative as well as the individual narratives of the groups of which it is comprised. Also, as al-Qaeda narratives and objectives are inextricably linked as keys for success, so are they for JNIM. Therefore, this section will first look at JNIM as a whole then dissect it and investigate the goals and narratives of its four subgroups: AQIM, the MLF, AAD, and al-Mourabitoun.

JNIM’s foundational objectives are in line with those of al-Qaeda. As an al-Qaeda affiliate, JNIM plays an important role in carrying out al-Qaeda’s ideology in Africa. Though JNIM may act with substantial autonomy, its objectives remain those of a Salafi jihadist group: “The group’s goals and ideological basis are closely aligned with those of AQIM and it seeks to build up a Salafi-Islamist state while restoring the caliphate...and effectively implement Shariah law.”⁷¹ While this is al-Qaeda’s grand strategic vision for JNIM, the alliance’s unique goals involve the drive to “expand its presence over larger territory and train militants against

JNIM's enemies, while preserving relations with local communities."⁷² To peruse that objective, JNIM must use its individual groups and their corresponding unique objectives.

JNIM's narrative is strongly reliant on a combination of its affiliation with al-Qaeda and its ties to local populations. The organization also relies heavily on the idea of unity—the notion that once disjointed and fragmented groups have now joined together under “One banner, one group, one Emir.” In a place where ethnic tensions and violence are a constant threat and marginalization from the government with reprisals from the military are commonplace, the slogan of unity between groups of different backgrounds and ethnic compositions is extremely impactful.⁷³

The narrative and propaganda efforts do not stop with preaching unity, however. Like AQIM and other affiliates, JNIM has its own propaganda arm, *az-Zallāqa*, with which the group preaches several main narratives: martial prowess and jihad, victimization of Muslims (mostly in the Sahel), and dehumanization of the enemy.⁷⁴ *Az-Zallāqa* often produces high quality publications, including images of training camps, drone shots of military formations, and videos of successful operations all interwoven with text, speeches from terrorist leaders, and eulogies of fallen terrorists—all with the objectives of recruitment, awareness, and indoctrination.

Other important pieces of JNIM's narrative are a desire to maintain good relations with local populations and to be seen as an alternative to the national government for defense and income. Part of JNIM's efforts to integrate locally is to use revenue gained from criminal operations to pay fighters, offer financial incentives to impoverished Malians, and provide basic services in places that the government cannot.⁷⁵ JNIM also seeks to appear as the righteous defender of the people and of Islam. JNIM Emir Iyadh Ag Ghali even laid out the organization's military policy by explaining that it seeks to continue “expanding geographically as much as possible, undermining (the) enemy by attacking him wherever he may be, inciting the people to do the same and protecting them, and securing popular support.”⁷⁶ To truly integrate with the people, however, JNIM must rely on its subgroups and the legitimacy many of them already have.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb–Sahel

In general, AQIM is aligned with al-Qaeda's broader goals to institute sharia in all its areas of operation and claims that all non-Islamist governments are illegitimate and therefore must be replaced by whatever means necessary.⁷⁷ As verbalized by AQIM's leader Abdelmalek Droukal, “Our general goals are the same goals of al-Qaeda the mother, and you know them. As far as our goals concerning the Islamic Maghreb, they are plenty. But most importantly is to rescue our coun-

tries from the tentacles of these criminal regimes that betrayed their religion and their people.”⁷⁸ AQIM has also made statements naming the overthrow of the governments of Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mali and the reclamation of lost Islamic lands in southern Spain among its long-term goals.⁷⁹ As AQIM–Sahel was originally just an offshoot of AQIM, and even now represents a subgroup of JNIM (which is in turn loyal to AQIM), it is safe to say that AQIM–Sahel’s goals are the same as those of AQIM but with a focus on the smaller group’s primary areas of operations: the Sahel and Mali.

AQIM–Sahel’s narrative, like that of other al-Qaeda affiliates, focuses around the authority and fear generated by the al-Qaeda brand. AQIM must simultaneously seem to be “one of the people” in their areas of operation while also having the ability to control the populace and use them for the organization’s own means. As an example, in 2015, several dozen masked AQIM fighters took over several intercommunal meetings in the Timbuktu region. They read a letter “encouraging reconciliation between communities, threatened those that collaborated with the ‘Enemies of Islam,’ and promised to act against rural criminality.”⁸⁰ This illustrated AQIM’s effort to ensure its narratives walk the line between striking fear and ingratiating them to the people. One of the other ways in which they do this is by allying with organizations that already have that local legitimacy.

Al-Mourabitoun

Of the four main jihadist groups that make up JNIM, al-Mourabitoun has arguably the most complex history. In 2011, Mokhtar Belmokhtar was leader of AQIM’s Sahel branch under the command of AQIM commander, Abdelmalek Droukdel. However, Belmokhtar was unhappy with Droukdel’s leadership and split from AQIM to form the al-Mulathamun Battalion in 2012. In 2013, the al-Mulathamun Battalion merged with significant elements of the MUJAO to form al-Mourabitoun. Despite their earlier schism, al-Mourabitoun rejoined AQIM–Sahel in 2015 and united under the JNIM banner in 2017.

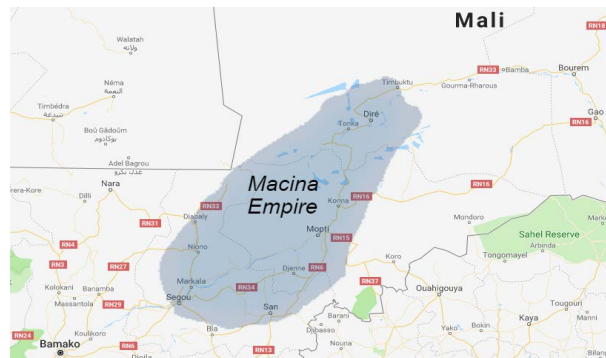
Despite the schism with AQIM in 2013, al-Mourabitoun’s overall objectives never strayed far from those of AQIM. Similarly, its narrative does not represent a significant departure from that of AQIM–Sahel or JNIM more generally. Like the MLF, the name al-Mourabitoun harkens back to a historical empire. The Almoravid dynasty was an eleventh-century Berber empire known for religious zeal “that came from the merger between the preacher movement and the tribes they embedded in, ruling over the Maghreb and the Iberian Al Andalus.” Without doubt, the selection of this name was made with the objective of conjuring up images of past Muslim power and piety.⁸¹

Ansar al-Din

If AQIM's objectives are continent-wide and AQIM–Sahel's objectives are regional, AAD's strategies focus still further into northern Mali and local issues. Though still an adherent to Salafi jihadist ideologies, AAD and its leader, Iyadh Ag Ghali have shown, since 2011, that its priority is bringing those ideologies to a northern Mali that is free from governmental oversight and control. It is notable that AQIM used its AAD allies as the face of the jihadist front during the 2012 uprising: "The use of Malians allowed AQIM and MUJAO to hide their actions behind those of AAD, while also tapping into local religious, ethnic, and cultural divides to fuel support and recruitment."⁸² Being the "local face" of AQIM and now JNIM has not only driven AAD's goals but likewise its narrative. Iyadh Ag Ghali's installation as the publicly recognized leader of JNIM can be seen as both a reason and a consequence of this narrative of local legitimacy.

Macina Liberation Front

Above all, the FLM can and should be seen as a branch of AAD with specific cultural and tribal association. The group was created in 2015 by Fulani members formerly serving as MUJAO cadres. Therefore, though the FLM's broad objectives remain the same as AAD, its narrative and some of its unique objectives are shaped by the group's Fulani tribal affiliation.⁸³ The name Macina is a reference to the Macina Empire which, from 1818 to 1863, was a Fulani power in the Sahel. As discussed previously, the Macina Empire was one of the series of Fulani states that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a result, the FLM has leaned heavily on narratives of this historical empire for legitimacy and power and to gain support among disenfranchised Fulani. Parallel to the goal of sharia law in Mali, the MLF also maintains the goal of conquering the traditional area of the Macina Empire and substituting that for the Malian government.⁸⁴



(Image: Tommy Lorne Miles; map data: Google)

Figure 7: The Macina Empire, c. 1830

For the JNIM, the Fulani comprise a significant portion of its recruits; likewise, the inclusion of the FLM was key to maintaining the stream of fighters. Moreover, the FLM area of operations, central Mali, is currently one of the most dangerous in the region. In 2018, 500 civilians were killed, more than 60,000 people have fled the violence, and 972,000 people are in need of humanitarian assistance. In fact, the MLF is believed to be one of JNIM's most active groups, currently linked to 63 percent of the violence in the country.⁸⁵

The FLM's increasing importance and activity is reflective of JNIM's gradual shift of focus from the North to the more turbulent central parts of Mali. As one of JNIM's most active groups, the FLM has followed Droukdel's orders to "pretend to be a 'domestic' movement that has its own causes and concerns" and to avoid "showing that we have an expansionary, jihadist, al-Qaeda or any other sort of project."⁸⁶ Thus, by portraying itself as a "liberation movement," the FLM can avoid scrutiny by international counterterrorism organizations, carry out attacks, and simultaneously provide JNIM with local support. As a result, since approximately 2015, it has become one of the primary attack arms of JNIM and shifted the security situation into central Mali.⁸⁷

Ansaroul Islam and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Although not part of JNIM, one cannot talk about extremist violence in Mali without mentioning Ansaroul Islam. As Mali's neighbor, Burkina Faso has been a victim of JNIM attacks along their shared border, but Ansaroul Islam is Burkina Faso's first homegrown Islamist group. In 2016, Malam Dicko, an ethnic Fulani, founded the group, which for the next two years would be responsible for more than half the violent attacks in Burkina Faso. Ansaroul Islam's alliance with FLM and links with AQIM ensure the frequency and severity of its and helps to protect its presence near the Burkina–Mali border. In 2018, Ansaroul Islam carried out 137 attacks accounting for 149 fatalities.⁸⁸

This article will not focus on Ansaroul Islam nor on the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). The latter is not an ally of JNIM and is comprised mostly of fighters that actively defected from AQIM or FLM to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State. Also, most of its attacks are focused in Burkina Faso and Niger. That said, it remains a player in the greater Sahel, where the organization has been as deadly as JNIM. Moreover, in some cases though not a part of JNIM, "ISGS maintains close ties with JNIM members facilitating the coordination of their respective activities. The ability and willingness of ISGS to coordinate with JNIM enables them to deconflict their activities while expanding the areas in which the militants operate."⁸⁹ Therefore, any analysis of violent extremist organizations in the region is lacking without at least mentioning ISGS.

Methods and Tactics

Once one understands JNIM's goals and the narrative it uses to pursue them, the next step is to analyze the organization's capabilities. According to authors, Kim Cragin and Sarah Daly, there are five indicators by which one can assess how capable a terrorist group is:

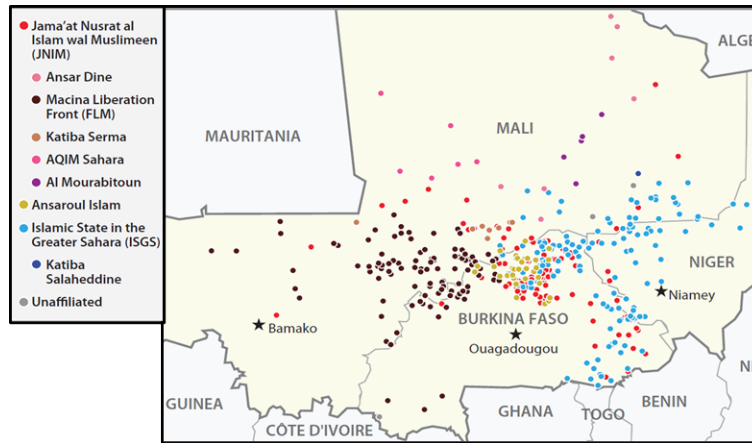
1. Killing/injuring 50 or more people in a single attack;
2. Targeting ungarded foreign nationals;
3. Killing or injuring 150 or more people in a single attack;
4. Striking guarded targets; and
5. Successfully conducting multiple coordinated attacks.⁹⁰

JNIM or its subgroups have met and exceeded every one of these threat indicators. The first two have been met by numerous attacks since 2013. Though technically before the announcement of the JNIM's formation, al-Mourabitoun carried out a suicide attack in January 2017 that resulted in 79 dead and 108 wounded—meeting the third threshold.⁹¹ On the anniversary of its 2 March inauguration, JNIM conducted a coordinated attack on the French embassy and Burkinabe Army headquarters in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, meeting the fourth and fifth indicators. Thus, by this measure, JNIM qualifies as being a highly capable extremist organization.

Not only is it capable, but the organization conduct its attacks using a broad spectrum of technologies. It has been responsible for complex attacks such as the 14 April 2018 Timbuktu airport attack, in which it sent four suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices into the airport, followed by an armed assault that resulted in a gun battle and the death of a UN peacekeeper.⁹² Yet, there have also been reports of booby-trapped corpses and roadkill.⁹³ Generally, JNIM's preferred weapon has been improvised explosive devices (IED). Of 276 attacks in 2017, 71 came as a result of IEDs. However, most of the attacks that are considered "high casualty" (10+ casualties) are armed assaults and shootings.⁹⁴

By its very nature as an alliance of four distinct groups, JNIM is willing and able to pull off attacks in coordination with other extremist groups. JNIM's very creation represents a complex organizational structure of communication, delegation, and operation coordination. This deconflicts attacks and mitigates the potential for group infighting and is evidenced by the geographic concentration of its operations (fig. 8). Furthermore, JNIM can also act like an "umbrella" for its constituent members. This is exemplified by the FLM, which, though it is the leading militant actor in Mali, is able to maintain a low profile. As previously stated,

JNIM obscures the group's true capabilities and the extent of its actions to avoid attention from government or international actors.⁹⁵



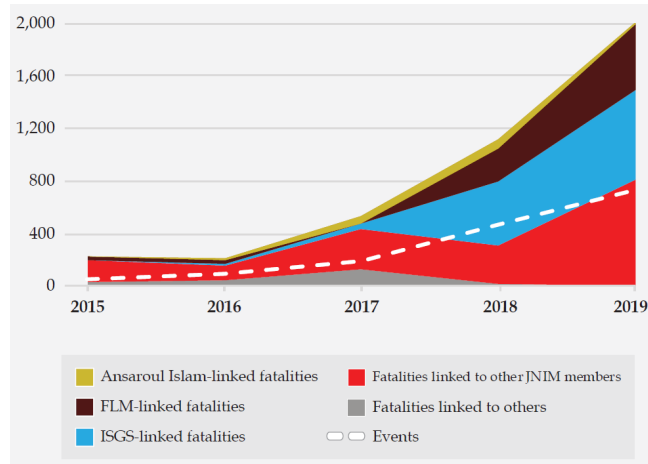
(Data source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED])

Figure 8: Violent events involving the designated groups in 2019. Note: Data points represent violent events involving the designated groups in 2019.

Training is another key piece of the JNIM's overall capabilities. Al-Qaeda places significant emphasis on the training and development of operatives in all its affiliates, and JNIM is no exception: "JNIM controls a large territory in which to train new operatives . . . Training operations consist of both physical exercises and propaganda and trainees are given a manual of comprehensive instructions for conducting terror operations."⁹⁶ As part of its propaganda operations, JNIM features training camps in a video the organization released in 2018.⁹⁷

Since the peace treaty was signed in 2015, JNIM and its constituent groups have undergone two shifts in their methods and overall strategy. First and most obvious, they have steadily increased their operational tempo to include more attacks with high casualty results (fig. 9). However, the second shift is more insidious, yet in line with the al-Qaeda keys to success previously discussed. To take advantage of conflicts between ethnic groups in the central parts of the country, JNIM has shifted its operations from the North to Mali's central regions. There, the group has access to fertile recruiting grounds and has the ability to push its narrative into communities that are already rife with conflict. In these communities, JNIM can exploit the grievances against other tribes and against the government. JNIM, and especially the FLM, "have tapped deep-seated local grievances to exploit social cleavages between Fulani and other local groups like the Bambara and Dogon. These recriminations have degenerated into ethnic clashes in central Mali."⁹⁸ Furthermore, for those communities that, until now, have avoided any

intercommunal violence, JNIM can foment those divisions, then present itself as the only viable choice for stability protection.



(Data source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED])

Figure 9: Fatalities caused by extremist groups

Resources and Means

The primary means of supply for AQIM–Sahel and by extension, JNIM, was generally weapons smuggling from Libya and Algeria. Between 2011 and 2014, the majority of weapons trafficking in the Sahel originated in Libya and moved through Algeria or Niger on the way to AQIM. Though Libyan weapons remain a problem, recent evidence indicates that JNIM and other extremist movements have “employed an increasing proportion of heavy weaponry from Malian government stockpiles—particularly ammunition for larger weapon systems such as rockets and artillery—as opposed to Libyan or other foreign sources.”⁹⁹ The decrease in smuggling is mostly due to the efforts of the French and Operation Barkhane. However, as clashes with Malian security forces continue and governance in the central and northern regions does not improve, JNIM will have continued access to weapons from both domestic and international sources.

Outside of weapons, Mali is still a crossroads for trade and commerce of both licit and illicit goods (fig. 10). Smuggling has been a part of the local livelihood since even before independence. Thus, JNIM makes much of its revenue through exploiting these commercial routes and smuggling operations. Networks that traditionally exchanged licit goods such as gas and foodstuffs, often evolve into illicit networks wherein JNIM and al-Qaeda operatives smuggle weapons, narcotics, tobacco, and

even people.¹⁰⁰ Of these revenue streams, there are two that have largely been the most lucrative for JNIM and its allies: kidnapping and drug trafficking.

Kidnapping has been a part of AQIM's arsenal since the early days of its appearance in Mali and became a mainstay of its tactics in the years leading up to 2012. Starting in 2003, AQIM committed a dizzying array of kidnappings, with victims ranging from 32 Europeans in one event to individual French tourists who were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. For a decade after 2003, AQIM made more than 100 million USD, of which kidnapping was the predominant income source, allowing the organization to spread its influence throughout the Sahel. Kidnapping was an effective and extraordinarily high-reward practice. Between 2008 and 2013, AQIM netted 91.5 million USD on just seven ransom payments for 20 individuals (roughly 4.6 million USD per hostage).¹⁰¹ While JNIM did not exist at that time, kidnapping is still one of its primary means of revenue. In 2017, under the auspices of JNIM, AQIM kidnapped a South African and eventually received a 4.2 million USD ransom.¹⁰²

Next to kidnapping, drugs represent JNIM's main revenue stream. Each year, 1.25 billion USD of cocaine transits through West Africa. JNIM subgroups, specifically, make the bulk of their funds "from their control of 'ancient trade routes through the Sahara' used for trafficking drugs . . . (and) taxes on shipments going through their territory."¹⁰³ Though historically kidnapping for ransom has been the most lucrative activity, JNIM has taken a globalized trajectory. It has shifted its focus away from kidnapping to protection rackets, robbery, human trafficking, and money laundering and with that shift toward al-Qaeda networks, facilitating drug trafficking from South America into Europe.¹⁰⁴

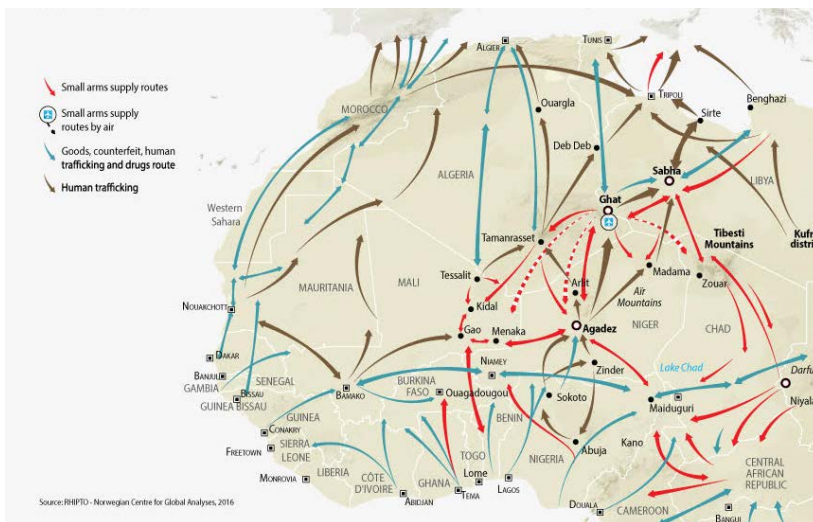


Figure 10: Trans-Saharan trafficking and threat finance

Conclusion

Before 2012, the international community saw Mali as an example of what success in Africa could look like. Unfortunately, Mali's institutional weakness under the surface meant that success was a façade. Thanks to the deep-seated scars of colonization, simmering ethnic conflicts, and detrimental effects of nearby civil wars, Mali was unable to maintain its pretense of stability in the face of an ethnic revolt. The result was the near-complete collapse of the Malian state and—perhaps more dangerous for the continent as a whole—the creation and empowerment of radical groups that would in time become JNIM.

JNIM's activity in Mali and the greater Sahel, coupled with the group's integration into society, represents an existential threat to Mali. Similarly, continued degradation of the Malian state is advantageous to JNIM and fits into its narrative of state weakness and lack of governance. By understanding both the root causes of Mali's current instability and the characteristics of its most dangerous extremist group, one can begin to develop strategies that simultaneously combat JNIM and improve Malian stability and governance. Therefore, a subsequent article in this journal will take on that objective, building upon the information here to provide strategies for both combating JNIM and improving conditions on the ground in Mali.

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