AQIM'S IMPERIAL PLAYBOOK

UNDERSTANDING AL-QA`IDA IN THE ISLAMIC MAGHREB'S EXPANSION INTO WEST AFRICA

Caleb Weiss | April 2022

AQIM's Imperial Playbook:
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About the Author

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAA - Almansour Ag Alkassoum

AAM - Ansar Allah al-Murabitin

ACLED - Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

ADC - Democratic Alliance for Change

AFRICOM - United States Africa Command

AI - Ansaroul Islam

AO - area of operations

AQ - al-Qa`ida

AQAP - al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula

AQI - al-Qa`ida in Iraq

AQIM - al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb

ATT - Amadou Toumani Touré

CTC - Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

EIJ - Egyptian Islamic Jihad

FIT - Tunisian Islamic Front

FLN - National Liberation Front

FIS - Islamic Salvation Front

GIA - Armed Islamic Group

GIMF - Global Islamic Media Front

GMPJ - Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Jihad

GSPC - Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat

HRW - Human Rights Watch

ICG - International Crisis Group

IED - improvised explosive device

ISGS - Islamic State in the Greater Sahara

ISWAP - Islamic State West Africa Province

JNIM - Group for Support of Islam and Muslims

KFR - kidnapping for ransom

LIFG - Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

MEI - Movement for an Islamic State

MNLA - National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad

MOC - Operational Coordination Mechanism

MPLA - Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad

MUJAO - Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

TTPs - tactics, techniques, and procedures

UBL - Usama bin Ladin

UN - United Nations

VDP - Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland

List of Individuals

Abd al-Baqi al-Laghouati - Sahel-based GIA commander in the early 1990s

Abd al-Rahman Ould Muhammad al-Husayn Ould Muhammad Salim/Younis al-Mauritani - dual-hatted GSPC and al-Qa`ida leader

Abdallah al-Shinqiti - Mauritanian field commander in AQIM; former emir of AQIM's Katibat al-Furqan

Abdelaziz Bouteflika - president of Algeria from 1999 to 2019

Abdelhak Layada - co-founder of the GIA

Abdelhamid Abu Zeid - Sahara-based AQIM commander of Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad

Abdelkader Chebouti - co-founder of Algeria's Movement for an Islamic State; co-founder of the GIA

Abdelmalek Droukdel - third emir of the GSPC from 2004 to 2006; emir of AQIM from 2007 to 2020

Abderrazak al-Para/Amari Saifi - Sahara-based AQIM commander; founder of Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad

Abdul Rahman al-Nigeri - Nigerien deputy of Mokhtar Belmokhtar; led the 2013 In Amenas attack in Algeria

Abubakar Shekau - second emir of 'Boko Haram' from 2009 to 2021

Abu Ali al-Naygeri - Nigerian member of Katibat al-Mulathameen; suicide bomber in 2013 Niger attacks

Abu Bakr al-Masri - first emir of al-Murabitoon from 2013 to 2014

Abu Hafs al-Mauritani - former senior al-Qa`ida leader

Abu Maysara al-Iraqi - first spokesman of al-Qa`ida in Iraq

Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi - one of al-Qa`ida's key ideologues

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri - formerly one of al-Qa`ida's key ideologues; supporter of the GIA

Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi - founder and first emir of al-Qa`ida in Iraq

Abu Qatada al-Filistini - one of al-Qa`ida's key ideologues; supporter of the GIA

Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi - current emir of AQIM since 2020

Abu Walid al-Sahraoui - co-founder of MUJAO; co-founder of al-Murabitoon; founder and first emir of ISGS

Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti - former Mauritanian religious official in AQIM

Adam Kambar - Nigerian member of GIA; co-founder and senior leader of Ansaru

Adil Hadi al-Jaza'iri - dual-hatted GIA and al-Qa`ida commander; previously detained at Guantanamo Bay

Ahmada Ag Bibi - Tuareg notable and co-founder of Ansar Dine

Ahmed al-Tilemsi - co-founder of MUJAO; co-founder and second emir of al-Murabitoon

Ahmed Ould el-Khory - founder and emir of GMPJ

Algabass Ag Intalla - Tuareg notable and co-founder of Ansar Dine

Aliou Mahamar Toure - commander within MUJAO; head of its Islamic police during the occupation of Gao

Almansour Ag Alkassoum - senior commander in Ansar Dine; founder and first emir of Ansar Dine's Katibat Gourma

Amadou Kouffa - senior commander in Ansar Dine; founder and first emir of Ansar Dine's Katibat Macina; senior leader within JNIM

Amadou Toumani Touré - former president of Mali from 2002 to 2012

Antar Zouabri - final emir of the GIA

Attiyah al-Libi/Attiyah Abd al-Rahman - senior al-Qa`ida leader; former member of the LIFG

Ayman al-Zawahiri - current overall emir of al-Qa`ida since 2011

Blaise Compaoré - president of Burkina Faso from 1987 to 2014

Boubacar Sawadogo - field commander in Ansar Dine; led Ansar Dine's Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid

Cheikh Ag Aoussa - former Tuareg rebel leader; co-founder of Ansar Dine

Djamel Okacha/Yahya Abu al-Hammam - Sahara-based AQIM commander; former leader of AQIM's Katibat al-Furqan; former emir of AQIM's Sahara Emirate; former deputy emir of JNIM

Djamel Zitouni/Abu Abdul Rahman Amine - former emir of the GIA

Emad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan/Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni - al-Qa`ida representative sent to the GSPC in the late 1990s and early 2000s

Hamada Ag Hama/Abdelkarim al-Targui - Tuareg AQIM commander; founder and emir of Katibat al-Ansar

Hamada Ould Khairou - co-founder of MUJAO

Hassan Allani - Sahel and Nigeria-based GIA commander in the early 1990s

Hassan Hattab - co-founder and first emir of the GSPC

Hibatullah Akhundzada - third and current emir of the Afghan Taliban; al-Qa`ida and all of its branches swear loyalty to him

Hisham Abu Akram - former member of the GIA; currently one of AQIM's main ideologues

Ibrahim Dicko/Boureima Dicko - founder and first emir of Ansaroul Islam

Ishaq al-Afghani - Sahara-based deputy of Mokhtar Belmokhtar

Iyad Ag Ghaly - co-founder and emir of Ansar Dine; current emir of JNIM

Jafar Dicko - current emir of Ansaroul Islam

Jamal al-Fadl - former Sudanese senior leader of al-Qa`ida and important early defector from the organization

Khaddim Ould Semane - Mauritanian member of the GSPC; co-founder and emir of Ansar Allah al-Murabitin

Khalid al-Barnawi - Nigerian member of the GIA; co-founder and senior leader within Ansaru

Mansour Meliani - co-founder of the GIA

Moh Leveilley - co-founder of the GIA

Mokhtar Belmokhtar - Sahara-based commander of the GIA and later GSPC; founder of Katibat al-Mulathameen; co-founder of al-Murabitoon; third emir of al-Murabitoon

Muhammad Yusuf - founder and first emir of 'Boko Haram'

Mustapha Abu Ibrahim/Nabil al-Sahraoui - co-founder and second emir of the GSPC

Mu'az Abu Mus'ab al-Mauritani - Mauritanian field commander of AQIM

Mus'ab Abu Dawud - deputy of Abdelmalek Droukdel sent to the Sahara

Nabil Abu Alqama/Nabil Makhloufi - Sahara-based AQIM commander; former emir of AQIM's Sahara Emirate

Omar Chikhi - co-founder of the GIA

Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harithi/Abu Ali al-Harithi - Yemen-based al-Qa`ida operative; coordinated with GSPC

Qari Said - senior leader in al-Qa`ida and co-founder of the GIA

Qutaybah Abu Nu'man al-Shinqiti - senior religious official in both AQIM and JNIM

Said Makhloufi - co-founder of Algeria's Movement for an Islamic State; co-founder of the GIA

Sanda Ould Bouamama - former spokesman for Ansar Dine

Sedane Ag Hitta/Abu Abdelhamid al-Kidali or al-Qairawani - Tuareg AQIM commander; founder and emir of AQIM's Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine; current deputy emir of JNIM

Souleymane Keita - field commander within Ansar Dine; co-founder and former emir of Ansar Dine's Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid; released from prison in 2020

Sultan Ould Bady - co-founder of MUJAO; former commander within Ansar Dine; former commander within al-Murabitoon; former commander within AQIM; former commander within ISGS

Talha al-Libi - Mauritanian field commander within AQIM; emir of AQIM's Katibat al-Furqan; senior leader within JNIM

Taqi Ould Yusuf - former Mauritanian commander within AQIM; former AQIM liaison in Nigeria

Usama bin Ladin - co-founder and first emir of al-Qa`ida

Yahia Djouadi - veteran of the GIA and GSPC; appointed the leader of AQIM's Sahara Emirate in 2007 and replaced in 2011; killed in northern Mali in 2022

Executive Summary

In 2021, the United Nations noted the newfound threats of the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), a branch of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), that extended into Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast, stretching farther yet into Ghana, Togo, and Benin.[1] Had an observer in 2006 had this information presented to them, they might have scarcely believed it. That year, in which AQIM was formed, the group was a thoroughly North African organization and based primarily in Algeria. Fast forward 15 years, how did AQIM end up nearly 1,300 miles away, now posing immediate threats in the states of littoral West Africa?

Relying on a combination of primary source jihadi propaganda and historical research, this report argues that over the past 30 years, al-Qa`ida and its branches and allies in North and West Africa have followed what this report calls "al-Qa`ida's Imperial Playbook," as they have sought to expand their areas of influence southward. Al-Qa`ida's "playbook," this report shows, is composed of five fundamental tactics: befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict; integrating themselves into communities where those militants exist; exploiting grievances of those communities to gain sympathy; addressing internal or external dissent either passively or aggressively; and looking toward new theaters once their base is solidified. Al-Qa`ida has subsequently utilized this playbook to expand southward from its Algeria base in five distinct historical periods: from 1992-1998; 1998-2006; 2006-2012; 2013-2017; and 2017-present. Al-Qa`ida and its affiliates in northern and western Africa are likely to continue to use this playbook as they continue their contemporary expansion into West Africa.

To be clear, this report does not posit that al-Qa`ida used the exact same tactics—or the exact same iterations of these tactics—for expansion in each of the five time periods. Indeed, various periods saw the use of either variations of these tactics or, often, different or additional tactics as compared to its previous or subsequent historical eras. Depending on the needs of the organization to continue its expansion southward, different approaches were considered. All in all, however, each tactic fits within what this report refers to as "al-Qa`ida's Imperial Playbook" for expansion throughout West Africa.

As such, this report breaks down al-Qa`ida's history in the Sahel into five basic chapters based on the aforementioned historical periods in order to understand how and why AQ moved southward in each period.

Beginning in its first time period (1992-1998), al-Qa`ida first moved into the Sahel around 1993 and 1994 as it supported the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in its fight in the civil war in Algeria. The connections between the GIA and al-Qa`ida were first formed in Afghanistan but were predominately forged and solidified in both Sudan and Niger. Moreover, as the GIA sought a safe rear base and a steady supply of weapons, money, and support, it utilized al-Qa`ida's networks in the Sahel in addition to forming its own in both Niger and Nigeria. The networks established by the GIA were later taken over and subsumed by its splinter group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC).

Al-Qa`ida's second time period of expansion (1998-2006) was marked by intense ideological battles that eventually overtook the GIA, which prompted the creation of the splinter group GSPC with al-Qa`ida's assistance. Much like its predecessor, the GSPC initially looked to the Sahel as a viable rear base for its Algeria-focused mission. However, when its Sahel-based commanders began marrying into local tribes and families, bankrolling construction and offering other social support to locals, and establishing deep and lasting relationships with local powerbrokers, politicians, and criminals,

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1   "Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," United Nations Security Council, July 15, 2021, p. 8.

the GSPC began to take in flocks of local Sahelian recruits and collaborators. This influx of Sahelians significantly shifted the GSPC's character away from being an Algeria-specific organization, to an outfit focused on both North Africa and the Sahelian grievances more generally. With this shift, the GSPC's leadership saw the Sahel as a viable space for kinetic operations, starting with its attacks in Mauritania in June 2005.

In the third period of al-Qa`ida's West African expansion (2006-2012), the GSPC officially became al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, with its focus remaining on expanding in the Sahel. Local efforts to establish a Mauritanian branch were made the same year, while the group also began to target Malian troops in 2009. Further social integration within the Sahel also meant more local recruits, which was reflected in AQIM establishing several local brigades in the late 2000s and early 2010s. As Tuareg rebellions occurred in the Sahara in the mid-2000s, AQIM took the opportunity to further integrate itself within the society of northern Mali. When a Tuareg rebellion inside Mali catapulted that country into conflict in 2012, AQIM took its newfound weaponry from the chaos in Libya to initially support the Tuaregs in taking over half of the country in mid-2012. Eventually, AQIM would turn on its one-time allies and rule over northern Mali alongside its local front organization and allies with its strict interpretation of sharia law. Around the same time in 2012, AQIM assisted in the creation of a pro-al-Qa`ida group inside Nigeria, Ansaru, offering al-Qa`ida its first official franchise in the country. Yet, the history of AQIM in the Sahel has not always been harmonious, as seen with the emergence of two splinter groups from the organization between 2011 and 2012—al-Mulathameen and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). These splinters, however, still cooperated with their parent organization, AQIM, and still operated in the Sahel in the name of al-Qa`ida.

Al-Qa`ida's fourth expansionary time period in the Sahel (2013-2017) was marked by a period of significant rebuilding and reconstituting of its forces away from its historical areas of operation in Mali into areas such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and beyond. This was done by the merger of al-Mulathameen and MUJAO to form a new group, al-Murabitoon, in 2013, a move that was preceded by the two groups performing a large joint operation deep within Nigerien territory. For its part, between 2014 and 2015, Ansar Dine, one of the al-Qa`ida-loyal organizations in northern Mali, created several sub-groups across central and southern Mali. Meanwhile, in 2016, al-Qa`ida members in Mali assisted local Burkinabe jihadis to form Burkina Faso's first jihadi organization, Ansaroul Islam.

The fifth and final expansionary period (2017-2021) has seen al-Qa`ida's widest expansion yet. By 2017, these outfits, Ansar Dine and its subgroups, AQIM's Saharan wing, and al-Murabitoon publicly merged to form the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM). JNIM has since expanded farther across central and southern Mali, especially by deeply ingraining itself within local conflicts and local communities in order to build public support. Additionally, its violence has continued to spread outside of the Sahel and is now threatening several littoral West African states. Meanwhile, Ansaru, which is attempting a comeback after a period of dormancy, now threatens to create a contiguous battle zone for al-Qa`ida across much of the Sahel and West Africa.

Collectively, this report suggests that the five tactics used across the five time periods outlined are likely to continue into the future.

Part 1: Introduction

Our Muslim Ummah in the Islamic Maghreb, from Abidjan, Ouagadougou and Timbuktu to the heights of the Atlas, from Shinqit to Siwa: The French have returned once again ... so rise and be valiant men just as your forefathers were. Teach the French a lesson whose bitterness and pain they will narrate for generations to come. —Ayman al-Zawahiri, September 2017[2]

Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its Sahelian branch, the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), together represent one of the most significant security challenges on the African continent today. Indeed, these al-Qa`ida (AQ) groups present major threats not only to local states, militaries, and civilian populations, but to the national security interests of the United States as well. U.S. military leaders have been explicit on this matter. In 2018, U.S. Marine Corps General Thomas D. Waldhauser, the former commander of U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), stated in congressional testimony that "in Mali and adjacent countries, AQIM and its affiliates remain a threat to U.S. interests and the security of our African partners."[3] Speaking more recently, U.S. Air Force Major General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, then commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, told the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point in February 2020 that "al-Qa`ida is our deeper concern on the continent."[4] Regarding the Sahel, he added that AQ is "establishing themselves in the Azawad area of northern Mali. They're quietly establishing their connections and their relationships there."[5] In a separate interview that month with the Associated Press, Maj. Gen. Anderson was even more clear that AQ's activity in West Africa "could very easily develop into a great threat to the West and the United States" if the jihadi group there goes unchecked.[6]

Though it is unclear how much al-Qa`ida's activities in West Africa threaten the U.S. homeland, the more regional concerns are not unfounded. Since 2017, Africa's Sahel region has witnessed an exponential rise in jihadi violence across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[7] This tracks with a broader continent-wide rise in jihadi violence. For instance, Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner have found that between 2009 and 2021, jihadi violence in Africa has increased nearly 17-fold.[8] To better contextualize the worrying speed in which this phenomenon has occurred in just the Sahel, anecdotally, Burkina Faso alone suffered a 250 percent increase in jihadi violence between 2018 and 2019.[9] This violence, largely perpetrated by JNIM, has also recently started to threaten the security of several littoral West African states, such as the Ivory Coast, Togo, Ghana, and Benin, as attacks trickle deeper and deeper into southern West Africa.[10] Worrying still, a nascent al-Qa`ida franchise in northwestern Nigeria has

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2   Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Messages from the Frontlines," As-Sahab Media, September 2017.

3   "2018 Posture Statement to Congress," United States Africa Command.

4   Jason Warner, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).

5   Ibid.

6   "AP Interview: Al-Qaida, IS Affiliates Team Up in West Africa," Associated Press, February 27, 2020.

7   "'Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region," U.N. News, January 8, 2020; "Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region," Human Rights Watch, March 22, 2019; "Jihadist violence putting 'generation at risk' in Africa's Sahel: WFP," Reuters, November 19, 2019; "Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali," Human Rights Watch, February 10, 2020.

8   Tricia Bacon and Jason Warner, "Twenty Years After 9/11: The Threat in Africa—The New Epicenter of Global Jihadi Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 14:7 (2021).

9   "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Burkina Faso," U.S. Department of State.

10   Caleb Weiss, "Jihadists target military outpost in Ivory Coast," FDD's Long War Journal, June 11, 2020; Celia Lebur, "Worried Togo finds itself on the front line of Sahel's jihadist war," AFP, May 20, 2020; Sarah Maslin Nir, "Benin Awakens to the Threat of Terrorism After Safari Ends in a Nightmare," *New York Times*, August 20, 2019.

threatened to unify the Sahelian and Nigerian theaters for the global jihadi organization.[11]

Al-Qa`ida's expansion into southern West Africa is the focus of this report. Indeed, since the early 1990s, al-Qa`ida members have steadily expanded southward from their traditional bases in southern Algeria to Mauritania and northern Mali; from northern Mali to central Mali and Burkina Faso; and from those spaces, now currently moving deeper into West African states including the Ivory Coast, Togo, Ghana, and Benin. While much has been published on AQIM, JNIM, and even its Sahelian operations, little research has been dedicated to exploring just how and why al-Qa`ida became such a potent threat across a vast stretch of territory in western Africa. Thus, the driving question of this report is: How did a group that began in Algeria shift from a primarily North African-focused entity to an organization that now threatens large swaths of the Sahel and parts of littoral West Africa? This report walks through that historical trajectory of AQIM and JNIM, and explores how networks and systems put in place decades ago are now being exploited as jihadis continue to push violently toward West Africa's coastal states.

To offer context to this report, it helps to understand what research has already been undertaken on the groups falling under the umbrella of "al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb." Most broadly, it bears noting that even though JNIM—al-Qa`ida's West African branch and sub-group of its parent organization, AQIM—is currently one of the largest and most potent of al-Qa`ida's branches around the world, there remains somewhat of a paucity of historical research on AQ's activities in the Sahel.

Historical research on AQIM, where it exists, has touched on a wide array of topics. For example, in 2003, Luis Martinez wrote one of the first investigations into the violence perpetrated by AQIM's predecessor group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat.[12] For her part, Lianne Kennedy Boudali provided one of the first English-language profiles of GSPC following its formal ascension into the al-Qa`ida network in 2006,[13] while Jean-Pierre Filiu's early work on the relationship between AQIM and al-Qa`ida's central leadership has become a widely cited paper on the group.[14] Likewise, writing in 2008, Hanna Rogan was one of the first scholars to focus on AQIM's kidnapping tactics and how these attacks represented an expansion of the group's threat.[15] Gregory Smith's 2009 brief history of AQIM in the context of North Africa's ever-changing political and social contexts still provides important lessons when considering the future of the group.[16] Meanwhile, beginning in 2011, Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani were some of the first researchers to explain how and why AQIM began to branch out from its strongholds in northern Algeria to various countries across Africa, making this an important paper in the composition of this report.[17] And lastly, scholars such as Frederic Wehrey, Anouar Boukhars, Sergei Boeke, and Mathieu Pellerin have written detailed reports on AQIM's ties to organized crime throughout West Africa and the Sahel.[18]

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11   Jacob Zenn and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru Resurgent: The Rebirth of Al-Qaeda's Nigerian Franchise," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15:5 (2021).

12   Luis Martinez, "Le cheminement singulier de la violence islamiste en Algerie," *Critique Internationale* No. 20, July 2003, pp. 165-177.

13   Lianne Kennedy Boudali, *The GSPC: Newest Franchise in al-Qa'ida's Global Jihad* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

14   Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal* 63:2 (2009); Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 1, 2009.

15   Hanna Rogan, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb Strikes Again," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:8 (2008): pp. 23-28.

16   Gregory A. Smith, "Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb," *Journal of Strategic Security* 2:2 (2009): pp. 53-72.

17   Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations," Istituto Affari Internazionali, April 2011.

18   Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, "Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013; Mathieu Pellerin, "Narcoterrorism: Beyond the Myth," in Christina Barrios and Tobias Koepf eds., *Re-mapping the Sahel: Transnational security challenges and international responses* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2014).

While most of these aforementioned scholarly works touched on AQIM's history as a whole in North Africa, a host of other studies have sought to address directly or indirectly the group's history in the Sahel more specifically. Jean-Pierre Filiu and Modibo Goïta have both touched on this topic, with short reports or policy memos on this subject. Jacob Zenn's work on the relationship between AQIM and Nigerian jihadis has examined AQIM's Sahelian operations to a greater degree.[19] And since the formation of JNIM in 2017 and the subsequent rise of violence that year, renewed scholarly focus has been paid to both the Sahel and al-Qa`ida's operations in that region. For instance, Aly Tounkara and Bassirou Gaye's 2019 book, *Le djihad à Ké-Macina dans le centre du Mali: Prosélytisme religieux ou enjeux socio-économiques?* (*Jihad in Ké-Macina in central Mali: Religious proselytism or socio-economic issues?*), tracks the history of al-Qa`ida's activities, particularly by its Katibat Macina, inside central Mali.[20] Mathieu Pellerin's 2019 French-language study, "Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections? (Armed violence in the Sahara. From jihadism to insurgencies?)," also tracks the evolution of al-Qa`ida and its various affiliates and allies in the Sahel into a dangerous insurgency.[21] Meanwhile, Yvan Guichaoua has discussed at length how the efforts made by JNIM are exacerbated by French military efforts, while both Guichaoua and Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré have published on how local conflicts, especially in central Mali, play into the violence perpetrated by JNIM's sub-group Katibat Macina.[22] For his part, Andrew Lebovich covered much of the early conflict inside northern Mali, writing some of the earliest English-language pieces diving into groups like Ansar Dine and MUJAO and their relationships to AQIM.[23] Both Jean-Pierre Filiu and Modibo Goita have written about AQIM's strategy more broadly in the Sahel.[24] Meanwhile, Vidar Skretting's more recent article outlining the evolution of AQIM's Sahelian strategy has been one of the most thorough explorations on the subject to date.[25] Despite these various strands of scholarship, however, there has not been an extensive treatment of just how and why AQIM emerged so strongly in the Sahel.

In this regard, this report asks and sets out to answer three questions on this topic. How did al-Qa`ida gain a foothold in northern Africa? How and why did it spread so far south? And finally, what does al-Qa`ida's past expansion reveal about its possible future trajectories in West Africa?

This report argues that since at least 1992, al-Qa`ida and its northern and western African branches and allies have followed what this report calls "al-Qa`ida's Imperial Playbook," as they have sought to expand their areas of influence southward. This "playbook," this report shows, is composed of five fundamental tactics:
1. Befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict
2. Integrating themselves into communities where those militants exist
3. Exploiting grievances of those communities to gain sympathy
4. Addressing dissent either passively or aggressively

19   For his most recent work, see Jacob Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram: Exploring Global Jihad in Nigeria* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2020).

20   Aly Tounkara and Bassirou Gaye, *Le djihad à Ké-Macina dans le centre du Mali: Prosélytisme religieux ou enjeux socio-économiques?* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2019).

21   Mathieu Pellerin, "Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections?" IFRI, December 2019.

22   Yvan Guichaoua, "The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel," *International Affairs* 96:4 (2020): pp. 895-911; Yvan Guichaoua and Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, "Central Mali gripped by a dangerous brew of jihad, revolt and self-defence," Conversation, November 13, 2016.

23   Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM and Its Allies in Mali," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2013.

24   Modibo Goita, "West Africa's Growing Terrorist Threat: Confronting AQIM's Sahelian Strategy," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 1, 2011; Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 1, 2010.

25   Vidar B. Skretting, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, September 24, 2020.

    5.   Looking toward new theaters once their base is solidified.

To be clear, it is unknown if these tactics existed in a codified set of rules for al-Qa`ida members in the Sahel. Instead, it is much more likely these tactics existed in a more informal, norms-based "playbook" that comported to al-Qa`ida's overall *modus operandi*. The use of the term "playbook" is thus based on this author's own conceptualization of al-Qa`ida's Sahelian strategies, and should not be conceived of as an actual, physical book, though AQIM did author a physical playbook for its operations in Mali specifically.[26] Moreover, the use of the term "playbook" is in line with the trend in the literature for describing AQIM's actions in the region.[27]

In conceptualizing al-Qa`ida's expansion into the Sahel, this report argues that there are five general historical periods in AQIM's southern trajectory: from 1992-1998; 1998-2006; 2006-2012; 2013-2017; and 2017-present. Each historical period shows AQIM employing similar tactics from its "playbook," which present themselves in different forms according to the time period. Leveraging English, French, and Arabic-language research in primary and secondary source material, this report shows how and why AQIM used its playbook to move southward in each of these time periods. It thus works to fill in epistemological gaps in the understanding of the group's history, operations, and current strategy for the Sahel. More broadly, it argues that al-Qa`ida's current *modus operandi* in the Sahel can shed light on the group's other global branches' *modus operandi* as well.

This report has relevance for both scholars and practitioners interested in AQ, AQIM, JNIM, or the Sahel more broadly. For policymakers, this report provides insight into the contemporary and historical contexts of AQIM and especially JNIM in the Sahel, simultaneously providing explanations of how al-Qa`ida operates more globally. In doing so, better policy prescriptions can be made to address the violence engendered by AQIM and JNIM. For academics, this report seeks to provide a better look into the "glocal" approach that al-Qa`ida has historically understood itself to undertake. Indeed, for the constellation of groups discussed in this report, there exist lively debates as to whether the "local" or the "global" factors matter more in shaping the actions and ideologies of branches of jihadi insurgencies. However, this report suggests that this is largely a false binary created by the academic community. Both "local" and "global" considerations play important roles for al-Qa`ida and its various allies, affiliates, and branches—not least in the Sahel—and are not in and of themselves mutually exclusive influences on such groups. While this report focuses most acutely on "global" influences (namely, al-Qa`ida's influence on the rise and spread of local Sahelian armed groups), this of course does not negate the "local" factors that lead to the general mobilizing or radicalizing factors in those countries in which jihadis operate and recruit. Indeed, the creation of a false dichotomy between the "global" and the "local" is a misreading of what the "global jihad" truly is. As expressed by Ayman al-Zawahiri on multiple occasions, "it is a single war with different fronts united against a single enemy."[28]

Following this introduction, the report is broken down into seven additional parts. Part 2 deals with the methodology of the report and introduces several caveats. Part 3 delves into the heart of the topic at hand by answering the first of the three questions: How did al-Qa`ida find a foothold in northern Africa at all? To do so, it looks at the rise of predecessor groups to AQIM in Algeria (1992-1998). The next four sections answer the second question: How and why did AQ succeed in expanding so far south?

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26   "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press, 2013.

27   Pascale Combelles Seigel, "AQIM's Playbook in Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6:3 (2013).

28   Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda leader: America in the main enemy in a 'single war with different fronts,'" FDD's Long War Journal, September 11, 2018; Thomas Joscelyn, "Zawahiri lectures on global jihad, warns of national boundaries," FDD's Long War Journal, June 10, 2017. This is also a mutated version of the works of Abdullah Azzam and through him of the Ottoman scholar Ibn Abidin. See Andrew McGregor, "Jihad and the Rife Alone': Abdullah 'Azzam and the Islamist Revolution," *Journal of Conflict Studies* XXIII:2 (2003).

Part 4 thus looks at the formation of al-Qa`ida's first official branch in northern Africa, AQIM, and its initial expansion into Mali and Mauritania (1998-2006). Part 5 focuses on the methods al-Qa`ida took to solidify itself into the Sahel (2006-2012), primarily in Mali, which led to its brief occupation of the country's northern regions. Part 6 subsequently dives into al-Qa`ida's post-intervention rebuilding in the Sahel (2013-2017) and explores how this impacted its expansion across the Sahel. Part 7 deals with the emergence of al-Qa`ida's current West African branch, JNIM, and how it contemporarily seeks to expand deeper into littoral West Africa (2017-present). For each of these five periods, this report describes how AQ and its affiliates followed the "Imperial Playbook," emphasizing that certain strategies were more pronounced in certain phases and that a dynamic remaking of the strategies was ever-present. In Part 8, the conclusion, this report answers the third question; it uses the past as prologue to the future, bringing to light what lessons AQ's past efforts to expand into wider West Africa suggest about what it might look to do in the future, and how policymakers might best respond.

Part 2: Methodology

2.1: Research and Data Collection

The data used in this report was gathered from a multitude of sources. Firstly, the author assembled primary source documents from jihadis themselves via official and unofficial al-Qa`ida social media channels on social media sites such as Twitter, the Internet Archive, and encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram, Hoop, and RocketChat, between 2014 and 2021. Websites maintained by al-Qa`ida, such as Emaad and Al-Bayaan, were also consulted to collect videos and statements released by AQIM, JNIM, or other Sahelian-based groups through various propaganda outlets like Al-Andalus Media, Al-Zallaqa Media, or Ifriqiyah Muslimah, all official media outlets belonging to AQIM and JNIM. Jihadology, an online repository of jihadi media, was also utilized to supplement gaps in primary source collection. Internal al-Qa`ida files recovered from Usama bin Ladin's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, related to AQIM, the Sahara, or the Sahel, and declassified by the Central Intelligence Agency were also consulted. Arabic, English, and French-language media reports were also all employed in this research. Finally, this report uses books, think-tank policy reports, academic articles, government documents, and other secondary source material.

2.2: Caveats and Limitations: Methodological and Argumentative

Though this project seeks to present the most thorough account to date of al-Qa`ida's implantation in the Sahel, as well as map out what direction the group may be heading toward in the future, some important caveats apply about its inherent limitations. These relate to its methodological limits as well as the scope conditions of its arguments.

Methodological

First, and perhaps foremost, AQ is a clandestine organization that is not particularly transparent about its activities. Information gleaned from statements, media, or other pieces of propaganda only reveal what al-Qa`ida and its many branches are willing to share. This thus presents inherent challenges. However, from these releases, one can get a sense of the movement's history, its general activities, an approximate view of its tactics and capabilities, and how it views itself within the local context in which it operates. When taken in tandem with appropriate secondary source material, this helps to paint a better overall picture of the topic at hand. Second, the research itself comes with some limitations. While the author has tried to make this report as exhaustive as possible while remaining accessible, it is likely that some information has been unknowingly left out of the picture. In this vein, while consulting local and international media, observers, including the author, are beholden to what is and is not reported.

Argumentative

In discussing al-Qa`ida's activities in the Sahel throughout this report, it is important to note several key issues that relate to its argumentative limits. First and foremost, this report does not contend that al-Qa`ida, in its various historical forms, has been the only actor, or even the primary actor in many respects, contributing to the current complex and multi-actor crisis of violence in the Sahel. While this report focuses on al-Qa`ida's history and specific role(s) in the Sahel, this is not to say other actors who are motivated by other communal, local, or regional grievances are less important to understanding the conflict. It is *not* this author's goal to paint al-Qa`ida's activities in the Sahel as the primary reason for the region's current quagmire. Instead, it is this author's goal to specifically look at how al-Qa`ida has historically operated—and oftentimes exploited or benefited from these more local issues and actors—and has thus contributed to the crisis currently unfolding throughout the region. Moreover, this report, while tangentially discussing the roles state actors have played in these crises, does not explore the roles of states in the region as thoroughly as al-Qa`ida's. This is a decision to remain on topic; it is not intended to downplay the role of state crimes and various mishandlings of violence of sub-state actors that have undoubtedly created many of the conditions for violence perpetrated by such groups to exist at all.

2.3: Geographical Terms

At the very heart of consideration of this report lies Africa's vast Sahelian region. Originating from the Arabic word *Sahil*, or 'coast,' the term denotes the transitional areas between the Sahara desert and sub-Saharan Africa, or the 'coastal' areas between the two geographically and topographically diverse landscapes.[29] Traditionally, the "Sahel"[30] has been used to denote the countries stretching from Senegal, Mauritania, (southern) Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, (northern) Nigeria, Chad, and Sudan.[31] But when discussing Sahelian-based jihadi groups, many have been able to project power and operate outside of this strict geographical area. As a result, this report also discusses many other West African states, especially the littoral states such as Benin, Ivory Coast, and Senegal, as they relate to these jihadi groups, even if by many definitions they are not necessarily considered "Sahelian." Additionally, the current jihadi crisis emanating from the Sahel can trace its lineage to events that transpired during the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002); thus, Algeria will also be discussed, though much of its territory lies outside of both the Sahel and wider West Africa. In the same vein, many Sahelian jihadi groups have exploited the chaos in Libya for a wide variety of purposes, including as rear bases. As such, short discussions of the current Libyan civil war will also be provided when related to those specific jihadi groups. And so, while this report looks at al-Qa`ida's efforts in the Sahel specifically, attention must be paid to the aforementioned neighboring states and geographical areas as they help provide more context and insight into the jihadi movement's overall activities in the region.

2.4: Report Layout and Terminology

This report is organized around the five historical time periods in which al-Qa`ida in northern Africa and the Sahel has operated. Namely, the five historical time periods have been organized as: al-Qa`ida's Arrival (1992-1998); Creation of an Official al-Qa`ida Branch and First Moves Southward (1998-2006); AQIM's Initial Sahelian Expansion and State-Building (2006-2012); Rebuilding of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel (2013-2017); and al-Qa`ida's Transformation into a Fully Sahelian Enterprise (2017-present). The titles for each time period refer to the main theme of each respective era of al-

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29   "The Sahel," International Review of the Red Cross.

30   More specific geographical language within the Sahel—such as Azawad (the Tuareg word for northern Mali), Bilad al-Shinqit (a historical Arabic term denoting Mauritania), or Bilad al-Sudan ('Land of the Blacks' in Arabic, which denotes much of West Africa)—will only be employed when specifically mentioned or used by the jihadi groups themselves. Many northern Sahelian states, such as Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, also have much of their territory within the expansive Sahara Desert that stretches across North Africa.

31   "The Sahel: Land of Opportunities," Africa Renewal, United Nations.

Qa`ida's southward-looking African operations.

Beyond offering mere histories, these five sections also describe the specific tactics al-Qa`ida has used in its expansion from Algeria to littoral West Africa. In delineating these efforts, this report conceptualizes the specific tactics as "plays" in an overall strategic "playbook" utilized by the jihadi network. Much as in basketball or football, the term "play" is conceptualized herein as a plan of action, otherwise regarded as tactics, that al-Qa`ida has historically used in its operations, while "playbook" refers to the overall collection of "plays," or tactics, the organization has been able to call upon as it has sought its expansion southward from Algeria.

Time Period	Plays
Al-Qa`ida's Arrival (1992-1998)	Befriending or creating militant groups; looking toward new theaters; dealing with internal dissent both passively and aggressively
Creation of an Official al-Qa`ida Branch and First Moves Southward (1998-2006)	Integrating into local communities; befriending or creating militant groups; looking to new theaters; dealing with internal dissent more aggressively
AQIM's Initial Sahelian Expansion and State-Building (2006-2012)	Befriending or creating militant groups; integrating into local communities; looking to new theaters; dealing with internal dissent both passively and aggressively; exploiting grievances
Rebuilding of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel (2013-2017)	Befriending or creating militant groups; integrating into local communities; looking to new theaters; dealing with internal dissent both passively and aggressively; exploiting grievances
Al-Qa`ida's Transformation into a Fully Sahelian Enterprise (2017-Present)	Befriending or creating militant groups; looking to new theaters; integrating into local communities; exploiting grievances

Figure 1: Table of Time Periods and Their Respective Plays

2.5: Groups Covered

In conceptualizing "al-Qa`ida in the Sahel," it is important to note that this moniker encapsulates a number of organizations operating in a vast geographic landscape, whose names and memberships have been dynamic over time. Indeed, AQ's efforts in this region make up the most expansive theater for the global jihadi group on the African continent. From Algeria in the north to Nigeria in the south, and from the Ivory Coast in the west to northern Niger in the east, AQ operates via a vast network of local armed movements. In this respect, it is important to highlight the overall composition and connections embedded within this network, and how these hierarchies fit into the global al-Qa`ida command structure.

At the helm of this local, or regional, network is al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. This report argues that it is useful to think of AQIM as not *just* a core group based in Algeria, but rather to think of AQIM as an extensive web of the core group based in Algeria *and* a multitude of other groups dispersed across North and West Africa under the direction of AQIM's central leadership. As outlined by Warner, Chapin, and Weiss, beyond the core group in Algeria, AQIM consists "of a variety of internal 'sub-

groups' as well as a universe of external 'affiliate,' or 'allied' groups, all of whose violent activities are undertaken in support of the broader AQIM enterprise."[32]

When referring to the actions of specific groups in this report, the specific names of each respective group will be utilized. For instance, when referring to actions undertaken by JNIM, this report will refer to JNIM as such, and not by the name of its parent organization, AQIM. However, as each group fits into al-Qa`ida's global hierarchy and works to advance al-Qa`ida's overall strategic vision for the region, this report also often collectively refers to these groups as simply "al-Qa`ida," though with appropriate reference to the individual group being discussed. For example, JNIM may be referred to by its official name or simply as "al-Qa`ida" depending on the context. And unless starting a sentence, this report utilizes the transliteration of "al-Qa`ida," with the Arabic definite article "*al*" appearing lowercase.

Main Organization and Sub-Groups

At the head of this framework is the AQIM 'core' group based in Algeria, which originated from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in 2006. This 'core' group is itself composed of various internal 'sub-groups' directly under the control of AQIM's central leadership.[33] It is important to note that outside of core leadership, AQIM, much like its predecessor factions the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the GSPC, has historically been organized into several distinct regions or emirates.[34] These include the Central Emirate (based in Algiers, Kabylie, and their surroundings), Eastern Emirate (based in eastern Algeria and Tunisia[35]), Southern (or Saharan) Emirate, and Western Emirate (western Algeria).[36] Even further, AQIM maintains several distinct *katibas*, or battalions, which operate under AQIM's overall 'emirate' hierarchy,[37] though they all have varying degrees of their own autonomy. For example, this includes such *katibas* as Katibat al-Fath and Katibat al-Arqam in Algeria under the Central Emirate;[38] Katibat al-Furqan, Katibat Tariq bin Ziyad, and Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine in the Sahel under the Southern (or Saharan) Emirate;[39] and Katibat Uqbah bin Nafi in Tunisia under the Eastern Emirate.[40] For purposes of this report, the Southern (or Saharan) Emirate and AQIM's central leadership are the two most relevant parts of AQIM's 'core' structure and will be discussed the most in-depth.

The sub-group category also includes the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), which is based in northern Mali. Formed in March 2017 to help consolidate al-Qa`ida efforts in the Sahel,

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32   Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss, *Desert Drift, Declining Deadliness: Understanding the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombers* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2020).

33   Ibid.

34   Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:5 (2016), pp. 914-936. Both the GSPC and its predecessor GIA modeled their organizational structure on the National Liberation Front's (FLN) wilayat (provinces) system during the Algerian War from 1954 to 1962. The FLN organized itself into six distinct wilayat across Algeria, each with their own command structure of various districts and *katibas*. See Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2006), p. 83.

35   Aaron Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It: al-Qaeda in Tunisia's Inability to Take Advantage of the Islamic State's Setbacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019): pp. 62-76.

36   "The political economy of conflicts in northern Mali," ECOWAS Peace and Security Report 2, April 2013; "The presence of Mauritanians in Al-Qaeda will increase as the number of Algerians shrink in the Saharan branch," France 24, September 30, 2010, translated from Arabic.

37   Ibid.; Marc Memier, "AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: Le djihad sahelien reunife?" IFRI, January 2017.

38   "The presence of Mauritanians in al-Qaeda will increase as the number of Algerians shrink in the Saharan branch."

39   Benjamin Roger, "Visuel interactif : le nouvel organigramme d'Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, October 25, 2013.

40   Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It;" Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda leader reported killed in Tunisia," FDD's Long War Journal, October 20, 2019; Tarek Amara and Lamine Chikhi, "Al Qaeda trying to regroup in Tunisia after Islamic State setbacks: sources," Reuters, February 7, 2018.

JNIM consists of AQIM's Saharan Emirate, two affiliate groups (al-Murabitoon and Ansar Dine), as well as Ansar Dine's central Malian contingent, Katibat Macina (also sometimes referred to as the 'Macina Liberation Front').[41] Other Ansar Dine sub-groups, such as Katibat Gourma (created in 2014), Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid (created in 2015), and Katibat Serma (created in 2015), while not part of the official announcement video, were also subsumed under the new JNIM hierarchy.

A final group, local Burkinabe jihadi outfit Ansaroul Islam, is also believed to be an official JNIM member, but this membership has not been publicly announced by JNIM itself.[42] JNIM is led by Ansar Dine's emir and longtime al-Qa`ida veteran Iyad Ag Ghaly, who was likely chosen due to his local stature in northern Mali. In JNIM's 2017 announcement video, Ghaly made it clear his allegiance (or *bay`a* in Arabic) was most immediately to then AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, through him to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al-Qa`ida, and through him to Afghan Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada.[43] Though some debate has arisen over how cohesive JNIM actually is, this report finds there is a real sense of unity and cohesion within the organization.[44]

Affiliates and Allied Groups

Separate from the internal 'sub-groups' are the 'affiliates' or 'allied' groups that do not necessarily fall directly under AQIM's hierarchy but that still conduct operations in the name of or in support of AQIM's or al-Qa`ida's overall objectives. These include the Sahelian-based factions of Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Katibat al-Mulathameen (also known as the 'Masked Men's Brigade' and 'Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade'), and al-Murabitoon.

Ansar Dine is a local jihadi organization primarily comprised of Tuaregs from northern Mali that emerged in late 2011 and was subsequently utilized by AQIM as a front organization to help localize its efforts in the country.[45] MUJAO and Katibat al-Mulathaeen first emerged as splinters of AQIM in 2011[46] and 2012,[47] respectively. Though they formally left AQIM's command hierarchy due to leadership disputes, each group still maintained close ties to and cooperated with its parent organization. Additionally, each group made its overall allegiance to al-Qa`ida known, with al-Mulathameen publicly pledging allegiance to overall al-Qa`ida emir Ayman al-Zawahiri directly.[48] MUJAO and al-Mulathameen would later merge in 2013 to form al-Murabitoon, again swearing fealty directly to al-Zawahiri.[49] Al-Murabitoon would then merge into AQIM's Sahara Emirate in 2015.[50] Additionally, in early 2012, an al-Qa`ida-loyalist splinter faction, Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimeen

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41   Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa," FDD's Long War Journal, March 13, 2017.

42   Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso," *CTC Sentinel* 11:3 (2018).

43   Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa."

44   Daniel Eizenga and Wendy Williams, "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 1, 2020.

45   Philipp Sandner, "Ansar Dine: radical Islamists in northern Mali," Deutsche Welle, December 18, 2014; Vincent Duhem, "Le groupe salafiste Ansar dine affirme contrôler le nord-est du Mali," *Jeune Afrique*, March 20, 2012; Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "US designates al Qaeda's branch in Mali as terror organization," FDD's Long War Journal, September 5, 2018; Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Mali sought to hide foreign designs," FDD's Long War Journal, February 15, 2013; "Mali-Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press, February 2013.

46   Adam Arroudj, "Sahel: la reddition d'un chef d'Aqmi affaiblit les djihadistes," *Figaro*, August 19, 2018; William Lloyd George, "Mali's irrevocable crisis," Al Jazeera, April 16, 2012.

47   Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb;" Bill Roggio, "Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying of hostages for al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, January 20, 2013.

48   Ibid.

49   Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda group led by Belmokhtar, MUJAO unite to form al-Murabitoon," FDD's Long War Journal, August 22, 2013.

50   Caleb Weiss, "Al Murabitoon, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, has reportedly rejoined AQIM ...," Twitter, December 4, 2015; Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda attacks hotel in Burkina Faso," FDD's Long War Journal, January 15, 2016.

fi Bilad al-Sudan, or Ansaru, emerged from the group commonly known as 'Boko Haram' in northern Nigeria.[51]

Thus, the current lineage of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel is as follows: JNIM and its sub-groups answer immediately to AQIM and its central command.[52] In turn, AQIM falls under the leadership of Ayman al-Zawahiri and other leaders within al-Qa`ida's geographically dispersed "core" or "senior" leadership. While this is the formal chain of command, some exceptions likely apply. For instance, it has long been thought that Iyad Ag Ghaly is himself a member of one of al-Qa`ida's main shura councils, or governing bodies.[53] Even after the death of Abdelmalek Droukdel, the former emir of AQIM, in June 2020,[54] it is unlikely that this has changed the equation. In November 2020, AQIM announced that Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi, a longtime member of AQIM's Council of Notables,[55] was the group's new emir.[56] For all intents and purposes, however, it is to be assumed that JNIM still answers to AQIM's central leadership. As an example, senior dual-hatted AQIM and JNIM religious official Qutaybah Abu Nu'man al-Shinqiti[57] made the announcement of al-Annabi's ascension in November 2020, further showing the organizational overlap between the two organizations.[58]

In regard to Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, in its current opaque nature, it has not formally announced any leadership since its rebirth in late 2019. Thus, it is unclear where it currently stands in this hierarchy, though it is still considered within al-Qa`ida's network and ties on the ground between it and JNIM have been documented.[59] In January 2022, Ansaru announced it had pledged allegiance to AQIM in 2020, though this statement has not been confirmed by AQIM itself.[60] Each of these organizations will be discussed more in-depth in the report.

It bears noting here that while this report is focused on al-Qa`ida efforts in the Sahel, the Islamic State and its local branch, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS, aka Islamic State West African province – Greater Sahara, or ISWAP-GS), will also be discussed.[61] Their inclusion in this discussion is warranted given ISGS' outgrowth from al-Qa`ida in the region, as well as its current role in the Sahel that helps to shape JNIM's trajectory. ISGS and its activities have forced JNIM to dedicate resources to combating the group across the Sahel, while also forcing JNIM to double down on some of its more localized strategies. JNIM's future is therefore intrinsically tied to ISGS.

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51   Bill Roggio, "Ansaru leader calls Zawahiri 'our good emir,' praises al Qaeda branches," FDD's Long War Journal, November 15, 2013.

52   To note, some JNIM sub-groups, such as the unit that is believed to have perpetrated the June 2021 massacre of 174 people in Solhan, Burkina Faso, were likely acting on their own volition and not under the orders of JNIM's senior command. As such, this suggests some degree of understood autonomy for some of JNIM's units and/or JNIM's largely Mali-based leadership struggles to effectively command some of its more geographically distanced units.

53   Author discussion, researcher and analyst Thomas Joscelyn, August 2020.

54   "Al-Qaeda chief in North Africa Abdelmalek Droukdel killed – France," BBC, June 5, 2020.

55   Thomas Joscelyn, "AQIM names veteran jihadist as new emir," FDD's Long War Journal, November 21, 2020.

56   Ibid.

57   Al-Shinqiti himself reportedly died from an unspecified illness in November 2021, though this has not been confirmed as of the time of this report's publishing. See Wassim Nasr, "#Sahel #Mali selon plusieurs sources Qotaïba Abou al-Nou'man al-Chinquiti ...," Twitter, January 7, 2022.

58   Joscelyn, "AQIM names veteran jihadist as new emir." For more on the organizational overlap in AQIM's and JNIM's respective media, see also Héni Nsaibia and Rida Lyammouri, "Digital Dunes and Shrublands: A Comparative Introduction to the Sahelian Jihadi Propaganda Ecosystem," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, October 27, 2020.

59   Zenn and Weiss.

60   Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru reaffirms its allegiance to al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, January 2, 2022.

61   The group is also known as the Islamic State West African Province - Greater Sahara, or ISWAP-GS, since 2019 following the group's restructuring into the Islamic State's formal leadership hierarchy in West Africa. However, it is unknown how much control the Islamic State's leadership in northwestern Nigeria exerts over its nominal Sahelian branch.

Given the wide array of groups, leaders, locations, and time periods of groups under consideration in this report, the author has attempted to make accessible (or at least comprehensible) an often overwhelmingly complex cast of actors. In order to make clearer the most important groups that this report refers to as "al-Qa`ida in the Sahel," Figure 2 delineates these groups, their overall leaders (or emirs), years operational, and areas of operation. The table below is thus organized by presenting the main groups first, namely AQIM and JNIM, then JNIM's sub-groups, and then al-Qa`ida's affiliates in wider West Africa.

Group Name	Overall Leader(s)	Category	Years Active	Areas of Operation
Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)	Abdelmalek Droukdel (deceased), Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi	Main organization	2006-present	Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, West Africa
Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad	Abderrazak al-Para (deceased); Abdelhamid Abu Zeid (deceased); Saïd Abou Moughatil	Sub-group of GSPC; later AQIM; later JNIM	2002-2017	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Tunisia, Libya
Katibat al-Furqan	Djamel Okacha (deceased); Abdallah al-Shinqiti (deceased); Talha al-Libi	Sub-group of AQIM; later JNIM	2009-2017	Mali, Niger, Mauritania
Katibat al-Ansar	Hamada Ag Hama (deceased)	Sub-group of AQIM; later Ansar Dine	2010-2013	Mali, Algeria
Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine	Sedane Ag Hitta	Sub-group of AQIM; later Ansar Dine	2012-2013	Mali, Algeria
Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Sub-group of AQIM	2017-present	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya, Ivory Coast, West Africa
Ansar Dine	Iyad Ag Ghaly	Affiliate; later sub-group of JNIM	2011-2017	Mali, Algeria, Libya, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania

Katibat Gourma	Almansour Ag Alkassoum (deceased), Abou Nasser (deceased), Abou Khalid	Sub-group of Ansar Dine; later sub-group of JNIM	2014-2017	Mali, Burkina Faso
Katibat Macina/Macina Liberation Front	Amadou Kouffa	Sub-group of Ansar Dine; later sub-group of JNIM	2015-2017	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo, Ghana
Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid	Souleymane Keita (detained, later released from prison); Boubacar Sawadogo (detained)	Sub-group of Ansar Dine; later sub-group of JNIM	2015-2017	Mali, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso
Katibat Serma	Farouk (deceased), Abu Hamza	Sub-group of Ansar Dine; later sub-group of JNIM	2015-2017	Mali, Burkina Faso
Ansaroul Islam	Ibrahim Dicko (deceased), Jafar Dicko	Affiliate; later sub-group of JNIM	2016-2017	Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast
Al-Murabitoon	Abu Bakr al-Masri (deceased), Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate unknown, likely deceased), Himama Ould Lekhweir	Affiliate; later sub-group of AQIM; later sub-group of JNIM	2013-2017	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO/ MUJWA)	Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou (fate unknown, likely deceased), Ahmed al-Tilemsi (deceased), Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui (deceased)	Affiliate; later sub-group of al-Murabitoon	2011-2013	Algeria, Mali, Niger

Katibat al-Mulathameen/ Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade	Mokhtar Belmokhtar (fate unknown, likely deceased)	Affiliate; later sub-group of al-Murabitoon; former sub-group of AQIM	2012-2013	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya
Jama'at Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru)	Abubakar Adam Kambar (deceased), Khalid al-Barnawi (detained)	Affiliate; possible sub-group of AQIM	2012-2015; 2019-present	Nigeria, Libya, Mali

Figure 2: Overview of 'al-Qa`ida in the Sahel'

This section outlined the methodological considerations of this report, addressing data collection, geography covered, dates and terminology employed, and the overall structure of the groups considered for the report. The next section will dive into the topic at hand by exploring just how al-Qa`ida got its start in northern Africa, and subsequently, how and why it succeeded in moving so far south from its Algerian origins.

Part 3: Al-Qa`ida's Arrival (1992-1998)

This section looks at the origins of al-Qa`ida in North Africa and the Sahara by answering the first of three questions posed by this report: Just how did AQ gain a foothold in the Sahara at all? This historiography underpins AQIM/JNIM's current operations across West Africa and helps to identify several recurrent themes inherent to AQ's *modus operandi* that characterize its operations across the globe. The historiography helps present a clearer picture in regard to the development of a regional al-Qa`ida branch in both North Africa and the Sahel.

This section thus argues that al-Qa`ida leveraged certain tactics, or "plays," within its overall "Imperial Playbook" to lead to the eventual creation of its official branch in northwestern Africa. To recall, the five tactics are: befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict; integrating itself into communities where those militants exist; exploiting grievances of those communities to gain sympathy; addressing internal or external dissent either passively or aggressively; and looking toward new theaters once its base is solidified. Moreover, the success of the basic model employed by al-Qa`ida in this initial period allowed the organization to replicate the model in subsequent periods, creating al-Qa`ida's proverbial "imperial playbook." For al-Qa`ida's first period in the region, it benefited from three of the five tactics, namely: *befriending or creating militant groups*; *looking toward new theaters*; and *dealing with internal dissent both passively and aggressively*.

As such, this section is broken down into a history of al-Qa`ida's first forays into the Sahara, its relationship with the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, and how al-Qa`ida helped form a splinter faction of the Armed Islamic Group that would become AQ's official branch in northern Africa. In doing so, this section also outlines the specific tactics within its playbook that al-Qa`ida used during this period to move into new theaters.

3.1: AQIM's Origins Within the Algerian Civil War

Al-Qa`ida in North Africa traces its lineage back to the Algerian Civil War, which took place between 1991 and 2002, and occurred because Algerian officials canceled the results of the December 1991 elections following the victory of the Islamist party, Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). The Armed Islamic

Group, the most prominent and violent of Algerian rebel groups, was first organized and founded by Algerians who had volunteered to wage jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan between 1979-1989, as part of the 'Afghan Arabs" phenomenon or the wider trend of fighters from across the Arab world who went to Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion.[62] But it would be the relationships and networks established by these Algerian fighters with Usama bin Ladin and his cohort inside Afghanistan that would facilitate the spread of al-Qa`ida into North Africa and the Sahel.

Estimates vary on how many Algerians actually traveled to Afghanistan to take part in the anti-Soviet jihad, but according to Redha Malek, Algeria's prime minister from August 1993 to April 1994, between 3,000 to 4,000 Algerians joined the jihadi cause in Afghanistan in the mid- and late 1980s as part of the general jihadi mobilization against the Soviet Union's invasion.[63] Regardless of the exact number, many of these Algerians would meet bin Ladin and his network inside Afghanistan. Bin Ladin had earlier moved into Afghanistan and Pakistan, and helped support the Afghan mujahideen by providing funding and foreign recruits. Hisham Abu Akram, who would later become an ideologue within AQIM and veteran of the Algerian Civil War, explicitly described these contacts in a 2015 booklet published by the group's Africa Muslima outlet.[64] According to Abu Akram, bin Ladin took a unique fascination with the entering Algerians and funded training courses at the Al-Farouq training camp in Kandahar and the Badr camp in Khost in 1992 in order to support those fighters wishing to return to Algeria.[65] And while there only exist approximations of how many Algerian nationals *went* to Afghanistan and their relationship to bin Ladin's network in the country, estimates of how many of these fighters actually *returned* to Algeria remain even more elusive. The late Algerian General Ali Tounsi, presenting one of the only estimates in this latter regard, alleged that at least 1,000 of these individuals did return to take part in the fighting inside Algeria after 1991 when the country's civil war began.[66] Whatever the actual number, several of these Algerian returnees from Afghanistan were indeed critical in the development of the jihadi movement inside the North African country.

Arguably the most important early link between al-Qa`ida core (based in Afghanistan) and the growing militant landscape in Algeria was Qari Said. An early Algerian foreign fighter in Afghanistan who fought under Ahmad Shah Massoud (who would go on to lead the Northern Alliance against the Taliban before the September 11th attacks), Said was one of the foremost founders of what would become the Algeria-based GIA.[67] As reported by Camille Tawil, after leaving Afghanistan and joining al-Qa`ida, Said established a guesthouse in 1991 for other Algerian volunteers inside Peshawar, Pakistan, under the direction and financing of bin Ladin.[68] This guesthouse, dubbed the *Bayt al-Mujahideen*, "was the seed which would eventually grow into the GIA," as Tawil states.[69]

It was in this Pakistani guesthouse that Said and other like-minded individuals first discussed founding an armed movement inside Algeria. Later that same year (1991), Said returned to Algeria to convince other Algerian Afghanistan veterans to join him in this venture. Indeed, the actions of Said and a few early Algerian returnees from Afghanistan would signal a coming conflict with the Algerian state

62   Tim Weiner, "A Nation Challenged: The Commanders; 'Afghan Arabs' Said to Lead Taliban's Fight," *New York Times*, November 10, 2001.

63   Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalism of Domestic Terrorism," ISS Monograph Series, No 144, June 2008, chapter 2.

64   Hisham Abu Akram, "Shaykh Osama and the Story of His Support for the Algerian Jihad," Ifriqiyya al-Muslimah, 2015, p. 5, translated from Arabic.

65   Ibid.

66   Botha, chapter 2.

67   Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: Saqi Books, 2010), p. 73.

68   Ibid.

69   Ibid.

even before the December 1991 elections. Earlier that month (December 1991), around 40 militants attacked an Algerian military outpost in the town of Guemmar in the eastern El-Oued Province near the border with Tunisia, killing eight soldiers and capturing dozens of automatic rifles.[70] One of the leaders of the Guemmar attack, Qari Said, would subsequently be instrumental in the establishment of the GIA and al-Qa`ida's early role inside Algeria and beyond.

Those who joined Qari Said in creating the GIA included Mansour Meliani, a fellow Algerian jihadi who also fought in Afghanistan.[71] After Said was arrested in Algeria in February 1992, Meliani accepted Said's charge and thus became the emir of an independent Algerian jihadi faction, which later embarked on its first official operations that same month.[72] A few months later in the summer of 1992, Meliani's group would officially merge with other Algerian jihadis and factions, including Abdelkader Chebouti and Said Makhloufi's Movement for an Islamic State (MEI), an unnamed faction led by Moh Leveilley, and a breakaway hardline Islamic Salvation Front-loyalist faction led by Abdelhak Layada to form a new group, the GIA.[73] The GIA thus became the main jihadi faction fighting for the creation of an Islamic state in Algeria, which was initially seen by al-Qa`ida as a natural ally.

Later incarnations of the GIA and its leadership would downplay the role of Qari Said in mobilizing men to unite under a single banner following Said's death in late 1994.[74] Tawil hypothesizes that this is likely due to later leaders attempting to stress the importance of *local* Islamists in the group's creation over the more *global* influence of Afghan Arabs.[75] The stories told by later GIA emirs, however, have been contradicted by other sources that confirm Said's important role. For instance, Lawrence Wright notes that Said's attempts at founding the GIA were backed by at least $40,000 in seed money offered by bin Ladin for the fledgling organization.[76] Al-Qa`ida-linked individuals have also described Said's high position within the militant group. For instance, Jamal al-Fadl, an early al-Qa`ida defector who later testified against bin Ladin in a New York court in February 2001, alleged that Qari Said was both a member of al-Qa`ida and the GIA's leader in the early 1990s.[77] This information was later repeated by Adil Hadi al-Jaza'iri, a dual-hatted Algerian member of both al-Qa`ida and the GIA who was held in the Guantanamo Bay detention center until 2010.[78] Indeed, Qari Said was a member of AQ's top shura council until his death in late 1994.[79]

3.2: Al-Qa`ida's Local Integration in North Africa

While al-Qa`ida's dealings in the Sahel would first be initiated by the GIA's own operations in the region, al-Qa`ida's complex relationship with the GIA was only made possible by bin Ladin's official relocation to the African continent. In 1991, the newly empowered Islamist government in Khartoum, Sudan, led by Omar al-Bashir and his spiritual advisor Hassan al-Turabi, invited bin Ladin to host his al-Qa`ida outfit in their country.[80] Offering lax political oversight and the freedom to engage

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70   "Algerian Army kills three terrorists near the Tunisian-Libyan Borders," Al-Quds Al-Arabi, March 11, 2016, translated from Arabic.

71   Tawil, p. 68; Evan Kohlmann, "Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria: the GIA, the GSPC, and al-Qaida," NEFA Foundation, May 2007.

72   Tawil, p. 68.

73   Ibid., p. 77.

74   Ibid., p. 73.

75   Ibid., p. 73.

76   Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 189 (Kindle edition).

77   United States of America vs Usama bin Laden, et. al, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York, February 6, 2001; Wright, p. 297.

78   "Summary of Evidence for Combatant Status Review Tribunal – Bin Hamlili, Adil Hadial Al Jazairi," U.S. Department of Defense, pp. 60-61.

79   Petter Nesser, "Ideologies of Jihad in Europe," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23:2 (2011).

80   Wright, p. 164.

in economic activities, such as starting and running businesses from Sudanese territory, bin Ladin accepted al-Bashir and al-Turabi's deal and moved his organization from Afghanistan to Khartoum. In Khartoum, bin Ladin also rejoined his friend and ally Ayman al-Zawahiri and his Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), with whom bin Ladin had a close relationship during the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan, and which had also just recently moved to Sudan, further solidifying the strength of the fledgling al-Qa`ida.[81]

But bin Ladin did not need to look far outside of Sudan to find willing recipients for this funding, support, and ideological patronage. Much like Afghanistan in the decade prior, Sudan in the early 1990s had become a hotspot for various militants from around the world. For instance, AQ and EIJ were joined by other jihadi groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG),[82] Egypt's al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya,[83] and Eritrea's Islamic Jihad Movement inside Sudan.[84] At the same time, however, Sudan's Islamist government was also hosting non-jihadi militant groups, such as a smattering of Central and East African rebel groups[85] and even Palestinian militants, such as the Abu Nidal Organization[86] and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.[87] But most importantly, Khartoum also became a significant base of operations for the GIA.[88] It is through these interconnections inside Sudan that al-Qa`ida's support and integration with the GIA significantly expanded.

Bin Ladin Looks to Algeria and the Sahara

While Qari Said was perhaps the first direct link between al-Qa`ida and the GIA, he was by no means the last. And in many ways, Said was not the only line Usama bin Ladin was running between his men in Afghanistan and outfits inside Algeria. So as bin Ladin and his men moved from Afghanistan to Sudan later in 1992, just a year after Said left Afghanistan for his native Algeria, it is unsurprising then that bin Ladin's efforts to support the jihad inside Algeria continued. Given the closer proximity between bin Ladin's new base in Sudan and the GIA's field operations inside Algeria, the latter likely became newly attractive.

Reportedly, bin Ladin subsequently dedicated resources to several al-Qa`ida reporting missions to the country. For instance, Abu Akram notes that UBL sent a team of 'scouts' to Algeria in early 1992 to further report on the feasibility of starting jihad work there.[89] This was around a year after Qari Said had already been dispatched to Algeria on behalf of UBL. That multiple scouting missions were purportedly sent to Algeria during this time indicates a real level of intent on bin Ladin's behalf to get more intimately involved in the Algerian struggle.

And indeed, while northern Algeria remained a priority area of operations, bin Ladin's gaze had shifted southward deeper into the country's south, the Sahara, and parts of the Sahel, constituting his first real forays into the region. Even prior to AQ's relocation to Sudan, bin Ladin had sought out the '*Sahra al-Kubra*,' an Arabic term meaning "the greatest desert" and used to denote the Sahara

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81 Ibid.

82 Tricia Bacon, *Why Terrorist Groups Form International Alliances* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), chapter 4, p. 154.

83 Ibid.

84 "Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement," Federation of American Scientists, October 29, 1999.

85 Gérard Prunier, "Rebel Movements and Proxy Warfare: Uganda, Sudan and the Congo (1986-99)," *African Affairs* 103:412 (2004).

86 Steven Holmes, "Terrorists helped by Sudan, US Says," *New York Times*, August 19, 1993.

87 "1996 CIA Memo to Sudanese Official," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2001.

88 Bacon, p. 154; Tawil, p. 91.

89 Ibid.

and the wider Sahel,[90] as an arena for his jihadi operations. According to the aforementioned AQIM ideologue Hisham Abu Akram, bin Ladin first pontificated about expanding the jihad to the Sahara Desert around 1987, even before the official creation of al-Qa`ida.[91] This was reportedly inspired by a group of Algerian volunteers who had traveled across the Sahara in their journey to Afghanistan and were early members of UBL's organization.[92]

Al-Qa`ida and GIA Collaboration Deepens

Scholarly and independent sources have generally vacillated between reporting that al-Qa`ida's support to the GIA increased and was accepted starting in 1993, and, conversely, that this support was categorically rejected by the GIA (or at least segments of it). For instance, Tricia Bacon states that AQ continued to provide GIA with "money and advisors" by 1993.[93] Bacon also finds that the GIA "periodically sought funding" from UBL and that GIA representatives sat on AQ's main shura council at the time,[94] in which the latter information was first detailed in Jamal al-Fadl's aforementioned testimony in the February 2001 *USA v Usama bin Ladin* trial.[95] Lawrence Wright also referenced recurring payments to the group from AQ.[96] Likewise, the *9/11 Commission Report* details UBL's desire to create an "Islamic army" inside Sudan around 1992-1993, which Khartoum-based members from the GIA reportedly joined, though it is unclear when or if the GIA purportedly joined this effort.[97]

Despite the fact that it seemed poised to accept assistance from AQ, not all agree that the GIA was eager for AQ assistance. Tawil, for instance, contends that certain GIA representatives wholly rejected increased al-Qa`ida support, such as training camps, in order to preserve the group's independence.[98] Moreover, a 2006 RAND Corporation report also rejected the idea that the GIA benefited from advanced support from AQ for the same reasons.[99] For his part, Jason Burke has also asserted that UBL's increased overtures were rejected by the GIA.[100]

Jihadi sources, however, have opined that the relationship between the GIA and al-Qa`ida was indeed one of support. In this regard, AQIM's Hisham Abu Akram notes in his 2015 booklet, *Sheikh Osama: And the Story of His Support to the Algerian Jihad*, that bin Ladin indeed made several overtures to the GIA while in Sudan in the early 1990s. For instance, he states that bin Ladin was receptive to the idea of providing increased financial and logistical support and military training for the GIA in the Sahara. According to Abu Akram, UBL sent representatives to meet a "Sheikh Hassan"—who is likely Hassan Allani (often transliterated as Hacene Allane from the Algerian Arabic[101]), a member of the GIA who would later join al-Qa`ida—in Niger to discuss this arrangement in the summer of 1993. However, Allani was subsequently arrested by Nigerien authorities and then released a year later.[102] Allani, an

90   Baher Kamal, "Europe, New Border of Africa's 'Great Desert' – The Sahara," Inter Press Service, September 5, 2017.

91   Akram, "Shaykh Osama and the Story of His Support for the Algerian Jihad," p. 5.

92   Ibid.

93   Bacon, p. 146.

94   Ibid.

95   *United States of America vs. Usama bin Laden, et al.*, 2001, p. 297.

96   Wright, p. 190.

97   *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004, p. 58.

98   Tawil, p. 96.

99   Angel Rabasa, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O'Brien, and William Rosenau, "Beyond Al-Qaeda: The Outer Rings of the Terrorist Universe," Rand Corporation, 2006, p. 30.

100 Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 247.

101 "Security Council ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Removes Three Entries From Its Sanctions List," United Nations Security Council, July 3, 2017.

102 Akram, "Shaykh Osama and the Story of His Support for the Algerian Jihad," p. 7.

Algerian veteran of the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad, had earlier relocated in 1992 from Algeria to Niger to assist in founding the GIA's presence in the Sahel, where he also ran an Islamic charity supported by bin Ladin.[103] Moreover, Allani had moved into the region in order to help the GIA procure more recruits, funding, and support. Additionally, the vast Sahara presented the group with a relatively safe rear base for its largely Algerian-based operations.[104]

In 1994, UBL again tasked AQ representatives to meet with Allani and other GIA leaders to facilitate greater cooperation with AQ.[105] Abu Akram notes that Allani, along with the contingent of AQ representatives, met with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, one of the GIA's commanders who had moved into the Sahara to facilitate the group's rear bases, and his commander Abd al-Baqi al-Laghouati in the Nigerien desert in the summer of 1994.[106] Abu Akram is short on details on the specific arrangement made during this meeting. However, he implies that AQ indeed entered into some sort of coordinating arrangement with the GIA, as he states that Abu Abdul Rahman Amine—the *kunya* of GIA emir Djamel Zitouni—was assigned to overseeing arrangements with "Sheikh Osama."[107] For his part, Mokhtar Belmokhtar has also offered some additional information. In a 2006 interview, he noted that he and Abd al-Baqi were tasked by the GIA leadership to communicate with al-Qa`ida in Sudan around 1994.[108] According to Belmokhtar, these communications were intended to facilitate greater support and coordination between the two groups.[109] And while details are scant, Hassan Hattab, the first emir of the GIA-splinter group Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), has also alleged that Ayman al-Zawahiri had also sent representatives to Algeria in 1995 to propose a merger between the GIA and his group, EIJ.[110] This idea was, however, flatly rejected by Djamel Zitouni according to Hattab.[111]

Whatever the exact nature of the support provided by AQ to the GIA between 1993 and 1995, this period remains significant as it provides a clear 'year zero' for the GIA's, and indeed al-Qa`ida's, Saharan operations. It is evident that both organizations began truly conducting activities in the region in tandem in earnest by 1994. Providing further confirmation of this date, Qutaybah Abu Numan al-Shinqiti, a Mauritanian religious official previously within AQIM (and as of 2021, JNIM) also states in a foreword in AQIM's 2017 booklet, *Sharia Advice to the Mujahideen in Nigeria*, that Algerian jihadis first went to Nigeria in 1994 to recruit locals and establish facilitation networks.[112] While al-Shinqiti does not explicitly name anyone, it is likely that this is a reference to Allani who had moved into Niger and northern Nigeria with the aforementioned support from al-Qa`ida that same year. The work started by figures like Allani and Belmokhtar in the Sahel in 1994 would prove to be the foundation that would eventually allow the Sahel to become one of al-Qa`ida's most important theaters today.

Exploiting Chaos in Northern Mali

While the GIA looked to northern Niger as a rear base for its Algeria-based operations with al-Qa`ida

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103   Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram*, p. 30.

104   Bin Ladin had also reportedly attempted to task Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, an Egyptian who was one of al-Qa`ida's key operatives in Africa in the early to mid-1990s, with providing the GIA with weapons, but it is unclear if these efforts were successful.

105   Akram, "Shaykh Osama and the Story of His Support for the Algerian Jihad," p. 8.

106   Ibid.

107   Ibid.

108   Caleb Weiss, "Translation of a May 2006 Interview of Mokhtar Belmokhtar," Line of Steel, July 21, 2020.

109   Ibid.

110   Tawil, p. 195.

111   Ibid.

112   Abu al-Hasan al-Bulaydi and Abu Numan al-Shinqiti, "Sharia Advice to the Mujahideen in Nigeria," Al-Andalus, 2017, p. 6.

supportive of the move, the GIA also benefited from a significant Tuareg rebellion inside northern Mali throughout much of the early 1990s as a means to secure funds, weapons, and a safe rear base. The Tuareg are a highly stratified society that have long existed as semi-nomadic people in the Sahara. Living in vast regions of Algeria, Mali, Libya, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the Tuareg were historically the dominant forces of the Sahara, controlling most trade routes through the desert for centuries.[113] While the Tuareg were at times both victims and benefactors of French colonial rule over Mali, their struggle for an independent state of their own has resulted in a series of rebellions since the 1960s.[114]

The most important rebellion in the context of the GIA and al-Qa`ida was the Tuareg rebellion that took place between 1990 and 1995. Initiated and led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a prominent member of the Kel Ifoghas Tuareg clan, the rebellion of the early 1990s began as a result of dissatisfaction over how the Malian state handled famine and drought during the 1970s and 1980s, which affected the Tuareg.[115] Ag Ghaly's group, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (or *Mouvement Populaire de Libération de l'Azawad*, MPLA), started the rebellion in June 1990 when he directed his men to target several Malian army positions across northern Mali simultaneously to free Nigerien Tuareg imprisoned for actions purportedly undertaken against the Malian and Nigerien states.[116] Ghaly and the MPLA waged war against the Malian state for another year until Malian President Moussa Traoré allowed a democratization process that saw the brief ascension of Amadou Toumani Touré (commonly referred to by his acronym, ATT) to the presidency.[117] ATT then began a peace process with Ghaly and the MPLA to end the conflict, which ostensibly ended with the January 1991 Tamanrasset Accords. In practice, however, this agreement broke down almost immediately when hardliners within the MPLA refused to lay down their arms.[118]

The rebellion of the early 1990s paved the way for Iyad Ag Ghaly's rise as a powerful figure in the Sahel, cementing his relationship with the GIA and by proxy al-Qa`ida, and ultimately proving crucial for AQ's later growth in the region. Following the collapse of the 1991 Tamanrasset Accords negotiated by Ag Ghaly, the Tuareg leader then fought a multi-pronged conflict against several other rival Tuareg groups who disagreed with the overall peace process.[119] By 1995, however, Ag Ghaly's MPLA reigned supreme over other Tuareg factions after it negotiated with Malian President Alpha Oumar Konaré to reinstate the 1991 peace agreement that year, resulting in the Malian state making several additional promises to make greater strides toward Tuareg integration into the state and its formal institutions.[120] By that year, Radio France International referred to Ag Ghaly as the "undisputed leader" of the Tuareg rebels.[121]

It is within this context of the rise of Ghaly and the unsettled political landscape in Mali between 1991-1994 that the GIA was able to utilize northern Mali as a rear base to support its Algerian operations. This occurred for two main reasons: political instability and weapons flows. First, the GIA was able

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113   Emizet F. Kisangani, "The Tuaregs' Rebellions in Mali and Niger and the U.S. Global War on Terror," International Journal on World Peace 28:1 (2012): pp. 59-97.

114   Ibid.; Stephen A. Emerson, "Desert insurgency: lessons from the third Tuareg rebellion," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 22 (2011): pp. 669-687; Kalifa Keita, "Conflict and conflict resolution in the Sahel: The Tuareg insurgency in Mali," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 9:3 (1998).

115   Keita.

116   Robin Poulton and Ibrahim ag Youssouf, "The Armed Revolt 1990-1997," in *A Peace of Timbuktu: Democratic Governance, Development, and African Peacemaking* (New York: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1998), chapter 3.

117   Kisangani.

118   Ibid.

119   Poulton and Youssouf.

120   Kisangani.

121   Steve Metcalf, "Iyad Ag Ghaly – Mali's Islamist leader," BBC, July 17, 2012.

to exploit the instability and lack of government capacity in northern Mali to establish contacts with Malian armed movements, smugglers, and other actors to benefit its Algerian-based operations. That said, more research is needed on the exact nature of the relationships forged between the GIA and the various Tuareg militants of northern Mali during this time.

Second, the GIA was able to take advantage of the flow of weapons into northern Mali for the conflict to re-arm itself for its fight in Algeria in the early 1990s. Emizet Kisangani, for instance, notes that the Algerian militants were able to forge ties with Tuareg militants through mutual arms dealers in both Libya and Chad.[122] Jihadi sources have also further discussed the GIA's search for weapons in the 'Greater Sahara,' a term that often refers to northern Mali, during the early and mid-1990s in several contexts. For example, a 2006 eulogy for the Algerian militant Ishaq al-Afghani, a deputy to the Sahara-based GIA commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, likewise mentions that al-Afghani and Belmokhtar traveled around the 'Greater Sahara' in 1996 to purchase weapons and ammunition for the GIA cadres in Algeria.[123] Undoubtedly, the weapons flows in northern Mali resulting from the Tuareg rebellion provided a lucrative opportunity for the GIA to establish greater armament networks in the Sahel. Additional expeditions into Mali and Mauritania by Belmokhtar and other jihadi commanders in the years following, such as in 1993 and 1994, in which the jihadis were described as "establishing contacts with arms dealers and leaders of local tribes," have been documented in more contemporary independent publications.[124]

3.3: Extremism and Dissidents

As the civil war in Algeria progressed into the mid-1990s, it became clearer that the GIA was taking on an increasingly extremist ideology and undertaking progressively more violent actions, including brutally attacking civilians rather than just purely fighting for an Islamic state in Algeria. The GIA's transformation toward more extreme violence began under the leadership of Djamel Zitouni, who had assumed the position of emir of the group in 1994. Following a reported internal coup attempt within the GIA sometime after his ascendency to the emir position in late 1994, Zitouni began a series of internal purges as part of a new hardline approach within the group that set off intense rounds of infighting within the group.[125] Zitouni was also responsible for ordering brutal massacres of civilians, including several French monks in Medea, Algeria.[126] Evan Kohlmann has also detailed that under Zitouni:

> *The GIA managed to further exacerbate tensions with the public by orchestrating elaborate revenge plots on would-be spies, informants, and supporters of the government. The attacks eventually extended out to target family members of the accused.*[127]

Underscoring his new, more international outlook, Zitouni also authorized a series of terrorist attacks across Europe, including the hijacking of an Air France flight in December 1994 and a series of bombings inside France throughout much of 1995.[128]

It is within this context of Zitouni's harsher turn that cracks between the GIA and al-Qa`ida began to develop. During his tenure, Zitouni, who had previously been accepting of al-Qa`ida-sent foreign volunteers fighting alongside the GIA, turned violent against the so-called *mujahideen* (Arabic term

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122 Kisangani.

123 Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "The Life of the Hero Martyr Ishaq al-Afghani," QMaghreb, July 16, 2006, author's personal archive.

124 Andrew Wojtanik, *Mokhtar Belmokhtar: One-Eyed Firebrand of North Africa and the Sahel* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018), p. 7.

125 Kohlmann.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid.

128 "Armed Islamic Group," Federation of American Scientists.

for 'emigrants,' and popular moniker for foreign fighters), as he became more radical and paranoid of any potential threats to his power. For example, the GIA had supported two other North African insurgent movements with funding and training: the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the Tunisian Islamic Front (FIT, for its French name).[129] But it would be the GIA's relationship with the LIFG that would prove disastrous for the GIA's relationship with al-Qa`ida. Originally formed by Libyan fighters inside Afghanistan in 1995, the LIFG's official *raison d'être* was the overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime and instillation of an Islamic state in its place.[130] But thanks to the connections made between Algerian and Libyan foreign fighters based inside Afghanistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and encouraged by al-Qa`ida, the LIFG took an increasing interest in the civil war and fighting inside Algeria.[131] Indeed, the LIFG would send multiple groups of its members to Algeria to fight in the civil war alongside the GIA between 1993 and 1994.[132] Initially, the GIA welcomed the arrival of the Libyans, just as it welcomed the arrival of members of the Tunisian Islamic Front in 1994.[133] However, a later deployment of LIFG fighters to Algeria, also in 1995, would never be heard from again. In response in 1995, Attiyah al-Libi, then a senior LIFG member close to bin Ladin who would later become a senior official within al-Qa`ida, was sent to Algeria by bin Ladin with a delegation of other AQ figures to investigate the disappearance of the LIFG group.[134] The investigative team was unable to officially determine what had happened to the fighters, but suspicion quickly fell on Zitouni, who it was assumed had ordered their deaths given his increasing extremism and wanton violence.[135] Attiyah's official report sent back to UBL had reportedly documented these suspicions and was wholly negative of the GIA, with Zitouni's rising extremism being the focus of his critiques.[136] While nothing is explicitly said about UBL's reaction to the presumed betrayal, the manner in which jihadi sources speak of the relaying of news suggests his disappointment in the GIA.

If UBL retained any support to the GIA following the missing LIFG affair in 1995, his support would officially and drastically cease following the appointment of Zitouni's successor, Antar Zouabri, as GIA's emir after Zitouni's death in July 1996. Under Zouabri, the extremism established by Zitouni was taken to an entirely new level. As described by Anneli Botha, Zouabri had several pro-GIA religious scholars write *fatwas* "in justification of its campaign against civilians" who, according to the GIA, had "forsaken religion and renounced the battle against its enemies."[137] Omar Chikhi, a founding member of the GIA, would go on to say that Zouabri killed "anyone he did not like."[138] In late 1996, Zouabri would declare Algerian society as impious, which led to a series of further massacres against civilians.[139] This included the killings of at least 80 civilians by the GIA in a series of massacres across northern Algeria in early 1997.[140] As a result, al-Qa`ida's propagandists, such as Abu Qatada al-Filistini and Abu Musab al-Suri, who had been supporting the GIA from London, withdrew their support.[141]

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129 Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 47-48; Hisham Abu Akram, "Memory of the Martyrs of the Sons of Libya in Algeria," Ifriqiyah al-Muslimya, 2015.

130 Tawil, p. 58.

131 Ibid.

132 Ibid.

133 Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service*, p. 47.

134 Akram, "Memory of the Martyrs of the Sons of Libya in Algeria," p. 9.

135 Ibid.

136 Ibid.

137 Botha.

138 Kohlmann.

139 Botha; Mohammed Hafez, "Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria," *Middle East Journal* 54:4 (2000): pp. 572-591.

140 "More than 80 Algerians killed in weekend massacres," CNN, April 6, 1997.

141 Tore Hamming, "The Hardline Stream of Global Jihad: Revisiting the Ideological Origin of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 12:1 (2019).

Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a close ally at the time of al-Qa`ida, also renounced the GIA, while bin Ladin withdrew any remaining support he had with the GIA.[142] To al-Qa`ida and its allies, Zouabri's deliberate wanton violence against Muslim civilians had crossed a line.

A Moderate Turn: From the GIA to the GSPC

Despite the removal of AQ support, Zouabri's extremism did not cease. In June 1997, Zouabri further called those Algerians who did not support the GIA *kuffar*, or infidels, and justified their murder in another communique.[143] This resulted in yet another wave of brutal killings against Algerian civilians committed by the GIA.[144] This includes the September 1997 Bentalha massacre in which at least 300 civilians were murdered by the GIA.[145] These killings thus resulted in a mass exodus of fighters disaffected by the extreme violence against civilians from the GIA. These fleeing fighters would subsequently form a myriad of splinter groups like the Islamic League for Preaching and Combat, Islamic Front for Armed Jihad, the Defenders of Salafist Preaching, and the Salafist Combatant Group,[146] and most germane to this history, the largest and most influential splinter organization, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). Officially founded by former GIA regional commander Hassan Hattab in 1998, the GSPC began to market itself as a group that opposed the GIA's wanton violence against civilians and instead as one that sought a return to a more moderate form of jihadism, free from massacres of Muslim civilians and more community outreach.

Over time, while many splinters of the GIA emerged, the GSPC stood out as the one with the most ideological and financial support from other influential jihadis, including al-Qa`ida. Much as he had in the creation and early history of the GIA, bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida also played pivotal roles in helping local commanders disenfranchised by the GIA to create the GSPC after bin Ladin and his organization officially ceased support for the GIA. Although the GSPC had been officially founded by Hassan Hattab in September 1998, behind the scenes, UBL had had a hand in lobbying Hattab and others to create an effective counterbalance to the increasingly extremist GIA.[147] Indeed, according to Evan Kohlmann, UBL had personally phoned Hattab from Afghanistan in early 1998, urging the Algerian commander to "work with others to establish a rival mujahideen organization in Algeria and present a 'better image of the jihad' [than GIA] against the secular government."[148] James LeSueur adds that by 1999, "Hattab and bin Laden were in frequent contact."[149] And in a 2015 booklet entitled *Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom* by AQIM's Hisham Abu Akram, the jihadi ideologue adds that by 1999, the GSPC had a dedicated communications official, identified only as 'Ayyub,' who maintained a direct line with al-Qa`ida's Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harithi (also known as Abu Ali al-Harithi[150]), a Yemen-based senior leader within the organization at the time.[151] According to Abu Akram, it was through this connection that further ties between the GSPC and al-Qa`ida were nurtured.[152]

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142 Ibid.; Tawil, pp. 96-97.

143 Kohlmann.

144 Hafez.

145 Hassina Mechai, "Remembering the Bentalha Massacre," Middle East Monitor, September 22, 2020.

146 Botha.

147 Ibid.

148 Kohlmann.

149 James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2010), p. 145.

150 Interestingly, Harithi was later killed in the first U.S. drone strike in Yemen in November 2002.

151 Hisham Abu Akram, "Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of His Martyrdom," Ifriqiyah al-Muslimah, 2015, p. 3.

152 Ibid.

Despite these lines of communication, it is unclear if this direct contact with UBL and al-Qa`ida resulted in any explicit guidance for the GSPC's activities during this period, especially as Hattab did not openly highlight the ties to al-Qa`ida.[153] What is clear, however, is that Hattab seemingly did work to fulfill bin Ladin's initial demand of 'bettering the image' of jihadis inside Algeria. For instance, the GSPC's first official communique in April 1999 dedicated most of its attention to critiquing the GIA and distancing itself from the group's mass killings and ultra-ideological extremism.[154] The GSPC would then spend the next several months issuing further denouncements of the GIA's massacres.[155] Taken in conjunction with the general amnesties issued by the newly elected Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999 that resulted in droves of militants ending the fight against the government, the GSPC's messaging strategy to differentiate itself from its parent organization resulted in the group taking on hundreds of additional members who did not wish to lay down their arms but who did not ascribe to the GIA's extremist ideology.[156] As a result, by 2001 the GSPC was the largest and most effective remaining militant organization in Algeria, eclipsing its parent organization, the GIA.[157]

Conclusion

From the very beginning of the civil war in Algeria, the largest jihadi group in the conflict, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), enjoyed a close relationship with al-Qa`ida, beginning with Algerians in Afghanistan and continuing when Usama bin Ladin moved its headquarters to Sudan. At the same time, as the GIA moved southward in its operations in 1993 and 1994—at first to gain access to arms and supplies and later to establish a safe rear base—al-Qa`ida was an ally.

But as the GIA grew increasingly more extreme and engaged in wide-scale violence against Muslim civilians in northern Algeria, al-Qa`ida and its allies began withdrawing their support for the GIA and began to lobby for the creation of a more moderate splinter faction. This splinter faction, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), eventually eclipsed its parent organization not only in northern Algeria, but in the country's south and the wider Sahara. And it is through the GSPC that al-Qa`ida would eventually gain an official branch in northwestern Africa.

Along the way, al-Qa`ida employed a number of tactics within its playbook to achieve its goals during this time period. First, it employed its tactic of *befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict* on two separate occasions. It began this process by facilitating and supporting the creation of the GIA inside Afghanistan in 1992, while also supporting its efforts during the Algerian civil war (especially between 1992 and 1995). And as its support waned for the GIA following its brutality, al-Qa`ida then helped to create and support the GSPC as a counter-balance to the GIA. Second, al-Qa`ida *addressed non-adherence* by the GIA to its preferred *modus operandi*. This was likewise accomplished by the group's efforts to create the GSPC in 1998, which acted as a successful challenger to the GIA's extremism, offering al-Qa`ida a more stable and more publicly acceptable ally. Lastly, al-Qa`ida and its allies *looked toward new theaters once their base was solidified*. This was accomplished through the efforts of the GIA's southern units and personnel operating throughout the Sahara between 1993 and 1994, which were met by representatives from al-Qa`ida in Sudan during the same two years in order to facilitate closer ties and support between the two organizations.

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153 Ibid.

154 Kohlmann.

155 Ibid.

156 Botha; Kohlmann.

157 Ibid.

Part 4: Creation of an Official al-Qa`ida Branch and Moves Southward (1998-2006)

This section explores the second major question of this report: How and why did al-Qa`ida succeed in expanding so far south into Sahelian Africa? It argues that this process was initiated by the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), the al-Qa`ida-sponsored splinter faction of the GIA. As the GSPC moved southward, it began to take on a more Sahelian character in terms of both its recruitment pool and geographical reach; this increasingly Sahelian character would ultimately give al-Qa`ida its first official branch in northwestern Africa when the GSPC formally and publicly joined al-Qa`ida's global hierarchy.

Beginning with a discussion on the development of closer ties between the GSPC and al-Qa`ida following the creation of the GSPC in 1998, this section then turns to explaining how and why the GSPC began moving westward into Mauritania (by no later than 2000) and southward into Mali (beginning in the late 1990s), thus giving the group a more Sahelian character. This section then investigates how the GSPC became al-Qa`ida's official branch in northwestern Africa.

As will be discussed in the following sections, al-Qa`ida again followed four of the five tactics delineated within its playbook in order to achieve its goals of expansion. These specific tactics are namely: befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict; integrating itself into communities where those militants exist; dealing with internal dissent more aggresively; and looking toward new theaters once its base is solidified.

4.1: Additional al-Qa`ida Outreach and Integration

During Hattab's tenure as the GSPC's emir starting in 1998, the leader found himself caught between increased outreach from al-Qa`ida (which respected his more moderate turn) and wanting to keep his organization more locally focused, and thus not letting AQ outreach overwhelm the group's character. Indeed, research shows that while Hattab had benefited from ties and contacts with al-Qa`ida in the establishment of his organization in 1998, he grew to have reservations about formally joining the global group and thus taking focus away from the Algerian conflict.[158]

Despite Hattab's reservations, this did not stop al-Qa`ida from sending an official representative to meet and facilitate better relations with more pro-al-Qa`ida figures within the GSPC. For example, a Yemeni operative named Emad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan, or Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni (sometimes transliterated as 'Yamani'), was sent by bin Ladin in early 2001 to visit the GSPC and send reports back to al-Qa`ida leadership in Afghanistan and Yemen.[159] As indicated by U.S. officials in the early 2000s, al-Yemeni was "as an adviser for militant groups in the [North Africa] region and a liaison with operatives in Yemen."[160] In a 2015 biography of al-Yemeni, AQIM posthumously identified the al-Qa`ida operative as part of another key al-Qa`ida network led by Abu Ali al-Harithi and based in Yemen, which reported to bin Ladin and other top leaders in Afghanistan.[161] But as described by Hisham Abu Akram in his aforementioned booklet on al-Yemeni, the al-Qa`ida operative first went to Niger to link up with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, at this time one of the GSPC's top Sahara-based commanders, in 2001.[162] Belmokhtar then took al-Yemeni to GSPC positions in northern Mali in early 2002 where Abu Akram notes that al-Yemeni "opened up the first [al-Qa`ida] training camp [in

158 Yassin Temlali, "Al-Qaeda in Algeria," Bab el-Med, November 12, 2007.

159 Akram, "Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni;" "Bin Laden reportedly contacts Algerian rebel," *Irish Times*, December 26, 2002.

160 "Militant Killed in Algeria was al-Qaida Operative," Associated Press, November 26, 2002.

161 Abu Binan Saeed, "Some of the Feats of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni," Ifriqiyah al-Muslimah, 2015, p. 8.

162 Akram, "Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni," p. 4.

northern Mali] … where the focus was on weaponry and tactics."[163] Not long after his stint in northern Mali, Abu Akram states in his booklet that al-Yemeni then went briefly to the deserts of Niger to meet with another GSPC brigade stationed there before making his way to Batna in eastern Algeria a few months later.[164] From there, al-Yemeni visited various GSPC battalions across northern and eastern Algeria, reportedly acting in an advisory capacity and taking part in combat with the group.[165] It is there that al-Yemeni was killed by Algerian security forces on September 12, 2002.[166]

Around the same time that al-Yemeni was in northern Africa in 2001, al-Qa`ida also sent a Mauritanian, Abd al-Rahman Ould Muhammad al-Husayn Ould Muhammad Salim (better known by his *kunya*, Yunis al-Mauritani), to visit the GSPC. According to the United Nations, al-Mauritani first pledged allegiance to bin Ladin in the late 1990s.[167] But by 2001, he joined the GSPC where he became "a communications link between [the] GSPC and Al-Qaeda."[168] According to Mokhtar Belmokhtar in a 2011 interview with a Mauritanian journalist, the GSPC's leadership officially appointed al-Mauritani to this role after the death of Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni in September 2002.[169]

Despite the visit by al-Yemeni and the broader integration of an official al-Qa`ida member, al-Mauritani, within the GSPC's higher ranks, Hassan Hattab remained hesitant to put GSPC directly under the command of bin Ladin by pledging *bay`a*. These reservations translated into internal power struggles within the GSPC over international connections to AQ. On one side was Hattab, who sought to keep distance. On the other were individuals such as Nabil al-Sahraoui, Abdelmalek Droukdel, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and others who, due to their historical ties to al-Qa`ida and a more global jihadi outlook, sought to move GSPC closer to AQ. Ultimately, the pro-AQ side won out. In 2003, Hattab was formally replaced by another Algerian, Nabil al-Sahraoui (also known as Mustapha Abu Ibrahim). Though Hattab remained within the group, he was excommunicated two years later.[170]

Al-Sahraoui's tenure as the GSPC emir was indeed marked by a desire to move closer to AQ. For instance, on September 11, 2003, two years after the 9/11 attacks and almost one year after the death of al-Yemeni, al-Sahraoui openly pledged *bay`a* to bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida.[171] Posted on the GSPC's website at the time, al-Sahraoui's communique said that "the [GSPC] declares to the world in general and to Muslims in particular its loyalty to every Muslim who testifies that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God."[172] He went on to add:

> *And to every mujahid raising the banner of jihad for the sake of God in Palestine and Afghanistan - in the Emirate of Mullah Muhammad Omar, may God preserve him -- and to the Al-Qaeda organization in [Mullah Omar's] Emirate of Sheikh Osama bin Laden -- may God protect him.[173]*

When asked to describe his relationship with AQ in an interview with the GSPC's website in December 2003, al-Sahraoui again openly touted bin Ladin as "among the most sincere mujahideen," while

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163 Ibid., p. 4

164 Ibid., p. 5.

165 Ibid., p. 5; Saeed, "Some of the Feats of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni."

166 "Militant Killed in Algeria was al-Qaida Operative."

167 "Abd al-Rahman Ould Muhamma al-Husayn Ould Muhammad Salim," United Nations Security Council.

168 Ibid.

169 Wojtanik, p. 8.

170 Ibid.

171 Nabil al-Sahraoui, "Statement of Support," Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, QMaghreb, September 11, 2003, author's personal archive.

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.

noting that the "work of the GSPC is integral [to the] work of other [jihadi] groups ... as it aims to establish the caliphate."[174] According to al-Sahraoui, the GSPC must have a relationship with AQ as they work to "educate the Muslims about loyalty to Islam and the Sunna [traditions of the Prophet Muhammad]."[175] Al-Sahraoui's more global mindset was also featured prominently in the first issue of the GSPC's official magazine, *Al-Jama'a*, in early 2004. That issue featured an article penned by al-Sahraoui entitled "Strangers of Islam," in which the jihadi leader denounced the United States and encouraged the mujahideen to stand united in the fight against the *kuffar*, or infidels.[176] Underscoring the GSPC's growing links with al-Qa`ida, that issue also featured another article written by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who at that time was al-Qa`ida's top ideologue.[177]

New Leadership and Closer al-Qa`ida Ties

Al-Sahraoui was killed by Algerian forces in June 2004 and was quickly replaced by the GSPC's shura council by another Algerian, Abdelmalek Droukdel,[178] whose tenure would continue al-Sahraoui's trend of moving more in lockstep with al-Qa`ida. Particularly during Droukdel's early reign, the GSPC's growing evolution into a formal al-Qa`ida branch was expedited thanks to the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the subsequent emergence and deepening of the GSPC's relationship with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's local al-Qa`ida branch in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi's organization, known as al-Qa`ida in the Land of Two Rivers, or simply, al-Qa`ida in Iraq (AQI), founded in 2003, would eventually develop close ties to the GSPC in Algeria. For instance, in a 2008 interview with *The New York Times*, Droukdel noted that he and al-Zarqawi were already communicating directly by 2004.[179] Evidence of behind-the-scenes relations between al-Zarqawi and Droukdel's organizations can be seen elsewhere. For example, in late 2004, Droukdel sent a public message to al-Zarqawi openly encouraging him to attack French interests and kidnap French citizens in Iraq, as part of the GSPC's wider public efforts denouncing France in its media.[180] While several French citizens were indeed kidnapped in both 2004 and 2005 in Iraq, it is unclear if AQI was actually responsible for any of those kidnappings.[181] But in July 2005, two Algerian diplomats were, in fact, kidnapped and later executed by AQI gunmen in Baghdad.[182] This was met by a congratulatory statement released by Droukdel, who also justified the diplomats' murder for Algeria's supposed betrayal of Iraqi Muslims.[183]

As further evidence of collaboration, between 2004 and 2005, the GSPC's magazine, *Al-Jama'a*, was replete with articles and statements in support of AQI and al-Zarqawi. In seven of the eight issues released during these years, the magazine included some form of explicit support for AQI or al-Zarqawi.[184] These statements of support were not unidirectional. For instance, in June 2005, AQI's

174   "First Discussion with the commander Abu Ibrahim al Mustapha," Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, QMaghreb, December 18, 2003, author's personal archive.

175   Ibid.

176   Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, *Al-Jama'a* 1, 2004, p. 5, author's personal archive.

177   Aaron Zelin, "Living Long Enough to See Yourself Become the Villain: The Case of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 9, 2020.

178   Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, *Al-Jama'a* 2, June 2004, author's personal archive.

179   "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel," *New York Times*, June 1, 2008.

180   David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: the evolution from Algerian Islamism to transnational terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2:4 (2008): pp. 91-97.

181   "Two French journalists kidnapped in Iraq," CNN, August 28, 2004; Kirk Semple, "French engineer is kidnapped in Iraq," *New York Times*, December 5, 2005.

182   "Algerian Diplomats killed in Baghdad," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 27, 2005.

183   Abdelmalek Droukdel, "Statement about the killing of the Algerian diplomats in Iraq," Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, QMaghreb, August 1, 2005, author's personal archive.

184   Author's own study based on eight issues released between 2004 and 2005.

spokesman, Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, congratulated the GSPC for its attack inside Mauritania earlier that month in an official communique released by AQI.[185]

The ties between the two groups extended beyond just communications and into battlefield cooperation. Starting in 2004 under Droukdel, the GSPC began recruiting, training, and sending North African recruits to AQI.[186] While the GSPC was largely Algerian-based at this time, it also recruited other North Africans, particularly Libyans, Mauritanians, and Tunisians. Exact numbers of these GSPC-trained recruits to AQI are unknown, but some clues about the potential influence of the GSPC on AQI exist. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, utilizing data from Saudi Arabia, estimated in 2005 that some 600 Algerians were members of AQI.[187] Then in 2010, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC) analyzed hundreds of captured AQI documents, colloquially referred to as the "Sinjar Files" for the northern Iraqi town where they were recovered, which dealt with foreign recruits to the group.[188] Of the 700 files analyzed by the CTC, just 49 were noted as Algerian, although not every file contained a place of origin and this number could be higher.[189] Important to underscore again, however, is that even though the GSPC is known to have trained and recruited Libyans, Mauritanians, Moroccans, and Tunisians for AQI, these files do not indicate how many went through the GSPC's North African camps.[190] Regardless of sheer numbers of fighters that it sent to Iraq, what is clear is that the GSPC under Droukdel looked to al-Zarqawi as a mentor and model to emulate, which would directly affect its ultimate transformation into AQIM. As stated by Droukdel in his *New York Times* interview, "we don't deny the pivotal role of … Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi … in the joining operation [i.e., joining al-Qa`ida] since its first phases."[191]

4.2: The GSPC's Greater Movement into the Sahel

As outlined in the previous section, while AQIM's predecessor organizations—the GIA and GSPC—began operating inside Mali and other Sahelian states, particularly Niger and northern Nigeria, between 1993 and 1994, their actual footprints at the time were relatively light. Indeed, while operatives were present, their activities were largely transactional in nature with more local actors, primarily to gain access to weapons and supplies, and entailed relatively brief encounters with official al-Qa`ida representatives to facilitate additional support. Indeed, only Hassan Allani's recruiting, logistical, and support activities in Niger and Nigeria (also beginning between 1993 and 1994) proved to be more long-term ventures. But four years later, in 1998, this calculus began to change inside northern Mali as the GSPC began actively building sustained, long-term relations with local communities.

Al-Qa`ida, via its ally in the GSPC, began to expand its influence inside Mali by integrating itself into local communities: Indeed, these intentional moves farther into the Sahel acted as part of a purposeful strategy to expand the GSPC's reach and areas of operation. As documented by Morten Bøås, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, GSPC members in Mali's Timbuktu region—chosen to provide a rear base for the group's Algerian operations—began to establish better relations with local elders by portraying

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185   Abu Maysara al-Iraqi, "Statement from the al-Qaeda organization congratulating the mujahideen's operation in Algeria," al-Qa`ida in Iraq, June 15, 2005, author's personal archive.

186   Gray and Stockham.

187   Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, "Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom's Response," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 19, 2005.

188   Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010).

189   Ibid.

190   Gray and Stockham; al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Our Honored Sharia: Sheikh Abu Khaythma al-Mauritani," Fursan al-Balagh, February 2013, author's personal archive. Al-Mauritani was killed in 2006 clash in Tunisia but previously fought in Iraq with AQI, according to the biography released by AQIM.

191   "An Interview with Abdelmalek Droukdel."

themselves as pious Muslims and honest brokers, particularly in engaging in fair business with local traders.[192] Bøås also notes that the GSPC "bought themselves goodwill, friendship and networks by distributing money, offering medicine, treating the sick and providing cellular phone access."[193] More importantly, however, GSPC fighters began to marry into local families—both impoverished families and noble ones—thereby improving their goodwill across larger segments of Malian society.[194]

For his part, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a senior GSPC leader who was based in the Sahel, established working ties with Tuareg nobles across northern Mali, while also marrying into a prominent Berabiche Arab family in Timbuktu in the mid- to late 1990s.[195] Belmokhtar also financed several construction projects for the Awlad Idriss clan, a sub-faction of the Berabiche Arabs in northern Mali.[196] Nabil Abu Alqama, who would later become a significant al-Qa`ida leader in Mali, himself married into a prominent Kounta Arab family of Timbuktu around the same time.[197] Further underscoring the nature by which the GSPC and later AQIM moved into northern Mali, Bøås finds they "also established alliances with some local marabouts (religious teachers) and encouraged them to preach [al-Qa`ida's] version of Islam."[198] Bøås succinctly concludes that the GSPC's strategy in Mali "was a careful and gradual one of integration and penetration into local communities based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic and humanitarian means."[199]

First Mauritanian Connection

While GSPC was helping to expand al-Qa`ida's influence southward from Algeria by building good relations with communities in Mali, its westward expansion into Mauritania was simultaneously being facilitated by a group that appears to have modeled itself after the GSPC. The first known al-Qa`ida-linked outfit in the country was the Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Jihad (GMPJ). Ostensibly formed by Mauritanian members of the Algerian GSPC in 2000, little is known about GMPJ's overall activities, though from the name alone, it is clear the group attempted to model itself after the GSPC. The U.S. State Department referenced the group once in a 2006 briefing that described GMPJ as "a newer terrorist organization that was founded in 2000 by Ahmed Ould el-Khory," and that "the exact size and areas of operation for the GMPJ are unknown."[200] The following year, the State Department released another briefing that noted GMPJ's leaders were arrested by Mauritanian officials in May 2005.[201] Additionally, researchers such as Andre Le Sage have also connected GMPJ to GSPC's overall activities in the Sahel, specifically in regard to the GSPC's foreign recruitment.[202] Others, such as John Davis, have made the case more forcefully that GMPJ recruited for the GSPC inside Mauritania, effectively making the GMPJ the Mauritanian affiliate of the GSPC.[203]

Thus, the GMPJ acted as a conduit in which many Mauritanian recruits were filtered into the GSPC in

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192   Morton Boas, "Guns, Money, and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 7:4 (2014).

193   Ibid.

194   Ibid.

195   Skretting.

196   Troels Burchall Henningsen, "The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region," *Contemporary Security Policy*, January 22, 2021.

197   Ibid.

198   Boas.

199   Ibid.

200   "U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2005," U.S. Department of State, April 28, 2006.

201   "U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism 2006," U.S. Department of State, April 30, 2007.

202   Andre Le Sage, "The Evolving Threat of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Strategic Forum, National Defense University, July 2011.

203   John Davis, "Understanding Terrorism in Africa," *Terrorism in Africa: The Evolving Front in the War on Terror* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), p. 145.

the late 1990s and early 2000s. Among the Mauritanians included in this list is Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti, a Mauritanian member of AQIM's main sharia committee who also advised the AQIM affiliate group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and who joined the GSPC in 2003.[204] Another is Islam Ould Abdullah Ould Obeid, who joined the GSPC in 2004 before dying in a clash with Algerian security forces in 2009.[205] Yet another is Ahmadou Ould Maqam, who reportedly in around 2004 fought in Iraq alongside Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, the founder of al-Qa`ida in Iraq, before returning to the Maghreb to join the GSPC in 2006.[206] Maqam was later purportedly killed in a clash with Tunisian security forces south of Tunis in late 2006.[207] These individuals are just a small sample of the overall foreign, and mainly Sahelian, recruitment of the GSPC during this time, further showing the group's expanding westward reach.

Kinetic Strikes in the Sahel

As the GSPC was moving westward into Mauritania and southward into Mali, it was not just taking part in recruitment and community integration activities. Indeed, by 2003, the group had begun to actively undertake offensive operations within the region. These events, which included attacks against state forces and civilians in the Sahel, would mark the first instances of al-Qa`ida's global network striking against civilians and state forces in the Sahel.

These kinetic strikes included the GSPC's first instance of violence against civilians inside the Algerian desert and later Mali—representing a shift for the group that was founded in response to its parent group's violence against civilians. For instance, in the spring of 2003 the GSPC's battalion Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad, formed a year prior and led by Abderrazak al-Para and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid—two GSPC commanders who had operated in the Sahara as part of the group's rear base—kidnapped 32 people from seven different groups of European tourists in the Algerian desert.[208] The hostages were then kept in movable make-shift camps within the Sahara before an Algerian military operation in May of that year near Tamanrasset in the country's south freed 17 of the Europeans.[209] The remaining hostages, barring one German woman who died in captivity, were later freed from the GSPC's bases in northern Mali a few months later in August 2003.[210] While denied by various European states, a ransom payment of at least five million euros is the most commonly reported amount paid to the militants.[211] The 2003 crisis would prove to be a watershed moment for jihadism in northern Africa, as many of the key players later became significant actors for al-Qa`ida in the region.[212]

The 2003 kidnapping event, however, was not the only early attack that signaled al-Qa`ida's growing capabilities in the Sahel and indeed not the only event in which individuals who would later become influential within AQ's regional network took part. In June 2005, dozens of GSPC jihadis led by the aforementioned Mokhtar Belmokhtar attacked a Mauritanian military outpost in the town of

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204 "Mauritanian jihadists in Libyan and Algerian prisons," Akhbar al-Sahel, September 14, 2017, translated from Arabic; "Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti sends a letter to Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia," Sahara Medias, May 21, 2013.

205 "Wana Opens the File of the Mauritanian dead within Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Souhoufi, September 8, 2010, translated from Arabic.

206 Ibid.

207 Ibid; Craig S. Smith, "Tunisia Says Suspects in Gun Battle Had Blueprints of Embassies," *New York Times*, January 14, 2007.

208 Rukmini Callimachi, "Anatomy of an Abduction," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014.

209 Carlos Echeverria Jesus, "Kidnappings as a Terrorist Instrument of AQIM and the MUJAO," *Paix Et Securite Internationales*, December 2013, pp. 161-166.

210 Ibid.

211 Ibid.

212 For instance, Mokhtar Belmokhtar and his Katibat al-Mulathameen also provided support for Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad during the hostage crisis. And on the government side, Algeria, Mali, and the European states relied on the aforementioned veteran Tuareg militant Iyad Ag Ghaly to negotiate the release of the prisoners in northern Mali. Perhaps ironically, Ghaly now leads al-Qa`ida's JNIM in the Sahel.

Lemgheity in the country's remote north, killing at least 17 soldiers.[213] The deadly attack marked the GSPC's first kinetic strike against state forces inside the Sahel.

Moreover, the composition of Belmokhtar's *katiba*, or battalion, during the 2005 Lemgheity raid also demonstrated that the GSPC was no longer just an Algerian group, but rather was marked by an increasingly Saharan and Sahelian composition. Indeed, taking part in the raid were at least two Nigerians, Adam Kambar and Khalid al-Barnawi, who would later form an al-Qa`ida group of their own, most commonly known as Ansaru, inside Nigeria six years later.[214] The two had already been running GSPC-affiliated training camps inside the Algerian desert for Nigerian militants.[215] Also present during the 2005 raid was the aforementioned dual-hatted Mauritanian GSPC and al-Qa`ida member, Yunis al-Mauritani.[216] Additionally, the raid also acted as a recruiting effort, attracting many Mauritanians following the attack. Anouar Boukhars notes that following the raid, "the GSPC engaged in luring a small group of Mauritanians into its camps in the Sahel and Sahara region."[217] Part of this small group included several significant individuals for al-Qa`ida in the Sahel, including the Mauritanian Taqi Ould Yusuf, who worked to establish further al-Qa`ida's networks inside Nigeria before his capture in 2010.[218] Important field commanders were also recruited during this wave, including Hamada Ould Khairou, who would later form an AQIM-splinter group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO);[219] Abu Anas al-Shinqiti, an AQIM ideologue arrested in Algeria in early 2011;[220] Abu Ayman al-Shinqiti, who played an important sharia role within al-Qa`ida in the Sahel before his death in 2018;[221] Abdallah al-Shinqiti, who also helped establish connections with Nigerian militants;[222] and Talha al-Libi (or al-Mauritani), a Mauritanian who has risen through the ranks of AQIM's Saharan wing and now acts as a shadow governor for Timbuktu.[223] Though just a sample of the overall Mauritanian recruitment into the GSPC, these examples nevertheless represent how the GSPC, and indeed al-Qa`ida's overall presence in northwestern Africa, was becoming a more Sahelian franchise.

4.3: Official Merger Between GSPC and al-Qa`ida

As mentioned in previous sections, al-Qa`ida and the GSPC were closely affiliated since the latter's formation in 1998. By the early 2000s, al-Qa`ida had sent official emissaries to the GSPC in both Algeria and the Sahel in the forms of Abu Muhammad al-Yemeni and Yunis al-Mauritani. By 2003, the second emir of the GSPC, Nabil al-Sahraoui, had pledged his group's allegiance to Usama bin

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213   Laurent Prieur, "U.S. transfers suspected senior al Qaeda member to Mauritania," Reuters, June 1, 2013.

214   Jacob Zenn, "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria: Cases from Boko Haram's Founding, Launch of Jihad and Suicide Bombings," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:6 (2017): pp. 173-189.

215   Ibid.

216   "Treasury Targets Three Al-Qa'ida Leaders," U.S. Department of the Treasury, September 7, 2011.

217   Anouar Boukhars, "Mauritania's Precarious Stability and Islamist Undercurrent," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2016.

218   "Wana Opens the File of the Mauritanian dead within Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb."

219   Ibid.; Diego Guerrero Oris and Nahuel Arenas-Garcia, "AQIM and Mauritania: Local paradoxes, regional dynamics, and global challenges," Documentos iecah, December 2012.

220   "Security forces discover that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is targeting Europe," France 24 Arabic, February 6, 2011.

221   "Death of Ayman al-Shinqiti, commander in the al-Qaeda organization, near Timbuktu," Sahel News, September 19, 2018. Translated from Arabic.

222   Jacob Zenn, "A Primer on Boko Haram Sources and Three Heuristics on al-Qaida and Boko Haram in Response to Adam Higazi, Brandon Kendhammer, Kyari Mohammed, Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, and Alex Thurston," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12:3 (2018).

223   Caleb Weiss, "GSPC's 2005 Video from Northern Mali," Line of Steel, May 20, 2020; Héni Nsaibia, "#Algeria/#Sahel: Talha al-Barbouchi was designated 'governor' of the Timbuktu Region ...," Twitter, Menastream, November 21, 2020; "Abdallah al-Shinqiti: the new emir of Katibat al-Furqan in the Al-Qaeda Organization," Sahara Medias, November 27, 2012.

Ladin and al-Qa`ida. And between 2004 and 2005, al-Sahraoui's successor, Abdelmalek Droukdel, developed close rhetorical, communication, and logistical ties with Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and al-Qa`ida in Iraq.

By 2006, however, the two groups would take their relationship even further, with the GSPC publicly merging into al-Qa`ida's global hierarchy and becoming an official wing of the group. Referred to as "branches" by al-Qa`ida, its regional affiliates act as the local face of the global al-Qa`ida organization, working to achieve local or regional objectives while still remaining connected to and receiving top-level orders from al-Qa`ida's central leadership apparatus. Perhaps unsurprisingly given his earlier role as an emissary to the GSPC, U.S. officials believe that Yunis al-Mauritani was sent by GSPC that year to al-Qa`ida in Pakistan to assist in merging the groups.[224] By late 2006, Abdelmalek Droukdel would again pledge the GSPC's allegiance to bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida. A few months later in September 2006, al-Qa`ida's then deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, publicly recognized and announced the merger a few months later in a public video.[225] It is unclear why the earlier pledge of allegiance by Nabil al-Sahraoui was not publicly commented on by al-Qa`ida leaders.

In the video, al-Zawahiri recognized that the GSPC had been formally merged within the global command structure of al-Qa`ida. He then urged the GSPC to become "a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders." [226] He further added that "we pray to God that our brothers from the GSPC succeed in causing harm to the top members of the crusader coalition, and particularly their leader, the vicious America."[227] Al-Zawahiri's speech thus acted as both a celebration and a call to action to al-Qa`ida's new northern African wing, which also represented its first official global branch outside of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. A few months later in early 2007, the GSPC officially changed its name to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), thus making its integration into al-Qa`ida unmistakable.

Conclusion

The formation of the GSPC as a splinter from the GIA was marked by increased al-Qa`ida support, ties, and connections, which culminated in the GSPC officially merging with al-Qa`ida to become AQIM. From the GSPC's onset, two camps emerged in its leadership around its relationship with al-Qa`ida: those who supported closer integration and those who wanted to remain more independent. Starting in the early 2000s, al-Qa`ida sent at least two official emissaries to the GSPC that helped not only strengthen the relationship between the two groups but to bolster the pro-al-Qa`ida integration wing of GSPC. This wing, led by Nabil al-Sahraoui and Abdelmalek Droukdel, became the dominant faction of the GSPC by 2003. And by late 2006, the GSPC was formally and publicly merged into al-Qa`ida's global hierarchy as an official branch of the group by al-Qa`ida's then deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Occurring at the same time as these internal developments within the GSPC, the group was expanding farther southward into Mali and westward into Mauritania. This was again accomplished by utilizing several tactics within al-Qa`ida's playbook. In order of tactics involved, this first included *integration into local communities* by several influential Saharan-based GSPC commanders, who did so by marrying into prominent families of northern Mali, buying or financing local construction projects, and offering rudimentary social services to local populations. In Mauritania, the GSPC benefited from the Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Jihad, which facilitated the significant recruitment of

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224 "Treasury Targets Three Al-Qa'ida Leaders."

225 Pascale Combelles Siegel, "AQIM Renews its Threats Against France," Jamestown Foundation, August 7, 2007.

226 "Al-Qaeda issues France threat," BBC, September 14, 2006.

227 Ibid.

Mauritanians into the GSPC's fold, thus *befriending a local militant group*. And finally, despite internal disagreements between the overall relationship with al-Qa`ida, pro-al-Qa`ida leaders, particularly al-Sahraoui and Droukdel, were successful *in dealing with the internal dissent* by replacing the GSPC's original leader, Hassan Hattab, who opposed integration with al-Qa`ida. And finally, the GSPC began looking toward new theaters during this time by launching its first Sahelian-based attack inside Mauritania in 2005.

Part 5: AQIM's Initial Sahelian Expansion and State-Building (2006-2012)

This section acts as the second phase in the exploration into one of the major questions of this report: How and why did al-Qa`ida succeed in expanding so far south? As the GSPC solidified its bases in northern Mali between 1998 and 2006, it began conducting kinetic strikes starting in Mauritania before turning to other endeavors, including income generation activities such as kidnapping for ransom and smuggling protection rackets. Following its official rebranding as AQIM and its recruitment of more local Sahelians, it also created several local Sahelian sub-units. All of these operations and activities helped expand al-Qa`ida's reach deeper into the Sahel and culminated in al-Qa`ida's brief co-occupation of northern Mali alongside its allies in 2012.

In January 2012, the Tuaregs of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) began cooperating with members of AQIM and two of its affiliates, Ansar Dine and MUJAO, to take control of vast stretches of northern Mali. After the failure of the Malian government to successfully respond to the uprising in the north and continual loss of territory, members of the Malian army conducted a coup in March 2012, ousting the president, Amadou Toumani Touré, which gave even more operational latitude to the northern rebellion.[228] In April 2012, the MNLA declared the existence of a state called "Azawad," the Tuareg word for northern Mali, after ejecting the Malian military from most major towns and military bases.[229] The following month, however, the MNLA's allies in al-Qa`ida then betrayed the group and ousted its men from various northern cities, essentially hijacking the Tuareg independence movement.[230] Following this, al-Qa`ida and its various affiliates occupied Mali's north, enacting their strict interpretation of sharia law, destroying libraries and mausoleums,[231] chopping hands off of alleged thieves,[232] and executing reported murderers.[233]

Al-Qa`ida's brief occupation, which lasted just eight months between June 2012 and January 2013, offered the group its first chance at governing over a territory and population inside northern Africa. While AQIM and its allies quickly lost control over its territory following a French-led intervention against it in January 2013, this era nevertheless showed not only the group's long-term ambition and overall capabilities, but that the group, despite its Algerian heritage, was no longer just an organization for Algerians by Algerians.

The following section thus demonstrates just how al-Qa`ida and its allies were able to take over and briefly control much of northern Mali, the culmination of the use of many tactics within AQIM's proverbial "Imperial Playbook." For instance, two of its most well-known tactics during this period—

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228 "Turmoil In Mali Deepens After Military Coup," NPR, April 5, 2012.

229 Shreeya Sinha, "Timeline on Mali," *New York Times*, January 18, 2013.

230 Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, "The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019).

231 Luke Harding, "Timbuktu mayor: Mali rebels torched library of historic manuscripts," *Guardian*, January 28, 2013; "Timbuktu mausoleums in Mali rebuilt after destruction," BBC, July 19, 2015.

232 "Islamists invoke sharia law to cut off hand of alleged thief," France 24, August 9, 2012.

233 "Mali Islamists Execute Man in Timbuktu," Voice of America, October 3, 2012.

kidnapping for ransom and participation in smuggling operations—were undertaken in the service of both its so-called 'plays' of *integrating itself into local communities* in Mali and *expanding itself into new theaters*. Meanwhile, an expansion in the Sahel meant it took aboard new Sahelian members within its ranks, resulting in the *creation of new groups*, namely several local sub-units of AQIM in northern Mali and beyond. At the same time, severe internal disagreements forced AQIM's leadership to *address the dissent within the organization*, again calling on its 'playbook' to passively deal with more problematic commanders.

Starting with an overview of AQIM's efforts in developing its networks and affiliated groups inside Mauritania, this report then turns to a discussion of AQIM's kidnapping for ransom operations across the Sahel. The report then explores the exact role AQIM played in Sahelian smuggling networks and how its protection of these networks helped expand and solidify its position in the Sahel. It then discusses the creation of several AQIM sub-groups in the Sahel before looking at how regional events coalesced into allowing AQIM and its allies to mount its occupation.

5.1: Expansion Model: Increased Operations Throughout the Sahel

In 2007, the aforementioned dual-hatted AQIM and AQ senior leader Yunis al-Mauritani penned a wide-ranging report to al-Qa`ida's top leadership gauging and assessing the viability of jihad across West Africa.[234] Though it is ultimately unclear if al-Qa`ida's central command shared AQIM's enthusiasm at the time, it *is* clear that AQIM was signaling back to bin Ladin and other senior leaders its desire to expand into new theaters. In the assessment, al-Mauritani reports to other AQ senior leaders basic demographic information on countries from Senegal to Nigeria, offering a descriptive take on whether al-Qa`ida members could indeed operate in those countries.[235] As stated by al-Mauritani in the report, "the brothers [AQ central command] cannot imagine how weak the countries neighboring Algeria, like Mauritania, Mali and Niger, actually are."[236] He goes on to describe how AQIM's men could "build bases and remain unmolested in the Atlas Mountains [of Morocco] and the Sahara desert, as well as in the forests further to the south," referencing areas such as central Mali or Burkina Faso.[237] Though AQ senior leadership had historically been interested in the GSPC (now AQIM)'s southward expansion, the 2007 report seems not to have elicited any serious interest. As concluded by Vidar Skretting, "despite al-Mauritani's exhortations to expand in the Sahel, the report was seemingly shelved at the time, and not given serious consideration until years later."[238] Indeed, upon its receipt, no evidence exists to suggest that AQ senior leaders requested AQIM to act on its proposals.

Second Mauritanian Connection

While AQ's central leadership was not eager to work to expand in the Sahara and Sahel, AQIM itself undertook renewed expansion efforts of its own, including in Mauritania. By early 2007, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who by this time was leading AQIM's forces in the Sahara, dispatched Mauritanian member Khaddim Ould Semane to the latter's home country, Mauritania, to set up an AQIM cell.[239] Calling his group Ansar Allah al-Murabitin (AAM), Semane recruited dozens of members from local

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234 Younis al-Mauritani, "Report on the Islamic Maghreb," CIA Abbottabad documents, translated from Arabic. (Author was written as Salih al-Mauritani, although this is a known alias for Younis.)

235 Ibid.

236 Ibid.

237 Ibid.

238 Skretting.

239 Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *New York Times*, February 13, 2009.

mosques in the capital of Nouakchott that year.[240] Following the December 2007 AAM murder of four French tourists in an attempted kidnapping in Aleg, close to the border with Senegal, Mauritania began a crackdown on AAM.[241] In April 2008, Mauritania rolled up AAM's networks, crippling the group.[242] And a year later, Sedane and Sidna were both arrested, officially putting an end to AAM.[243]

The loss of AAM, however, did not seem to deter AQIM's expansionary efforts. In February 2008, AQIM had already begun officially operating in Mauritania under its own name when it claimed an assault on the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott, wounding three French nationals.[244] This operation then began a rash of attacks perpetrated by AQIM itself in the country reportedly under the command of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. In June 2008, Mauritanian security forces engaged in a gunfight with AQIM fighters in the streets of Nouakchott.[245] In September 2008, AQIM ambushed and killed a dozen Mauritanian soldiers in a military patrol near Tourine in the country's north near Western Sahara.[246] In August 2009, AQIM began launching suicide bombings in the country when two security guards were wounded after a bomber detonated himself at the gates of the French embassy in Nouakchott.[247] Two other suicide bombings were perpetrated by AQIM inside Mauritania, with the last occurring in August 2010.[248] French and Mauritanian officials would even accuse AQIM of attempting to assassinate then-Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz in February 2011.[249]

And yet, following a July 2011 assault in Bassiknou on the Malian border, AQIM attacks in Mauritania mysteriously stopped.[250] While populations in the country were routinely targeted by AQIM's propaganda, al-Qa`ida has not, as of early 2022, conducted a single attack inside Mauritania in over nine years. Some researchers have previously argued that this paucity of operations is reflective of the efficacy of Mauritanian security efforts, which have been bolstered and backed by the U.S. military.[251] However, the declassification of documents gathered from bin Ladin's compound in Pakistan following his killing in May 2011 has allowed a new story and another potential explanation to emerge. In an undated letter (written prior to May 2011) to an unidentified commander, it was revealed that Abdelmalek Droukdel sent a message to al-Qa`ida's global management team asking for advice on a potential truce with the Mauritanian government.[252] According to the file, AQIM would have agreed to stop targeting Mauritania if the state stopped "intercepting the mujahideen," and therefore allowing a safe space to operate inside the country, and released al-Qa`ida fighters within its prison.[253] It is ultimately unknown if Mauritania ever agreed to the proposed truce. Other jihadis, such as former al-Qa`ida leader Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, the former leader of the Islamic

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240 "Essirage publishes the complete story of the Ansar Allah al-Murabitin organization," Essirage, January 22, 2010, translated from Arabic.

241 Schmidle.

242 Vincent Fertey, "Mauritania captures eight al-Qaeda suspects," Reuters, April 30, 2008.

243 "Mauritanian Policy Arrest Four Suspected Al-Qaida Militants," Voice of America, November 1, 2009.

244 "Gunmen attack Israeli embassy in Mauritania," France 24, February 1, 2008.

245 "Ratissage contre alqaida en mauritanie," YouTube, July 20, 2008.

246 "Militants kill 12 Mauritanian soldiers in Ambush," Associated Press, September 15, 2008.

247 Adam Nossiter, "Suicide blast wounds 2 at Embassy in Mauritania," New York Times, August 8, 2009.

248 Warner, Chapin, and Weiss.

249 Pierre Boisselet, "Attentat manque a Nouakchott: Aqmi voulait 'assassiner' le president Ould Abdelaziz," Jeune Afrique, February 2, 2011.

250 "Mauritania says kills six 'terrorists' in clashes," Reuters, July 7, 2011.

251 Geoff Porter, "The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania," CTC Sentinel 11:7 (2018).

252 Thomas Joscelyn, "Osama bin Laden's Files: Al Qaeda considered a truce with Mauritania," FDD's Long War Journal, March 1, 2016.

253 Ibid.

State in the Greater Sahara, have spoken toward the authenticity of such a deal.[254] But no independent confirmation has emerged on a deal between Mauritania and al-Qa`ida.

Kidnappings for Ransom as a Show of Projection

Beyond the stand-up of and assistance to new groups in the Sahel as a method to procure funding and expand its influence across the Sahel, AQIM began its kidnapping for ransom (KFR) operations. And while the operations were critical for the group's internal fundraising, the operations also allowed the group to demonstrate to external observers just how far its reach could extend and its ability to utilize its "play" of expanding into new theaters. While AQIM's predecessor, the GSPC, first engaged in this tactic with the aforementioned 2003 hostage crisis, AQIM's KFR operations officially began in earnest in February 2008. That month, two Austrian citizens in Tunisia were taken by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid's Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad and then transported to northern Mali.[255] The two were later released after a purported ransom was paid.[256] In December 2008, gunmen belonging to Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathameen kidnapped Canadian diplomats Robert Fowler and Louis Guay just outside of Niamey, Niger.[257] They were later freed in April 2009 as part of a prisoner swap with Mali, in which imprisoned AQIM members were also freed, though internal AQIM documents have stated a ransom of 700,000 Euros was also paid to the group.[258]

In 2009, AQIM's kidnapping for ransom operations reached their zenith. AQIM conducted at least six successful or attempted abductions in that year, demonstrating the group's already large reach across the Sahel. These included:

• January 2009: Edwin Dyer, Marianne Petzold, Gabriella Barco Greiner, and Warner Greiner kidnapped by Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad in northern Mali near the Nigerien border.[259] Petzold and Gabriella Greitner were released in April 2009 alongside Robert Fowler and Louis Guay.[260] Dyer was beheaded by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid in June 2009, while Warner Greiner was released a month later.[261]
• June 2009: AQIM gunmen murdered American Christopher Leggett in Nouakchott, Mauritania, during an attempted kidnapping.[262]
• November 14, 2009: Suspected AQIM gunmen attempted to kidnap American embassy personnel in the Tahoua region of Niger.[263]
• November 25, 2009: French citizen Pierre Camatte abducted by AQIM gunmen from Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad from his hotel in Menaka, Mali.[264] Camatte was later released in a prisoner exchange with Mali in February 2010.[265]
• November 29, 2009: Three Spanish aid workers taken by Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Katibat al-

254 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Islamic State confirms Sahelian leader's death, criticizes Al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, October 18, 2021.

255 "Al Qaeda abducts two Austrians in Tunisia," France 24, March 10, 2008.

256 "Freed Austrian hostages home after 8 month ordeal," Reuters, November 1, 2008.

257 "UN Diplomat tells of al-Qaeda kidnapping in Niger," BBC, June 4, 2013.

258 Ibid.; Rukmini Callimachi, "AP Exclusive: Al-Qaida rips into prima donna terrorist for failing to deliver big operations," Associated Press, May 28, 2013.

259 "Is it right to pay ransoms?" BBC, October 7, 2014.

260 Helen Pidd, "Background: The kidnapped of Edwin Dyer," *Guardian*, June 3, 2009.

261 Matthew Weaver, "British hostage Edwin Dyer killed by al-Qaida," *Guardian*, June 3, 2009.

262 "Tuesday Funeral for Tennessee Man Slain in Africa," WRCB TV, Junee 23, 2009.

263 "U.S. Embassy Niamey, Niger Warden Message – Kidnapping Threat," U.S. Embassy Niamey, Niger, November 15, 2009.

264 "Al Qaeda group extends French hostage ultimatum," France 24, January 31, 2010.

265 "French hostage freed in Mali after al-Qaeda release," BBC, February 23, 2010.

Mulathameen in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, near Western Sahara.[266] One aid worker, Alicia Gamez, was freed in March 2010, while the remaining two, Roque Pascual and Albert Vilalta, were freed in August 2010 after a purported ransom payment.[267]

- December 2009: An Italian man, Sergio Cicala, and his Burkinabe wife, Philomene Kabore, kidnapped in Kobeni, Mauritania, near Mali by gunmen from Algerian Djamel Okacha's Katibat al-Furqan.[268] The two were released in April 2010.[269]

While 2010 saw a limited number of KFR operations from AQIM—including two notable operations inside northern Niger[270]—the group again ramped up these activities across the Sahel in 2011. These 2011 incidents included:

- January 2011: Two French citizens kidnapped by Katibat al-Mulathameen in Niamey, Niger.[271] French special forces attempted to rescue the pair less than 24 hours later, but the hostages were killed during the firefight.[272]
- February 2011: An Italian woman and three Algerians kidnapped south of Djanet, Algeria, by Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad.[273] The Algerians were released immediately, while the woman was later freed in April 2012.[274]
- November 23, 2011: Two French citizens abducted from Hombori in central Mali by AQIM's Katibat al-Ansar.[275] One hostage, Philippe Verdon, was beheaded in March 2013.[276] The other hostage, Serge Lazarevic, was freed in December 2014 after a ransom payment and prisoner swap with Mali.[277]
- November 25, 2011: Three Westerners kidnapped from their hotel in Timbuktu by Katibat al-Furqan, while a fourth was killed during the raid.[278] One hostage, Dutch Sjaak Rijke, was freed by French special forces in April 2015.[279] Swedish captive, Johan Gustafsson, was freed in June 2017, while South African Stephan McGown was released a month later.[280]

These KFR operations were so important to al-Qa`ida, especially for income generation and propaganda, that its senior leadership was often involved. Documents uncovered from bin Ladin's Pakistan compound have confirmed this hierarchical dynamic. For instance, one file "had issued written instructions to members of [AQIM] on how to handle a group of hostages, including five French nationals, captured in Niger."[281] This was seemingly in response to a letter purportedly written by Abdelmalek Droukdel addressed to UBL in February 2009. That letter, written to update AQ's

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266 "Spanish hostage in Africa freed," BBC, March 10, 2010.

267 Ibid.; "Al Qaeda frees Spanish hostages after nine months in captivity," France 24, August 22, 2010.

268 "Aqmi au Sahel: Mokhtar Belmokhtar ecarte de son commandement," RFI, October 15, 2012.

269 "Al-Qaeda frees abducted Italian couple in Mali," BBC, April 16, 2010.

270 See "Al Qaeda says responsible for kidnap of Frenchman," Reuters, May 13, 2010; Jean Philippe Remy, "Les quatre otages enleves au Niger liberes," *Le Monde*, October 29, 2013.

271 "Al-Qaida Claims Kidnapping of French Nationals in Niger," Voice of America, January 12, 2011.

272 "Two French hostages in Niger killed in rescue attempt," BBC, January 8, 2011.

273 "Italians held by Qaeda in Algeria," News 24, February 18, 2011.

274 Remy.

275 "Enlevements au Mali: la piste Aqmi croise celle des ex-combattants touaregs de Kadhafi," *Jeune Afrique*, December 8, 2011.

276 "Philippe Verdon: French Mali hostage killed by al-Qaeda," BBC, March 20, 2013.

277 "French former hostage Lazarevic denies being spy, believes freed for ransom," RFI, December 14, 2014.

278 "French, Dutch hostages in Mali beg for help," News 24, November 18, 2014.

279 Caleb Weiss, "French forces free Dutch hostage in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, April 6, 2015.

280 Mfuneko Toyana, "Al Qaeda releases South African kidnapped in Mali in 2011," Reuters, August 3, 2017.

281 "Bin Laden 'wanted to use French hostages against Sarkozy,'" Reuters, September 9, 2011.

senior command of AQIM's January 2009 kidnapping of four Europeans in Niger, explicitly asks for guidance in the ransom negotiation procedures.[282] Other files show that AQIM sent status reports of certain kidnapping operations to al-Qa`ida's leadership, which further underscore coordination. For example, in a letter dated January 2009, an AQIM commander updated Attiyah Abd al-Rahman (also known as Attiyah al-Libi), a deputy to UBL, that the group had received a ransom payment from Austria for the two tourists kidnapped in Tunisia in February 2008.[283] Moreover, the AQIM commander asks Attiyah the best ways to establish direct contact between the senior leader and "the brothers in the desert."[284] Another message from May 2009 updated al-Qa`ida's leadership about the April 2009 prisoner swap that freed Marianne Petzold, Gabriella Barco Greiner, Robert Fowler, and Louis Guay.[285] By 2014, AQIM's KFR operations enabled the group to make at least $91.5 million in ransom payments according to a *New York Times* study.[286] Beyond their fundraising capabilities, these abductions proved the projection capabilities of al-Qa`ida militants and provided a glimpse into their relationship with AQ's central leadership.

Smuggling Operations as a Means of Local Integration

In addition to financing itself and projecting its presence with kidnapping, AQIM has long been accused of being involved in wide-ranging illegal smuggling, from weapons to cigarettes to drugs and other illicit commodities. While AQIM's roles in these smuggling networks have often been overstated, illicit smuggling has indeed provided the group more opportunity to not only fund itself, but mainly to help it expand into and instill itself within the local Sahelian context.[287] Thus, its participation in smuggling operations in the Sahel was employed in the advancement of its "play," or tactic, of local integration as it continued to spread across the Sahel.

In looking at Mali specifically, it has long existed as a transit state within the Saharan trade and smuggling routes.[288] This commercial importance has thus afforded significant power and influence to those communities actually involved in the trading. Given the importance of social structure in the Sahel, however, this means certain communities are more powerful than others in the licit and illicit commerce going through Mali. As stated by the United Kingdom's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, "social and family connections are the backbone of everything in the Sahara … [and] understandings between different groups govern long-distance trade."[289] Specifically, local Arab tribes in the Timbuktu (Kounta and Berabiche Arabs) and Gao regions (the Lamhar or Tilemsi Arabs) have become some of the most important power brokers in this regard.[290] It is no surprise then that these same groups have been targeted by AQIM in its so-called "plays" regarding both local integration and befriending other militant groups.

Internal al-Qa`ida documents have also discussed AQIM's role in certain smuggling operations. For instance, in a letter addressed to Usama bin Ladin from Abdelmalek Droukdel in 2009, the AQIM

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282 "Letter from the Algerian Group, May 2009," CIA Abbottabad documents, translated from Arabic.

283 Ibid.

284 Ibid.

285 Ibid.

286 Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, July 30, 2014.

287 Kerry Dolan, "The Secret of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Inc: A Resilient (And Highly Illegal) Business Model," *Forbes*, December 16, 2013; Scott Baldauf, "Air Al Qaeda: Are Latin American drug cartels giving Al-Qaed a Lift?" *Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 2010; Sergei Boeke, "Mali and the Narco-Terrorists," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, March 13, 2013.

288 "Traffickers and Terrorists: drugs and violent jihad in Mali and the Wider Sahel," U.K. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, October 2013.

289 Ibid.

290 Ibid.; Peter Tinti, "Illicit Trafficking and Instability in Mali: Past, Present, and Future," Global Initiative, January 2014.

leader references the importance of the Sahara for acquiring arms for his group.[291] Another undated letter written by Yunis al-Mauritani describes how both Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abdelhamid Abu Zeid procured weapons from local Sahelian arms dealers, discussing even the possible purchasing of surface-to-air missiles from a Spanish arms dealer in the region.[292] Independent investigations have also found that AQIM procured weapons directly from corrupt Malian army officials.[293] Meanwhile, other investigations have found that weapons from the Sierra Leone and Liberia civil wars also found their way to various Malian armed groups, including AQIM, by way of Guinea.[294]

Perhaps most interestingly, however, AQIM has long been accused of being part of the international drug trade across the Sahara, though there remains no direct evidence of AQIM being involved in the direct sale of drugs. For instance, it has been reported that AQIM "established partnerships with international drug cartels in Colombia and Bolivia that helped it acquire sophisticated know-how."[295] In 2010, AQIM made international headlines when the group allegedly met with Latin American drug cartel members on an island off the coast of Guinea-Bissau.[296]

However, most evidence seems to suggest that AQIM's role in the drug trade across the Sahel was more within protective services for smugglers, rather than being smugglers themselves. Even with the alleged meeting in Guinea-Bissau, AQIM reportedly only agreed to provide protection for the cartels' shipments through the Sahel to the North African coast.[297] Further, local witnesses have also reportedly documented seeing AQIM vehicles providing protection for drug convoys in Mali.[298] In 2010, Algerian security forces reported clashing with an AQIM-protected drug convoy in the Sahara, adding that this had occurred 19 other times over the previous two years.[299] Meanwhile, certain members, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar, have commonly been touted as being involved in this trade. In the case of Belmokhtar, for instance, his alleged role in the cigarette smuggling networks reportedly earned him the moniker "Mr. Marlboro."[300] But this may not be true. Lemine Ould Salem, a Mauritanian journalist who lived with Belmokhtar's group, has found no evidence that Belmokhtar was actually directly involved in the cigarette smuggling business, let alone wider drug smuggling activities.[301] But this does not rule out that his group provided protection for other actual smugglers.

This lack of actual AQIM involvement in direct drug trafficking largely comports with interdictions by AQ leadership prohibiting its affiliates' participation in the trade. In one letter found in internal AQ documents recovered from UBL's Pakistan compound, Attiyah Abd al-Rahman, a senior deputy to bin Ladin, instructed Jaysh al-Islam, an al-Qa`ida-linked group in Gaza, that while directly profiting from the sale of drugs is forbidden by Islam, there exists legal grey areas for profiting off of indirectly participating in the trade.[302] As stated by Attiyah, "if these traffickers, however, who traffic in forbidden

291 "Letter from the Algerian Group, May 2009."

292 Al-Mauritani, "Addendum to the Report on the Islamic Maghreb."

293 Djallil Lounnas, "The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel," MENARA, November 2018; Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 13, 2012.

294 Fiona Mangan and Matthias Nowak, "The West Africa – Sahel Connection: Mapping Cross-border arms trafficking," Small Arms Survey, December 2019.

295 Dolan.

296 "Guinea-Bissau: AQIM and the drug cartels," Africa Bulletin, November 5, 2010.

297 Dolan.

298 Boeke, "Mali and the Narco-Terrorists."

299 Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria says al Qaeda guards Sahara drug smugglers," Reuters, February 22, 2010.

300 "Profile: Mokhtar Belmokhtar," BBC, June 15, 2015.

301 Lounnas, "The Links Between Jihadi Organizations and Illegal Trafficking in the Sahel."

302 Ibid.

items such as drugs, give their monies as alms for jihad in God's name, then it appears to me, and God is all-knowing, that it is permissible to spend these monies for jihad in God's name."[303] It is unclear if this same advice was given to AQIM, but this same sharia justification was clearly present in AQIM's activities in the illicit economy of the Sahel. That AQIM would try to integrate itself within local smuggling and illicit trading communities to increase its power and influence is unsurprising. Indeed, these operations allowed the group to further embed itself within the Sahelian fabric.

5.2: Creation of Local AQIM Sub-Units in the Sahel

As AQIM and its allies spread farther south in the Sahel, they unsurprisingly took on an influx of local Sahelian recruits. In keeping with its proverbial playbook, it again utilized its "play" of creating militant groups that worked to expand its organizations. Yunus al-Mauritani's aforementioned 2007 expansion report for al-Qa`ida's senior leadership, however, also contains interesting information regarding the composition of AQIM's Saharan-based brigades at the time. For instance, he notes that local recruits constituted as much as 95 percent of the brigades, with many members originating from Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Nigeria.[304] This number thus represented a significant shift away from the group's Algerian origins. Al-Mauritania then specifically notes the large presence of Mauritanians and Malians within these brigades. Providing some evidence to support this claim, local and international outlets reported a series of clashes in late 2006 between the Tuareg rebel group Democratic Alliance for Change (ADC) and GSPC, as a result of the latter's increased recruitment of Tuareg members.[305] Al-Mauritani's claim also largely conforms with a later letter sent to bin Ladin from Abdelmalek Droukdel. In that 2009 letter, Droukdel tells his boss that recruits in the southern brigades are from "Western Sahara, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria."[306] He further adds that "recruiting is very easy in places like Libya, Mauritania, and Nigeria."[307] Droukdel states that because of the increased Sahelian recruitment, a sub-unit for Mauritanians was created and was led by one Mu'az Abu Mus'ab al-Mauritani.[308] In the same vein, he adds "we have created other brigades for fighters from every country that is represented in al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb and that all of their emirs have been integrated into the main shura council."[309] And while some Tuareg clans did not take kindly to al-Qa`ida's encroachment, these relationships were largely reconciled by 2009.[310] Indeed, as reported by AQIM to al-Qa`ida's central leadership in 2010, its Sahelian brigades established "brotherly relationships with many of the tribes in the Sahel region."[311] An overview of AQIM's Saharan brigades is provided in Figure 3, while a photo of many of AQIM's emirs is provided in Figure 4.

The influx of local Sahelian recruits into AQIM was made evident by the creation of three units at the *katiba*, or brigade, level, allowing new local Saharan recruits to serve as the leaders of their own local groups under the umbrella of AQIM. For instance, Djamel Okacha (or Yahya Abu al-Hammam), a veteran Algerian militant and deputy to Mokhtar Belmokhtar, was promoted to head his own brigade, Katibat al-Furqan, in 2009.[312] The brigade would then take part in several kidnapping operations

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303 Ibid.

304 Al-Mauritani, "Report on the Islamic Maghreb."

305 "Mali Tuaregs say Algerian militant killed in clash," Reuters, December 13, 2009.

306 "Letter from the Algerian Group, May 2009."

307 Ibid.

308 Ibid.

309 Ibid.

310 Skretting.

311   "Report of the Organization in the last term," CIA Abbottabad documents, translated from Arabic.

312 Andrew McGregor, "Yahya Abu al-Hammam: France Eliminates Leading Saharan Jihadist," Jamestown Foundation, March 5, 2019.
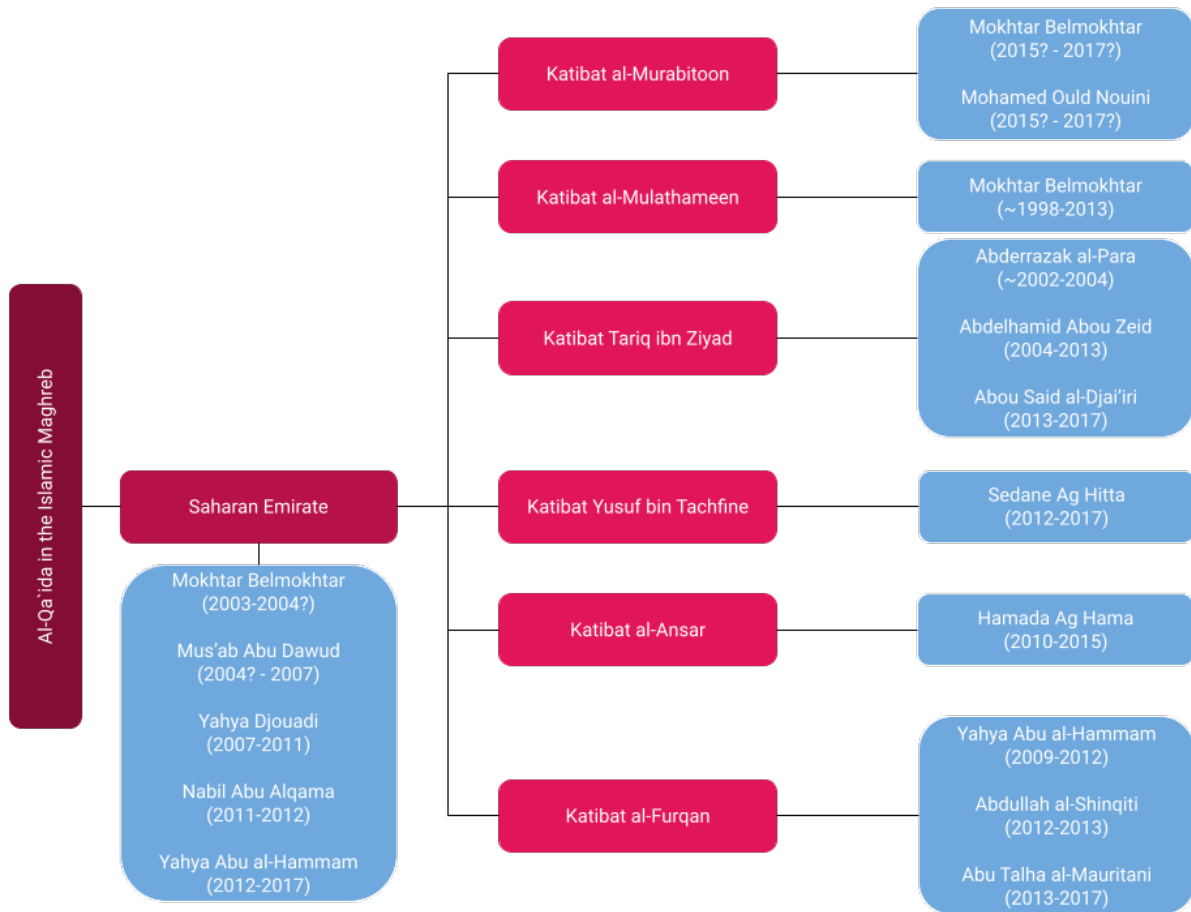
across the region.[313]

Figure 3: Organizational chart of AQIM's Sahel-based units before the French intervention in Mali in 2013. Light red are AQIM sub-groups, while individuals listed in blue are commanders of attached sub-groups.

The second new Saharan brigade that emerged was Katibat al-Ansar in 2010, intended to accommodate the increase in Tuareg recruits into the group.[314] AQIM's leadership gave the helm to Hamada Ag Hama (also known by his *kunya*, Abdelkarim al-Targui), a member of the Ifoghas Tuareg and nephew of the veteran rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghaly.[315] However, following the French intervention in Mali in 2013, Katibat al-Ansar is believed to have been folded into Ansar Dine, a local Tuareg jihadi group that AQIM used to mask its operations inside Mali.[316] Nevertheless, Ag Hama was regarded as one of al-Qa`ida's most formidable operatives in the Sahel until his death in 2015.

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313 Later during the occupation of northern Mali, Okacha would become the 'governor' of Timbuktu. Following the death of Nabil Abu Alqama, Okacha was then promoted to the emir of the entirety of AQIM's Saharan branch. As a result, the Mauritanian jihadi Abdullah al-Shinqiti took over the helm of Katibat al-Furqan until his own death in 2013 and was subsequently replaced by another Mauritanian, Talha al-Libi (also known as al-Mauritani, al-Azawadi or al-Berabichi). See McGregor, "Yahya Abu al-Hammam: France Eliminates Leading Saharan Jihadist;" "Mali: Antiterroriste: Sur la piste de Talha al-Liby de la Katiba al Fourghan," Mali Actu, May 24, 2018.

314 Herve Brusini, "Journalistes tues au Mali: La revendication d'Aqmi masque un ratage," France Info, June 11, 2013.

315 "Qui sont les deux jihadistes abattus par l'armee francaise au Mali?" RFI, May 21, 2015.

316 Ibid.

Hamada Ag Hama's Katibat al-Ansar was not the only local Tuareg brigade AQIM created during this time. In late 2012, two years after the creation of Katibat al-Ansar, a former commander from that group, Sedane Ag Hitta, was allowed to create a third new brigade, Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine.[317] Ag Hitta (also known as Abu Abdelhamid al-Kidali or al-Qairawani) is a former Malian soldier and rebel who fought under Iyad Ag Ghaly during the 2006 Tuareg rebellion in Mali.[318] His brigade, named after the legendary Berber leader and general, was responsible for at least one kidnapping inside Mali during its brief existence. Much like with Katibat al-Ansar, Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine is believed to have been folded into Ansar Dine following the French intervention in Mali in January 2013.

Despite the southward move and influx of Sahelian recruits in the mid- to late 2000s, there was a desire by AQIM's central leadership to reorganize its local units to accommodate the increase in Sahelians. Katibats al-Furqan, al-Ansar, and Yusuf bin Tachfine thus joined AQIM's older Saharan brigades, Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad and Katibat al-Mulathameen, as all mandated by AQIM's leadership to operate in the wider Sahel. These units were thus organized under the so-called Saharan Emirate, an administrative division of AQIM meant to compartmentalize the Sahelian groups away from the Algerian-based units.[319] The Saharan Emirate thus joined AQIM's other administrative divisions: Central Emirate (based in Algiers, Kabylie, and their surroundings), Eastern Emirate (based in eastern Algeria and Tunisia[320]), and its Western Emirate (western Algeria).[321] Each division was relegated to focus on its respective geographical area of operation.

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317   "Assassinat de G. Dupont et C. Verlon: Seidane Ag Hitta, l'ascension du presume commanditaire," RFI, November 2, 2020.

318   "Seidane Ag Hitta, the rise of the alleged sponsor," Al Khaleej Today, November 2020.

319   Belmokhtar was the first leader of the Saharan Emirate but was replaced by fellow Algerian Mus'ab Abu Dawud and Yahia Djouadi following disagreements with AQIM's leadership. In 2011, Djouadi was himself replaced by Nabil Abu Alqama, who led the Saharan Emirate until his death in a car crash in 2012. Djamel Okacha, the aforementioned leader of Katibat al-Furqan, was then promoted as the leader of the Saharan Emirate. See Roger and "Le chef d'Aqmi au Sahara meurt dans un accident de voiture," RFI, September 10, 2012.

320   Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It," pp. 62-76.

321   "The political economy of conflicts in northern Mali;" "The presence of Mauritanians in Al-Qaeda will increase as the number of Algerians shrink in the Saharan branch."

Figure 4: Undated photo of AQIM's Sahelian commanders, from left: Abdelhamid Abu Zeid (Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad), Mokhtar Belmokhtar (Katibat al-Mulathameen), Nabil Abu Alqama (third overall leader of the Saharan Emirate), Djamel Okacha (Yahya Abu al-Hammam, Katibat al-Furqan), and unknown but possibly Yahia Djouadi (likely third overall leader of the Saharan Emirate).[322]

Internal Disagreements

While AQIM expanded southward and created several new fighting groups to accommodate this shift and resultant influx of local recruits, this process was not always harmonious. Most of the internal discord among AQIM's Sahelian contingents revolved around the leadership style of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. The famed Algerian jihadi had, at various times, feuded with his comrades-in-arms—Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, Amari Saifi, Djamel Okacha, and even Abdelmalek Droukdel—over topics such as areas of responsibility and overall command in the Sahara. And when the latter sent his deputy, Mus'ab Abu Dawud, to the Sahara to mediate the disputes, he too met the ire of Belmokhtar.[323] Despite these disagreements and quarrels, however, the al-Qa`ida commanders still largely cooperated and coordinated with each other across the Sahel.

By late 2012, however, the disagreements between Belmokhtar and most other AQIM leaders had boiled over, causing Belmokhtar to leave the organization entirely.[324] At this time, Belmokhtar was the emir of Katibat al-Mulathameen, which he created in the late 1990s, and officially split from AQIM, becoming an independent group operating throughout the Sahel.[325] Despite the defection, Belmokhtar's spokesman quickly made it clear that al-Mulathameen still answered to Ayman al-

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322 Author's archive.

323 Skretting; McGregor, "Yahya Abu al-Hammam: France Eliminates Leading Saharan Jihadist."

324 Bakari Gueye, "Belmokhtar breaks away from AQIM," Magharebia, December 11, 2012.

325 Ibid.

Zawahiri and al-Qa`ida's central leadership.[326] The larger al-Mulathameen operated as an independent group for less than a year before merging with another jihadi group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, to form al-Murabitoon in 2013. This evolution will be discussed more in an upcoming section.

5.3: Creation of al-Qa`ida-Affiliated Groups Across the Sahel

While AQIM and its various new sub-units operated within the Sahel, they were by no means the only al-Qa`ida-affiliated jihadi actors in the region. For instance, three other jihadi groups emerged in the Sahel prior to the 2012 occupation of northern Mali: Ansar Dine, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, and the Group of Helpers of Muslims in Black Africa (often translated as the Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa, or simply Ansaru). All three of these organizations, though not formally (or publicly) subsumed under the AQIM hierarchy, had extensive ties to AQIM and played pivotal roles within al-Qa`ida's overall ecosystem in the Sahel. This section provides a brief background on each of these groups, and just how they facilitated al-Qa`ida's deepening push southward.

Ansar Dine and a Localized Tuareg Approach

The formation of Ansar Dine likely dates to late 2011, though the actual date of its founding remains murky. In October 2011, Tuareg notables, rebel leaders, and returning fighters from Libya met in the northern town of Zakak, Mali, which resulted in the creation of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and an outline for its vision of a free Azawad.[327] Present at that meeting was the veteran rebel Iyad Ag Ghaly, who reportedly lobbied unsuccessfully to become the overall leader of the MNLA but rejected in fear of his extreme form of Islamism, as he petitioned for a sharia-compliant Azawad, causing problems for the clan.[328] It is within this context that Ansar Dine was then created.

Alongside several Tuareg elders and former rebel leaders who were not put off by Ag Ghaly's desire for a sharia-compliant Azawad, Ag Ghaly formed his own group, Ansar Dine, sometime between November 2011 and January 2012.[329] Owing to its ties within the Ifoghas Tuareg community, Ansar Dine was able to maintain a more friendly relationship with the MNLA early in its existence, which will be discussed later. For example, several of Ansar Dine's early senior leaders were influential leaders within the Ifoghas, including Ahmada Ag Bibi, a respected elder from Abeibara; Algabass Ag Intalla, another notable and son of the Amenokal (traditional Tuareg leader) of the Ifoghas; and Cheikh Ag Aoussa, another veteran Tuareg rebel.[330] To appeal to a broader base, the group also began to provide social services and implemented a sharia-based legal system, making itself more appealing than a virtually non-existent governmental structure in the northern Kidal region of Mali.[331] Even further, Ansar Dine's local messaging prioritized the Tuareg independence struggle, which helped it gain more

326 Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda central tightened control over hostage operations," FDD's Long War Journal, January 17, 2013. Belmokhtar also created a sub-unit within Katibat al-Mulathameen, Katibat Al-Muwa'qi'un Biddam (or Those Who Sign With Blood Brigade), which perpetrated the January 2013 hostage crisis in In Amenas, Algeria, shortly after its creation. Belmokhtar again claimed that operation in the name of al-Qa`ida. See "Terrorist designation of the al-Mulathamun Battalion," U.S. Department of State, December 18, 2013; Roggio, "Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying of hostages for al Qaeda."

327 Andy Morgan, "The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali," Think Africa, 2012.

328 Ibid.

329 Tim Jan Roetman, Marie, Migeon, and Veronique Dudouet, "Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation: The case of Ansar Dine in Mali," Berghof Foundation, December 11, 2019.

330 Ibid. Most of these leaders left by January 2013 as Ansar Dine grew more openly close with al-Qa`ida. See Lydia Polgreen, "Faction Splits from Islamist Group in Northern Mali," *New York Times*, January 24, 2013.

331 Ibid.

legitimacy among the populace.[332] But as these systems expanded, especially as both the MNLA and Ansar Dine took over more territory in the north, the relationship between the two soured and resulted in open warfare.[333] By June 2012, Ansar Dine completely upended its ambivalent relationship with the MNLA and began to publicly position itself closer to AQIM and MUJAO, its other allies in the occupation. This would ultimately result in Ansar Dine taking a much stricter approach to its sharia governance, which only worked to alienate itself from the population to which it once tried to curry favor.

Exploiting Chaos in Libya

Between 2011 and 2012, the Libyan context also provided significant opportunities for AQIM to expand and bolster its reach into the Sahara and Sahel by creating further instability and a safe second rear base for the group's operations in the region. In many ways, the role of the 2011 Libyan crisis and its immediate aftermath squarely intersects with the role of the Tuaregs and their rebellions in Mali. In particular, the 2011 Libyan revolution and subsequent civil war paved the way for the 2012 Tuareg rebellion and hostile takeover of northern Mali by al-Qa`ida and its allies. At the same time, the instability inside Libya has continued to afford AQ a safe rear base for its work in the Sahara and beyond.

Libyan Tuaregs, who largely reside in the southwestern Libyan region known as the Fezzan, have existed in varying conditions within the state since Libya gained its independence from Italy in 1951.[334] But following the ascension of Muammar Qaddafi as leader following the 1969 *coup d'état* of the previous Kingdom of Libya, the Libyan state's relationship with the Tuaregs was expanded as a means to exert greater control over the Fezzan.[335] At the same time, Qaddafi incorporated Tuareg military units into the state army with the creation of his 'Islamic Legion,' an expeditionary force of Muslim fighters from around the world, in the 1970s.[336] Those Tuareg from neighboring states who volunteered to join the Legion were further promised Libyan citizenship, luring many other Tuareg from around the region, including Iyad Ag Ghaly, who fought in both Lebanon and Chad as part of the outfit.[337] As a result, many Tuareg around the Sahara viewed the Qaddafi regime in a positive light.

Following the intervention by the United States and other NATO countries to ostensibly protect civilians from Qaddafi's crackdown during the events of the Arab Spring in early 2011, Qaddafi turned to his relationship with the Tuareg and called for help. Hundreds of Tuareg in the Fezzan, Mali, and Niger answered his call.[338] According to one report, a convoy of 40 vehicles containing almost 300 Tuareg militants traveled from Kidal, Mali, to Libya to assist regime forces that month.[339] One Malian official reported that these men were offered $10,000 to join Qaddafi's forces, with an additional $1,000 each day they remained in the fight, though these numbers are unconfirmed.[340] Ultimately, this assistance did little to help Qaddafi, who was deposed and killed in October 2011.

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332 Ibid.

333 "Mali rebel groups clash over breakaway state," France 24, June 8, 2012.

334 Fransje Molenaar, Jonathan Tossell, Anna Schmauder, Rahmane Idrissa, and Rida Lyammouri, "The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger, and Libya," Clingendael, September 2019.

335 Ibid.

336 Ibid.

337 Cyril Bensimon, Madjid Zerrouky, Joan Tilouine, Nathalie Guibert, and Charlotte Bozonnet, "Iyad Ag-Ghali, l'ennemi numero un del la France au Mali," *Le Monde*, July 27, 2018.

338 Martin Vogl, "Tuaregs 'join Gaddafi's mercenaries," BBC, March 4, 2011.

339 Ibid.

340 Ibid.

Following the overthrow and death of Qaddafi,[341] however, many of these Tuareg recruits did not stay in Libya. Indeed, a significant portion of Malian Tuareg returned home and joined the newly established MNLA, a merger of two Tuareg rebel movements.[342] The MNLA was quite open about the existence of its new battle-hardened recruits from Libya, with one spokesman boasting of this fact shortly after the group's creation.[343] More importantly, these militants were armed with heavier and more sophisticated weaponry, which was taken from Qaddafi regime bases, than their Malian state counterparts.[344] And as stated in a Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture report, "the Libyan crisis only accelerated the process of disintegration and collapse of northern Mali."[345]

Ansar Dine and AQIM: Local Face

Despite the local context in which it was founded, this does not nullify Ansar Dine's close relationship with al-Qa`ida. It is this relationship, in which Ansar Dine acted as a local face for AQIM in many respects, that helped AQIM further gain a stronghold in Mali and the wider Sahel.

Much evidence exists that helps to confirm Ansar Dine's close relationship with AQIM. For example, Iyad Ag Ghaly was the uncle of none other than Hamada Ag Hama, an AQIM commander with his own sub-unit in northern Mali, though some have also reported the two are cousins.[346] Moreover, as a longtime negotiator with al-Qa`ida members in the region, Ag Ghaly had also established ties with various commanders, especially Abdelhamid Abu Zeid, one of AQIM's top commanders in the region.[347] The United Nations has further documented Ag Ghaly's relationship with Abu Zeid, finding that Zeid's Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad provided around 400,000 Euros as capital for Ag Ghaly's fledgling group.[348] Additionally, Ansar Dine's official spokesman, Sanda Ould Bouamama, a Berabiche Arab from Timbuktu, was himself a veteran fighter of the GSPC and AQIM.[349]

It is within internal AQIM documents, however, that the exact nature of the relationship between al-Qa`ida's regional branch and Ansar Dine was documented. This information was made available from documents found by The Associated Press in Timbuktu in 2013, which were then made publicly available. In one such document, AQIM's overall emir Abdelmalek Droukdel outlined just how the relationship between his men and Ansar Dine operated. For instance, Droukdel explicitly ordered a portion of his men to fight under the flag of Ansar Dine and defer to Ansar Dine's leaders.[350] Another portion of AQIM's fighters, however, would remain separate from Ansar Dine to focus on external activity.[351]

It is the portion of AQIM's soldiers told to merge under Ansar Dine's flag that remains the most contentious issue for some scholars. For instance, Alex Thurston has contended that Ansar Dine was

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341 Erin A. Neale, "Timeline: How Libya's Revolution Came Undone," Atlantic Council, February 15, 2018.

342 "A Timeline of Northern Conflict," New Humanitarian, April 5, 2012.

343 "Ex-Gaddafi Tuareg fighters boost Mali rebels," BBC, October 17, 2011.

344 Adam Nossiter, "Qaddafi's Weapons, Taken by Old Allies, Reinvigorate an Insurgent Army in Mali," *New York Times*, February 5, 2012.

345 Djallil Lounnas, "The Libyan Security Continuum: The Impact of the Libyan Crisis on the North African/Sahelian Regional System," MENARA, October 2018.

346 Andrew Lebovich, "The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6:6 (2013).

347 William Lloyd George, "The Man Who Brought the Black Flag to Timbuktu," *Foreign Policy*, October 22, 2012.

348 "Ansar Eddine," United Nations Security Council.

349 Lebovich, "The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali."

350 "Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook."

351 Ibid.

not employed as a front for AQIM.[352] Proof of AQIM's deferment to Ansar Dine also exists elsewhere, however. For example, in the aforementioned disciplinary letter from AQIM's shura council to Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the leadership council makes note that Iyad Ag Ghaly ordered Belmokhtar to coordinate with MUJAO in order to better promote unity among the jihadi factions in the region.[353] It is clear from these documents that AQIM deferred to Ansar Dine's authority, which is perhaps a reflection of its understanding of Iyad Ag Ghaly's stature in the area. The Islamic State's local Sahelian leader, Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, has also confirmed Droukdel's orders were indeed for his men to hide under the banner of Ansar Dine.[354]

Moreover, AQIM's strategy to separate different portions of its forces from under the control of Ansar Dine was meant to help prevent more Western attention to the events in northern Mali. This fits with wider trends within al-Qa`ida at the time. In 2010, for instance, Usama bin Ladin instructed al-Shabaab to hide or downplay its AQ connections to avoid additional Western scrutiny.[355] Additionally, al-Qa`ida was experimenting with a large rebranding effort around this time. This was clear when al-Qa`ida took over large swaths of territory inside Yemen in 2011 and 2012 under the name of Ansar al-Sharia.[356] As noted by the U.S. State Department, the name change was "simply Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) effort to rebrand itself, with the aim of manipulating people to join AQAP's terrorist cause."[357] Likewise, al-Qa`ida affiliates bearing the Ansar al-Sharia name also appeared inside Tunisia, Libya, and even northern Mali in 2012.[358]

Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO): Further Sahelian Empowerment

The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (or MUJAO) was another short-lived jihadi organization in the Sahel between 2011 and 2013, which, despite its brevity, had major consequences for the southward trajectory of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel. At its core, MUJAO represented a real attempt for a Sahelian al-Qa`ida group to appeal to the black Africans of the region, a population historically underrepresented in previous AQ incarnations in the region. Announcing its existence in December 2011 as a splinter of AQIM, MUJAO quickly claimed credit for the kidnapping of three aid workers from Tindouf, Algeria, on the borders of both Mauritania and Western Sahara.[359] At the same time, the group confirmed that it had indeed broken away from AQIM but assured its members and supporters that it was not hostile to its parent organization as it noted in its inaugural address: "our Muslim brothers from other katibas … we have the same goal: jihad."[360]

As previously mentioned, AQIM created its first Tuareg-majority brigade, Katibat al-Ansar, sometime in 2010. Not long after, several figures within the organization petitioned AQIM's Saharan leadership for their own brigade.[361] These members included Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, an ethnic Sahrawi from Western Sahara; Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, a Mauritanian; and Ahmed al-Tilemsi and

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352 Alex Thurston, "Ansar Dine Was Not a Front Group for AQIM," Sahelblog, August 3, 2020.

353 "Al-Qaeda Papers: A Disciplinary Letter from al-Qaida's HR Department," Associated Press. (Note: Ag Ghaly is referred to by his *kunya* in the letter, Abu al-Fadl.)

354 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Islamic State official critiques Al Qaeda in the Sahel," FDD's Long War Journal, November 13, 2020.

355 Bill Roggio, "Bin Laden told Shabaab to hide al Qaeda ties," FDD's Long War Journal, May 3, 2012.

356 Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP provides social services, implements sharia while advancing in southern Yemen," FDD's Long War Journal, February 3, 2016.

357 Thomas Joscelyn, "State Department: Ansar al Sharia an alias for AQAP," FDD's Long War Journal, October 4, 2012.

358 Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able to Do It;" Thomas Joscelyn, "Libya's Terrorist Descent: Causes and Solutions;" "Ansar al-Sharia sets up shop in Mali," Magharebia, December 14, 2012.

359 "New Qaeda spin off threatens West Africa," AFP, December 22, 2011.

360 Ibid.

361 Arroudj.

Sultan Ould Bady,[362] two Lamhar Arabs from Mali's northern Gao region.[363] It was also soon evident that these figures, all non-Algerian members of AQIM, were also representing black Africans under their command in a common goal: a Sahelian brigade not under the command of an Algerian or the dominant Tuareg of Mali's north.[364] And while the majority of MUJAO were non-Algerian fighters during its existence, it should be noted that the group did poach several Algerians away from AQIM. The personal motivations for defection by these Algerians remain unclear.

Figure 5: Screen capture from a video of one of MUJAO's constituent groups, Katibat Osama bin Laden, in 2012[365]

From its onset, it was clear that MUJAO was positioning itself as both fully ingrained within the local context and dynamics of West Africa and also as an al-Qa`ida-loyal organization. While this may seem to many as a dichotomy created between the 'local' and the 'global,' this dual identity acts as a good example of how these analytical divisions do not necessarily exist in the minds of jihadis. A jihadi group can work entirely within the 'local' but still be part of al-Qa`ida and its global campaign or strategy. That it does not plot or conduct attacks against the West does not mean that the group is not part of AQ nor that AQ's leadership does not have control over its local branches.[366]

In this regard, MUJAO's first attempt to portray itself as a local unit was to put the group within the lineage of several historical West African figures within the Fulani community. The Fula people (also known as *Peul* in French) are the largest ethnic group in West Africa and are spread throughout the

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362   Sultan Ould Bady's Katibat Salahadin would eventually leave MUJAO's ranks and join Ansar Dine. He would later join al-Murabitoon, and then later rejoin AQIM proper before defecting to the Islamic State.

363   Arroudj.

364   Ibid.

365   Author's personal archive.

366   Barak Mendelsohn and Colin Clarke, "Al-Qaeda is Being Hollowed to its Core," War on the Rocks, February 24, 2021.

region and into the Sahel. "We are the ideological descendants of Usman Dan Fodio, El Hadj Omar Tall and Amadou Cheikhou, who all fought colonial invaders," a MUJAO representative said to the camera in the group's first video in late 2011.[367] The named individuals were all leaders of Fulani empires in what is now Nigeria, Senegal, and Mali, respectively.[368] By harkening back to the revered historical leaders of the region, MUJAO attempted to gain legitimacy within the eyes of the local populations—and in particular with the Fulani. This appears to have worked to some degree as large numbers of Fula from Mali's central Mopti region were reported to have joined MUJAO in 2012.[369] MUJAO's attempted alignment with the local Fulani was further established with its Katibat (or brigade) Usman dan Fodio, which was dominated and led by black West Africans, including a Nigerien and Beninese.[370] Indeed, MUJAO boasted of its large numbers of recruits from places such as Senegal, Nigeria, and Ivory Coast.[371]

At the same time, MUJAO attempted to win favor with the Songhai of Mali's Gao region.[372] Like the Fulani, the Songhai had also historically ruled over an empire that encompassed much of West Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries. In modern times, however, the Songhai are the predominant ethnicity within Gao and within many areas along the Niger River valley.[373] Exploiting this dynamic, when MUJAO, backed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathameen, forced the Tuareg MNLA from Gao in June 2012, MUJAO attempted to use the battle to influence the Songhai.[374] A video of the event subsequently released by MUJAO clearly shows native Songhai celebrating and cheering the jihadis for driving the Tuareg militants from the city.[375] Interestingly, the video was released through MUJAO's short-lived Askia Studios, a clear reference to the Askia Dynasty that ruled the Songhai Empire at its height in the 16th century.[376]

The catering to the Songhai did not stop there, however. For instance, during MUJAO's occupation of Gao during much of 2012, it appointed a local Songhai commander, Aliou Mahamar Toure, as its Islamic police chief for the city.[377] This again was likely a calculated move to appease the Songhai base. These moves worked to attract a number of Songhai into its ranks. In August 2012, Malian media reported that as many as 40 percent of MUJAO's members were residents of Gao.[378] Moreover, MUJAO was itself forced to create an entire new brigade, which it called Katibat Ansar al-Sunnah, to

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367 "New Qaeda spin off threatens West Africa."

368 To note, El Hadj Omar Tall actually belonged to the Toucouleur people of Senegal. However, the Toucouleur are a Fula-speaking population that share in the same Fula culture and are considered a sub-group within the larger Fula ethnic grouping. However, this grouping is still debated as the Toucouleur are historically sedentary. See Marie Eve Humery, "Fula and the Ajami Writing System in the Haalpulaar Society of Fuuta Tooro (Senegal and Mauritania): A Specific 'Restricted Literacy," in *The Arabic Script in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 173-198.

369 Remi Carayol, "Mali: dans le Macina, un jihad sur fond de revolte sociale," *Jeune Afrique*, June 20, 2016.

370 "Un Beninois remplace un Nigerien a la tete d'une katiba islamiste au Mali," AFP, December 28, 2012; "'Ils n'ont rien de musulmans': un jihadiste nigerien quitte le Mujao au nord du Mali," RFI, November 9, 2012.

371 Jessica M. Huckabey, "Al-Qaeda in Mali: The Defection Connections," Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 16, 2013.

372 The Songhai are another one of the major ethnic groups in northern Mali, particularly in its Gao Region and other areas along the Niger river.

373 These conflicts, which have increased since the 1990s, have resulted in the creation of two Songhai self-defense militias, the Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso, which have enjoyed periodic support from the government in Bamako in its conflicts with the Tuareg. The Gando Iso and MUJAO also had a brief truce and cooperated to a degree until MUJAO turned on its once allies. See Andrew McGregor, "'The Sons of the Land': Tribal Challenges to the Tuareg Conquest of Northern Mali," Jamestown Foundation, April 20, 2012; Huckabey.

374 Serge Daniel, "Islamists seize north Mali town, at least 21 dead in clashes," AFP, June 27, 2012.

375 MUJAO, "Le Manifestations Contre – MNLA – A Gao 26/6/2012," Askia Studios, June 2012, author's personal archive.

376 "The empires of the Western Sudan: Songhai Empire," Met Museum, October 2000.

377 Peter Tinti, "The Jihadi from the Block," *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2013. Toure was arrested in December 2013 and was freed as part of the prisoner deal in October 2020. He has likely rejoined al-Qa`ida as he has been seen in the group's productions since his release. See "Mali's former 'Islamic police chief' goes on trial in Bamako," France 24, August 18, 2017.

378 "Mali: 40% des combattants du Mujao sont des habitants de Gao," Xinhua, August 1, 2012.

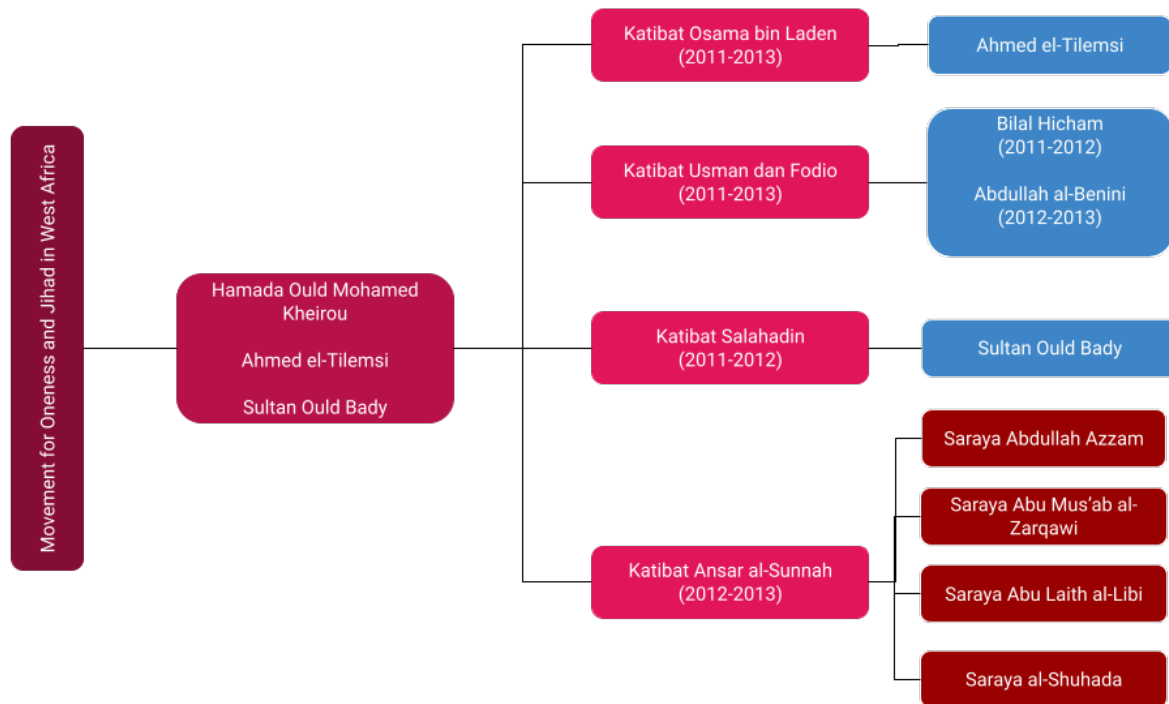accommodate the influx of Songhai by the end of 2012.[379]

Figure 6: Organizational chart of MUJAO from 2011 to early 2013. Light red indicates sub-groups of MUJAO, while darker red marks demarcate sub-units of one sub-group, and individuals listed in blue are the commanders of their associated sub-groups.

But while MUJAO attempted to promote itself within the fabric of local West African society, it also made it clear that it saw itself squarely within the al-Qa`ida fold. In its aforementioned first video in late 2011, the MUJAO spokesman also revered Usama bin Ladin and Mullah Omar alongside the historical West African leaders.[380] It also quickly created a Katibat Osama bin Laden in 2012, which was led by MUJAO co-founder Ahmed al-Tilemsi.[381] When it created Katibat Ansar al-Sunnah for its Songhai recruits, it also created four companies within the brigade named after influential al-Qa`ida leaders, including Abdullah Azzam, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and Abu Laith al-Libi.[382] Meanwhile, its propaganda releases were littered with references to and audio clips from various al-Qa`ida leaders. In statements to press outlets, MUJAO leaders also spoke highly of various AQ branches around the world. For instance, in April 2012, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou told a Mauritanian news outlet that "we subscribe to the logic of other movements: Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, al-Qa`ida in Asia, Islamic State of Iraq,[383] AQIM, and Ansar Dine."[384]

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379 "Le MUJAO annonce la creation d'une 'qatiba' (bataillion formee de Songhais," Sahara Medias, January 3, 2013.

380 "New Qaeda spin off threatens West Africa."

381 Francois Soudan, "Mali: le chef militaire du Mujao est un Malien," *Jeune Afrique*, July 27, 2012; "Le pays au nord du Mali seront notre permiere cible (Mujao)," Al Akhbar, December 2, 2012.

382 MUJAO, "Formation of the New Katibat Ansar al-Sunnah and Four Sarayyas," Al-Murabitin Foundation for Media Production, January 5, 2013, accessed at Jihadology.

383 This is the group al-Qa`ida in Iraq formed and merged into in 2006. The Islamic State of Iraq, which later became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, would eventually be kicked out of the al-Qa`ida fold in 2013.

384 "Sahel: MUJAO a la conquete des 'jeunes de 'Afrique noire," Al Akhbar, April 28, 2012.

Ansaru: AQIM's Move Deeper into West Africa

The third al-Qa`ida-linked group that emerged in the Sahel between 2011 and 2012 was Ansaru. The "Group of Helpers of Muslims in Black Africa," or Ansaru, at its height represented one of al-Qa`ida's most promising attempts to expand geographically deeper into West Africa than just Mali or Mauritania. Originally formed in January 2012 as a splinter from the group commonly referred to as 'Boko Haram,' Ansaru's history and trajectory shows a coordinated campaign between al-Qa`ida's central leadership, AQIM, and a cadre of Nigerian jihadis to foment insurgency across much of northwestern Nigeria. The group thus serves as a case study into AQIM's, and indeed al-Qa`ida's, involvement in broader West Africa and marks AQIM's 'play' of continuing to push into new theaters.

This report has described earlier outreach attempts between the GIA, GSPC, and Nigerian militants, such as the work done by Hassan Allani in the early 1990s, and the establishment of a training camp in the Algerian desert by two Nigerian jihadis, Adam Kambar and Khalid al-Barnawi. However, connections between AQIM and Nigerian militants increased following the ascension of Abubakar Shekau as emir of the group commonly referred to as Boko Haram in 2009 after the Nigerian government's infamous crackdown on what they described as the 'Nigerian Taliban' in the country's northern Bauchi State, sometimes referred to as the Maiduguri uprisings.[385] Following the death of Boko Haram's first leader, Muhammad Yusuf, Shekau and his men then retreated into the Sahel where they again linked up with AQIM's southern units, in particular Abdelhamid Abu Zeid's aforementioned Katibat Tariq ibn Ziyad in northern Mali.[386] This was made evident in several declassified internal al-Qa`ida documents recovered from bin Ladin's Pakistan compound. In one letter dated from August 2009, Abu Zeid reported the arrival of the Nigerians to his bases in Mali and petitioned Abdelmalek Droukdel for his approval in training and outfitting the men with weapons.[387]

A separate letter dated from later that month shows Droukdel communicating directly to the Nigerians about AQIM providing support for Shekau's group.[388] The AQIM leader tells Shekau he read his appeal to Abu Zeid and offers assistance in supplying weapons and training, as well as gives advice on how to open up and maintain communication between the groups.[389] Another document details that Droukdel ordered his men to send $250,000 to Shekau in order to begin his jihad inside Nigeria.[390] Yet another letter from Shekau to Ayman al-Zawahiri, which was purportedly forwarded to al-Qa`ida's central leadership by Droukdel, also documented Shekau's desire to officially merge his group into al-Qa`ida.[391] However, there is no evidence this merger ever took place.

Two years later, AQIM experimented with getting directly involved inside Nigeria. This was clear from the May 2011 kidnapping of two European engineers in Kebbi, Nigeria, which was claimed by a previously unheard-of group "al-Qa`ida in the Lands Beyond the Sahel."[392] As proposed by Jacob Zenn, however, this group was a front name used by the aforementioned Khalid al-Barnawi who undertook the operation and utilized his AQIM's connections to secure a ransom.[393] In January 2012,

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385   Mike Pflanz, "Dozens of Nigerian pro-Taliban Islamists killed after police station raid," *Telegraph*, July 26, 2009.

386   Zenn, "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria."

387   Joscelyn, "Osama bin Laden's Files."

388   "Letter from the Algerian Group, May 2009."

389   Ibid.

390   Zenn, "Demystifying al-Qaida in Nigeria."

391   Ibid.

392   Zenn, *Unmasking Boko Haram*, p. 184.

393   Ibid. This was also coordinated with Abubakar Shekau, though this operation caused some difficulty for al-Barnawi vis-à-vis AQIM as the latter did not sanction the kidnapping. However, this did not cause any break within the relationship with al-Barnawi and AQIM's Sahelian-based leaders.

a cell with the guidance and approval of AQIM's leadership led by Adam Kambar then kidnapped a German engineer in Kano.[394] Instead of using a vague front name, however, AQIM claimed that operation directly and released a proof-of-life video through its official Al-Andalus Media propaganda channel.[395]

Not long after the Kano kidnapping in January 2012, Adam Kambar, al-Barnawi, and other Boko Haram members who grew disillusioned with Abubakar Shekau's growing violence and indiscriminate killings created a breakaway faction of Boko Haram called "Group of Helpers of Muslims in Black Africa," or simply Ansaru.[396] This move was purportedly sanctioned by AQIM, which had been consulted by the Nigerians in their decision to split with Shekau.[397] It was also AQIM who allegedly told the Nigerians to use the Ansaru moniker,[398] which was likely an attempt by AQIM to hide its hand in the group's creation.[399]

Conclusion

Following the formal integration of the GSPC into al-Qa`ida's global hierarchy and rebranding as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (in January 2007), the group, between the years of 2006 and 2012, continued the trend of expanding farther into the Sahel. This was accomplished by establishing its own franchise inside Mauritania, Ansar Allah al-Murabitin (2007), which further facilitated al-Qa`ida operations in the country. AQIM also engaged in kidnapping for ransom operations (between 2009-2011), which helped it project its reach by showing how far it could reach into the Sahel. It also provided security for various smuggling operations in the region, which also allowed it to develop closer ties with Sahelian illicit networks, thereby further entrenching itself in the local fabric.

At the same time as these events, AQIM also took on an increased number of local Sahelian recruits, causing it to create local sub-units to better organize and accommodate the local Sahelians. Moreover, two splinter groups (the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and Katibat al-Mulathameen), both resulting because of internal disagreements within AQIM, emerged but continued to work and cooperate with its parent organization in the name of al-Qa`ida. Further, AQIM helped create a more pro-al-Qa`ida faction within 'Boko Haram' in Nigeria, thereby creating al-Qa`ida's first semi-official franchise in the West African country. All of these events culminated in al-Qa`ida and its allies temporarily occupying much of northern Mali between June 2012 and January 2013.

In order to better facilitate its continued southern expansion during this period (between 2006 and 2012), AQIM again utilized the tactics outlined within its "Imperial Playbook." AQIM both *befriended and created militant groups* by establishing ties with various illicit networks as part of its smuggling operations and by creating a local franchise in Mauritania and local sub-units throughout the Sahel. By establishing ties within the Sahelian illicit networks and markets, AQIM *integrated itself within the local Sahelian community fabric*. Lastly, AQIM *addressed its internal dissent* through this period passively by allowing splinter factions within its ranks to emerge but still cooperated with the splinter groups to achieve its wider objectives during the occupation of northern Mali. In doing so, all of these maneuvers later afforded al-Qa`ida and its associated groups in the Sahel the opportunity to rebuild

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394 Zenn, Unmasking Boko Haram, p. 185.

395 Ibid.

396 Ibid., p. 187.

397 Ibid., pp. 187-189.

398 Zenn and Weiss.

399 That said, in 2013, the emir of Ansaru publicly called Ayman al-Zawahiri "our good emir" and praised other AQ leaders around the world though without pledging allegiance. See Roggio, "Ansaru leader calls Zawahiri 'our good emir,' praises al Qaeda branches."

in the Sahel following the French-led intervention against it.

Part 6: Rebuilding of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel (2013-2017)

This section serves as the third and final exploration into the second major question of the report, namely: How and why did al-Qa`ida succeed in expanding so far south? Forced out of its strongholds and forced to regroup its units following the French-led intervention in northern Mali in January 2013, al-Qa`ida's rebuilding of its Sahelian-based forces directly contributed to its capacity to spread further south in western Africa. Recruiting more heavily from traditional Sahelian ethnicities resulted in the formation of new groups with new areas of operations, as well as returning to its more community-based approaches to public relations. As such, al-Qa`ida was able to better position itself to continue to expand by 2017.

Beginning with an overview of the post-2013 intervention landscape of northern Mali and decisions al-Qa`ida made to rebuild forces thus constituting its "play" of *creating new militant groups*, this report then turns to a brief look into how al-Qa`ida returned to more *community-based approaches* in the Sahel to slowly win back popular support following the harsh implementation of sharia law in northern Mali that alienated the local population. These maneuvers can be seen within the light of al-Qa`ida's plays of both *integrating itself into local communities* and *exploiting local grievances* to win support. Finally, this section then looks at how al-Qa`ida handled significant defections from its Sahelian contingents and then how it reorganized its plethora of units in the Sahel into one cohesive organization under the banner of JNIM, thereby following its play of *addressing internal dissent* in a passive, albeit organized way. This reorganization helped shift the locus of jihadi attacks southward away from northern Mali, setting the stage for today's current situation.

6.1: Al-Qa`ida's Post-Intervention Rebuilding

In January 2013, six months after al-Qa`ida's coalition captured and occupied much of northern Mali, the jihadi forces captured the central Malian town of Konna and threatened to push farther into the country's central and southern regions.[400] At the Malian government's behest, however, France intervened militarily, launching its Operation Serval.[401] In just a few weeks, French forces were able to recapture the cities and towns that had been occupied by the jihadis, which dispersed al-Qa`ida members across the Sahel.[402]

Shortly after the military intervention in northern Mali and forced away from many of its strongholds in northern Mali, al-Qa`ida members in the Sahel began a process of rebuilding and strengthening its forces. At the same time, two of its affiliated groups also launched a series of revenge attacks against French and Western targets in both Algeria and Niger. The units responsible for such operations demonstrated not only how integrated al-Qa`ida had become in the region, but also further showed al-Qa`ida's reach across the region even after losing its proto-state.

Formation of al-Murabitoon

It did not take long after the French-led intervention in Mali for al-Qa`ida-loyal militants in the Sahel to begin to rebuild its forces. For instance, in January 2013, the same month as the French intervention, jihadis loyal to the veteran Sahelian al-Qa`ida commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar stormed a gas facility

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400 "Ansar Dine Islamists seize Malian town of Konna," France 24, January 10, 2013.

401 Adam Nossiter and Eric Schmitt, "France Battling Islamists in Mali," *New York Times*, January 11, 2013.

402 "France in Mali: A year of hunting jihadists in West Africa," France 24, January 11, 2014.

in the southern Algerian desert.[403] Led by Abdul Rahman al-Nigeri, a Nigerien captain of Belmokhtar's Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade (itself a sub-unit of Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathameen), the attack left dozens of foreign hostages dead in the name of al-Qa`ida.[404] While the assault acted as a revenge attack against the French intervention, the raid also highlighted the more diverse, especially Sahelian nature of al-Qa`ida's northwestern forces with the leader of the operation a native of Niger.

The January 2013 In Amenas attack in southern Algeria was not the only attack undertaken by Belmokhtar's forces that showed the geographical reach of both al-Qa`ida members in northwestern Africa and its more Sahelian and West African composition. For instance, MUJAO and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathameen launched simultaneous suicide attacks against a Nigerien military base and a French-owned uranium mine in Agadez and Arlit, Niger, respectively, in May 2013.[405] The brazen attacks, which left at least 24 dead, again featured non-Arab fighters from greater West Africa playing large roles in the assault. For instance, a Nigerian member, identified later as Abu Ali al-Naygeri, was one of the suicide bombers used in the attacks.[406] By highlighting the diverse nature of the group's members, Katibat al-Mulathameen showed with the In Amenas hostage siege and the dual attack at Arlit and Agadez, Niger, just how far al-Qa`ida's Sahel-based forces were able to not only recruit across West Africa but how far it could strike away from its traditional bases in northern Mali.

In many ways, the May 2013 attacks in Niger additionally acted as a harbinger for Katibat al-Mulathameen and MUJAO merging just a few months later in August 2013 to form al-Murabitoon.[407] In its inaugural statement, al-Murabitoon made it clear that it was loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the overall leader of al-Qa`ida, and was led by an unnamed veteran of jihad who had previously fought in Afghanistan.[408] While not named at the time, it was eventually confirmed the leader was Abu Bakr al-Masri, an Egyptian who had actually been sent to the Sahel by al-Zawahiri to help end the previously discussed quarreling between the various AQIM leaders and Belmokhtar just a few years prior.[409]

The position of al-Murabitoon's emir, however, proved to be a tenuous one as a series of leaders were appointed between 2013 and 2015, its two years of existence as an independent jihadi group in the Sahel. Indeed, it is this quick succession of leaders that would have serious implications for not only al-Murabitoon, but al-Qa`ida's overall efforts in the Sahel. As the group's more pro-al-Qa`ida leadership

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403 Hannah Armstrong, "The In Amenas Attack in the Context of Southern Algeria's Growing Social Unrest," *CTC Sentinel* 7:2 (2014).

404 Laura Smith-Spark and Joe Sterling, "Bloody Algeria hostage crisis ends after 'final' assault, officials say," CNN, January 23, 2013; Bill Roggio, "Nigerien jihadist identified as commander of Algerian hostage operation," FDD's Long War Journal, January 18, 2013. Interestingly, the In Amenas operation was coordinated with the small Algerian jihadi group, the Sons of the Islamic Sahara Movement For Justice. Founded in 2004 in the southern regions of Algeria, the Islamic Sahara Movement was close to both AQIM commanders Abdelhamid Abu Zeid and Mokhtar Belmokhtar through its leader, Mohamed Lamine Bencheneb. At the same time, Bencheneb was also close to MUJAO and is reported to have assisted the group in several of its kidnappings across the Sahara. Conflicting reports alleged that Bencheneb's group joined either Belmokhtar's al-Mulathameen or MUJAO, but it remains unclear into which group the Islamic Sahara Movement actually merged. However, internal documents do suggest that Bencheneb was indeed on al-Mulathameen's shura council. Bencheneb was killed in the In Amenas operation, and his successor, Abdessalam Termoun, took the group out of the fold when al-Mulathameen and MUJAO merged to form al-Murabitoon in 2013. Termoun was himself killed in Libya in 2018, and it is thus unknown if the Islamic Sahara Movement remains active. See Tim Lister and Paul Cruickshank, "Sons of the Sahara – just one group in Algerian gas plant attack," CNN, January 24, 2013; "Al-Amin bin Sheneb," Al-Wasat News, January 22, 2013; and Malek Bachir, "Algerie: Termoun, de las contestation sociale a l'islamisme arme," Middle East Eye, January 11, 2018.

405 Bill Roggio, "MUJAO suicide bombers hit uranium mine, barracks in Niger," FDD's Long War Journal, May 23, 2013; "Niger: Belmokhtar aurait 'supervise lui-meme les attaques," *Le Monde*, May 24, 2013.

406 Interestingly, in a later video released by Katibat al-Mulathameen celebrating the attack, Abu Ali al-Naygeri is shown on camera clearly identifying himself as a member of Ansaru, al-Qa`ida's franchise in Nigeria that emerged as a splinter of Boko Haram. See "Epic Battles of the Fathers: The Battle of Sheikh Abdelhamid Abu Zayd," Katibat al-Mulathameen, September 2013, 30:30 timestamp. Author's personal archive; also accessible at Jihadology.

407 "Niger. Double attentat: 24 morts, un terroriste retranche," *L'Obs*, May 23, 2013.

408 Ibid.

409 Thomas Joscelyn, "Confusion surrounds West African jihadists' loyalty to Islamic State," FDD's Long War Journal, May 14, 2015.

cadres were depleted, this opened the door for more pro-Islamic State leaders to rise within the group's ranks, causing serious rifts within al-Murabitoon. After al-Masri was killed by French forces in April 2014, MUJAO co-founder Ahmed al-Tilemsi, a native Malian, took over the helm of al-Murabitoon.[410] Al-Tilemsi himself was killed at the hands of French forces in northern Mali in December 2014.[411] And in early 2015, al-Murabitoon was then split between two factions led by another MUJAO co-founder and senior leader of al-Murabitoon, Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, a native of Western Sahara, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar. As will be discussed in an upcoming section, it is this splintering within al-Murabitoon that had serious ramifications for al-Qa`ida's overall efforts in the Sahel.

Ansar Dine's Expansion

Al-Murabitoon was not the only jihadi organization that, following the French-led intervention, demonstrated how al-Qa`ida was rebuilding in the Sahel and able to project into previously untouched areas. By 2014, Ansar Dine, the predominately Tuareg jihadi group, began to expand farther across Mali rather than remaining in its traditional bases in Kidal and Timbuktu. That year, it created its Katibat Gourma, which is also known as Katibat AAA for the initials of its founder and first leader, Almansour Ag Alkassoum.[412] This unit was first developed in the northern Gao region, but later operated across the Gourma region, which expands across the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.[413] Alkassoum was killed in 2018, but his unit remains active within JNIM as of March 2022.[414]

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410 Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).

411 Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "French troops kill MUJAO founder during raid in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, December 11, 2014.

412 "Mali: sept jihadistes de la katiba du Gourma tues dans un raid de Barkhane," AFP, November 16, 2018.

413 "Communities address root causes of the crisis in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger," United Nations Sustainable Development Group, October 20, 2020.

414 Caleb Weiss, "AQIM emir confirms death of jihadist commander in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, December 12, 2018.
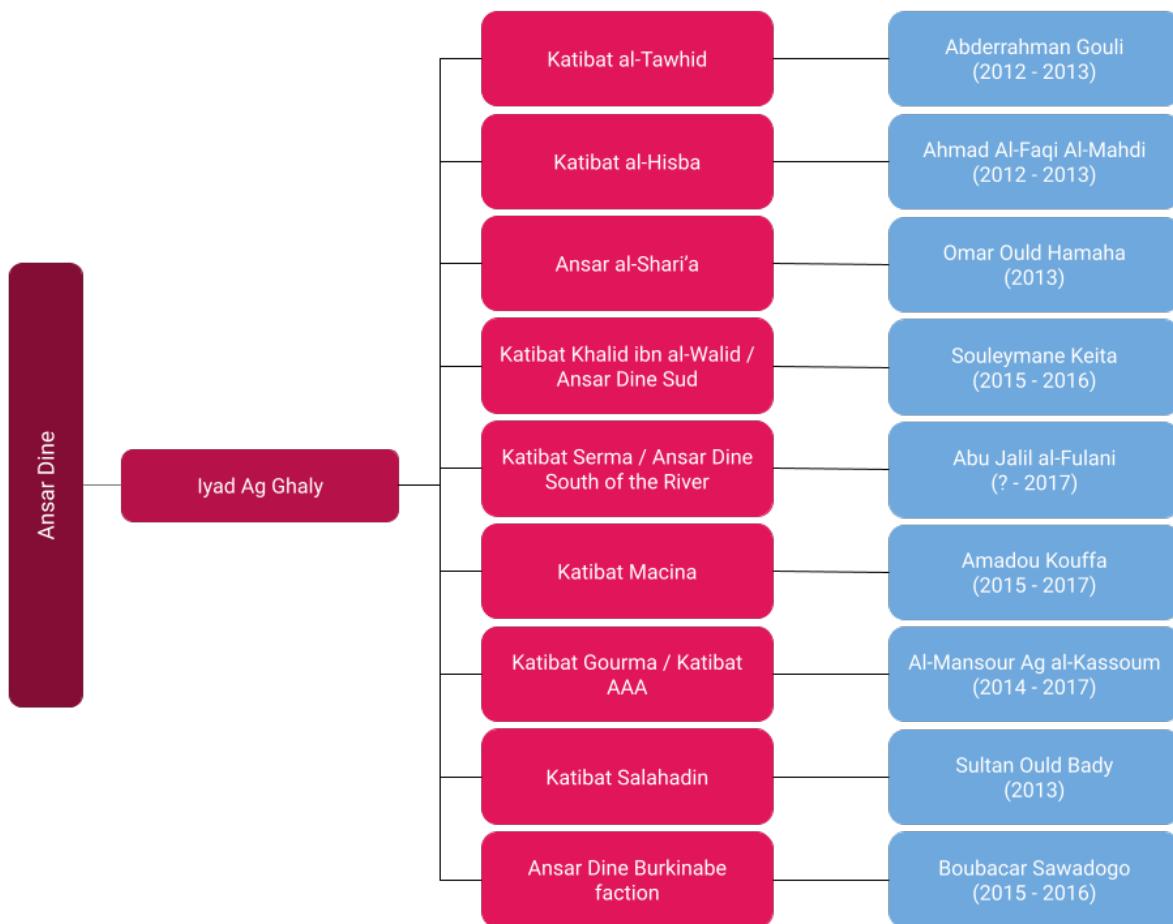
Figure 7: Organizational chart of Ansar Dine prior to the creation of JNIM in March 2017. Light red indicates sub-groups of Ansar Dine, while individuals listed in blue are the commanders of their associated sub-group.

It is in 2015, however, that Ansar Dine also expanded into central Mali. That year saw the creation of its Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid, or Ansar Dine Sud (French for south), which mainly operated in southern Mali.[415] Led by Souleymane Keita, the group conducted operations from Mali's southern Sikasso region into Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso.[416] However, this unit was short-lived as Malian authorities arrested Keita and much of his network in early 2016.[417] That said, another leader within Katibat Khalid ibn al-Walid, Boubacar Sawadogo, was able to establish a separate, albeit unnamed and short-lived, brigade inside Burkina Faso around the same time.[418] Another unit, nicknamed Katibat Serma by researcher Héni Nsaibia but also known as "Ansar Dine South of the [Niger] River," was also established in 2015 and, as of the writing of this report, still mainly operates in the eponymous Serma area between Mali and Burkina Faso.[419] Like Katibat Gourma, Katibat Serma continues to play an important role within its current formation under JNIM. Perhaps most importantly, however, 2015

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415 Héni Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency," ACLED, January 17, 2019.

416 Ibid.; Carayol.

417 "Mali captures militant Islamist leader on Mauritanian border," Reuters, March 31, 2016.

418 Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency."

419 Caleb Weiss, "France reports major security operation in central Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, April 12, 2019; Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

was also the year that Ansar Dine created its Katibat Macina (which is often erroneously called the 'Macina Liberation Front').[420] Operating in a vast stretch of territory from the borders of Senegal and Ivory Coast to the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is currently one of JNIM's most potent wings and led by Fulani ideologue and commander Amadou Kouffa. An overview of Ansar Dine and its sub-groups is provided in Figure 7.

Ansaroul Islam: Al-Qa`ida's First Group Inside Burkina Faso

When discussing al-Qa`ida's rebuilding in the Sahel after the 2013 French intervention, it is also important to briefly discuss its local Burkinabe franchise: Ansaroul Islam (AI). Officially formed in 2016, AI has acted as both al-Qa`ida's first real attempt at a socially integrated Burkinabe branch and currently as the unannounced fifth member of JNIM. As such, AI represents an important case study of how AQ has been able to move into a country that, until 2016, was left untouched by the jihadis. More broadly, it underscores the continued evolution of al-Qa`ida out of Algeria, and farther south into Sahelian West Africa.

AI was formed by Boureima Dicko (better known as Ibrahim Dicko), a radical Burkinabe imam, in the forests of central Mali in 2016.[421] Dicko had previously founded a radical Islamic sect in Burkina Faso's northern Soum region, Al-Irchad, before attempting to join Ansar Dine in 2013 but was arrested by French forces and sent back to Burkina.[422] In 2015, however, Ibrahim managed to link up with Amadou Kouffa's Katibat Macina in central Mali.[423] By this time, Ansar Dine and al-Qa`ida writ large had already been experimenting with creating a wing exclusively focused on operations within Burkina Faso.[424] Prior to the fall of the regime of Blaise Compaoré in 2014, Burkina and al-Qa`ida allegedly had a series of agreements to ward off any attacks in the country.[425] For instance, according to the International Crisis Group, the Compaoré regime provided logistical support to various armed groups, including al-Qa`ida, in return for the armed groups not attacking inside Burkina Faso.[426] Following Compaoré's ouster, however, these agreements lapsed and jihadis began looking at Burkina as fertile operational space.[427]

From there, Katibat Macina, as well as Ansar Dine's Katibat (or battalion) Serma, helped Dicko create Ansaroul Islam (AI) and provided him and his fighters with weapons, money, and extensive training to help in its goal of implementing sharia across northern Burkina Faso.[428] Al-Qa`ida's network in the Sahel was also utilized to further recruit for Ibrahim's outfit.[429] At least one military trainer belonging to AQIM's Saharan wing was also dispatched to central Mali to assist in the group's formation and training.[430] As AI became operational, it was thus quickly apparent that it used various tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) of its counterparts in al-Qa`ida in Mali. Namely, Ansar Dine and

420 Caleb Weiss, "Ansar Dine's branch in southern Mali releases first video," FDD's Long War Journal, May 18, 2016.

421 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

422 Caleb Weiss, "State Department designates Burkinabe jihadist group Ansaroul Islam," FDD's Long War Journal, February 20, 2018.

423 Ibid.

424 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

425 "Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence," International Crisis Group, March 5, 2018.

426 Ibid.

427 Ibid.

428 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso;" "Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence," International Crisis Group, February 24, 2020.

429 Ibid.; "Burkina – Mali : le jihadiste Ibrahim Malam Dicko joue à cache-cache," Jeune Afrique, April 6, 2017.

430 Morgane Le Cam, "Burkina Faso : confessions d'un ancien djihadiste," Le Monde, December 10, 2017; Héni Nsaibia, "Gondo plain is the area south of the Boni and the Hombori mountains, where al-Shinquiti would take …," Menastream, Twitter, January 6, 2018; Héni Nsaibia, "Burkina Faso: Ansaroul Islam Pledging Allegiance to the Islamic State? Maybe or Maybe not," Menasteam, April 16, 2017.

AQIM had transferred the technological know-how for IEDs to the group.[431] As such, it was Ansaroul Islam that perpetrated the first IED attack inside Burkina Faso in August 2017.[432] Ibrahim Dicko died of natural causes in late 2017 and was quickly replaced by his brother Jafar.[433]

But while al-Qa`ida in Mali was instrumental in AI's formation, the group nevertheless represented a local Burkinabe face to the jihad. As this author and Héni Nsaibia have previously outlined, the group is predominantly composed of local ethnic groups native to northern Burkina Faso, such as the Fulani and Rimaibé.[434] In explaining how AI was successful in its founding, they also outline that the founder and first emir of AI, Ibrahim Dicko, "was able to challenge long-established and prevailing hegemony of the traditional aristocracy [of northern Burkina Faso]" by his sermons and lectures in local mosques that put more focus on community equality.[435] In doing so, Dicko's speeches particularly attracted Fulani, who have historically been the focus of community stratification in Burkina Faso's north.[436] The rise in popularity of Dicko and his speeches greatly allowed AI to recruit more successfully across northern Burkina Faso, which correlated to a worsening spiral of violence in Burkina Faso, as will be discussed in a later section.

6.2: Al-Qa`ida's Rebuilding of Social Ties in the Sahel

During al-Qa`ida's rebuilding efforts, particularly in northern Mali, following the January 2013 French intervention, its forces also attempted to build back some of its public image and perception among the population it had subjugated under its harsh laws for most of the previous year. In doing so, al-Qa`ida further helped in its longevity in the region with these community outreach operations.

Dawa, which in jihadi circles is often defined as proselytizing people to the jihadis' form of Islam,[437] often manifests as public outreach, either by social or community services, or by public lectures or events. These activities have long been performed by al-Qa`ida's various branches and allies across the African continent. For instance, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia, al-Qa`ida's franchise in Tunisia, utilized *dawa* to build popular support in 2011 and 2012.[438] In 2014, at the height of Ansar al-Sharia's control over the northern city of Benghazi, Libya, the al-Qa`ida group also heavily engaged in *dawa* to improve its community relations.[439] And in Somalia, al-Shabaab, al-Qa`ida's branch in the East African country, routinely engages in *dawa* across its occupied territory in Somalia's south.[440]

Like its counterparts in North and East Africa, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb also worked to better integrate itself into the local northern Mali communities by undertaking these *dawa* activities. These efforts can be found in both al-Qa`ida's global propaganda and through local pamphlets it has periodically dispersed among its targeted communities. In terms of its outwardly focused propaganda,

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431 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso." See also a wanted list of Ansaroul Islam members released by Burkina Faso's security ministry in 2018. The wanted list outlined the close nature between al-Qa`ida members inside Mali and Ansaroul Islam, including at least one mention of the transfer of IEDs from Mali to Burkina Faso. "Liste d'individus recherches participation a une enterprise terroriste," Ministere de la Securite, June 2018.

432 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

433 Weiss, "State Department designates Burkinabe jihadist group Ansaroul Islam."

434 Ibid.

435 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

436 Ibid.

437 "From Dawa to Jihad: The Various Threats from Radical Islam to Democratic Legal Order," Dutch Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations, December 2004.

438 Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It."

439 Aaron Zelin, "When jihadists learn how to help," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2014.

440 Christopher Anzalone, "The Resilience of al-Shabaab," *CTC Sentinel* 9:4 (2016).

the group has focused on a mixture of both community relations and threats of violence. For instance, AQIM released a video in February 2014 entitled "Da'wah Caravan of the Mujahideen in the Greater Sahara," in which officials from the group are shown meeting with local elders in villages around the desert of northern Mali (presumably in Timbuktu given the use of Hassaniya Arabic by the locals[441]).[442] The video promotes the usage of *dawa*, which is one of the more popular ways that al-Qa`ida has won popular support and recruits in a post-Arab Spring environment.[443] Since the Arab Spring, AQ groups have utilized a form of *dawa* to promote its strict version of Islam by providing social services, charity, and education to locals.[444] This tactic has become a proverbial carrot to the group's more traditional stick approaches.

Dawa in Timbuktu was again featured in a 2015 production entitled "From the Depths of the Sahara." In that video, members of AQIM's Katibat al-Furqan and its emir, Talha al-Libi (or al-Mauritani or al-Berabichi), can be seen preaching to a group of Berabiche Arabs at a local festival in the town of Bou Djebeha.[445] The jihadi leader's speech was meant to shore up support from the Berabiche and other local Arabs of Timbuktu and to warn against supporting the French.[446] Locals can then be seen greeting and hugging Talha after his address, indicating some level of support from the community. It is through these events that al-Qa`ida hoped to win back popular support following its draconian occupation of northern Mali. But even more worryingly, these *dawa* activities helped further entrench the organization in the Sahel, which has only bolstered the group's longevity in the region.

6.3: Defections and Reorganization of al-Qa`ida's Sahelian Forces

By 2015, AQIM existed inside the Sahel alongside a smattering of other al-Qa`ida-loyal organizations, including Ansar Dine and its various sub-units, and al-Murabitoon. Beginning that year, however, al-Qa`ida in the Sahel faced its biggest internal divisions when a significant section of al-Murabitoon defected to the Islamic State. This competition would eventually become a large focal point between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State in the Sahel as the two organizations began to move farther into the Sahel, particularly inside Burkina Faso, and competing for local recruits.

Emergence of the Islamic State in the Sahel

As explored earlier in this report, al-Murabitoon, which began as an al-Qa`ida-loyal organization that operated independently of its parent organization AQIM (though it still cooperated with AQIM), went through a quick succession of leaders that drastically affected its overall direction between 2013 and 2015.

For instance, in May 2015 one of the co-founders of the AQIM-splinter faction MUJAO and a senior leader of al-Murabitoon, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, released an audio message in which he pledged allegiance to the Islamic State's then-emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on behalf of the group. He then continued his message by declaring the formation of a new group that is colloquially called the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).[447] This was quickly rebuffed by Mokhtar Belmokhtar,

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441　The local dialect of Arabic spoken by the Arabs of Timbuktu.

442　Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "Da'wah Caravan of the Mujahideen in the Greater Sahara," Al-Andalus Media, February 2014. However, the video was postdated, as Abdullah al-Shinqiti, who died in late 2013, is featured prominently. Author's personal archive; also available at Jihadology.

443　The use of *dawa* by al-Qa`ida in Tunisia was extensively documented in Aaron Zelin's *Your Sons are At Your Service*.

444　Zelin, "When Jihadists Learn how to Help."

445　Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "From the Depths of the Sahara," Al-Andalus Media, December 2015. Personal Archive, also available at Jihadology.

446　Ibid.

447　Joscelyn, "Confusion surrounds West African jihadists' loyalty to Islamic State."

the veteran al-Qa`ida leader who co-founded al-Murabitoon, who stated that al-Sahraoui's move was not sanctioned by the group's shura council and that only part of al-Murabitoon had defected to the Islamic State.[448] Following this, Belmokhtar became the official emir of al-Murabitoon until his purported death later that year.

Following the creation of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, al-Qa`ida members in the Sahel were not initially threatened by the nascent rival force. Indeed, Djamel Okacha, the former leader of AQIM's Saharan wing, stated in 2016 that "it is still a normal relationship and we have a connection with them [ISGS]."[449] From its creation to the later start of open warfare between JNIM and ISGS a few years later, the two groups also even maintained a plethora of liaison officials to coordinate and deconflict in various shared areas of operation.[450] These relationships, which were born of interpersonal relationships forged by fighting in the same previous groups or shared family, clan, or tribal affiliations, also allowed for the groups to conduct several joint raids and campaigns against their shared enemies across the Sahel.[451] As time went on, however, it was clear that this amicable relationship was not going to exist in perpetuity. All of these issues and differences came to a head in July 2019 when the two sides first clashed in the Burkinabe border village of Ariel.[452] Between that month and July 2020, JNIM and ISGS clashed an additional 45 times across the region, killing at least 300 members from both sides.[453] Meanwhile, between July 2020 and January 2021, the two sides have clashed an additional 80 times, killing hundreds of additional fighters.[454] These skirmishes have involved almost every JNIM sub-group and have taken place in central and northern Mali and across much of northern and eastern Burkina Faso.[455]

The officially stated reasons behind the creation of JNIM—unity and greater strength to impose governance in the territory it controls—however, were just part of the overall equation. Unofficially, JNIM's formation acted as a way for al-Qa`ida to shore up its efforts inside the Sahel in the face of a growing Islamic State franchise in the region. Ag Ghaly's Qur'anic reference in JNIM's first video is a thinly veiled nod to the need for AQ's local groups to remain unified against this threat. "Hold fast, all together," Ag Ghaly states, "by the rope which Allah stretches out for you and be not divided among yourselves."[456] Despite al-Qa`ida members in the Sahel initially taking a skeptical, but pragmatic approach to the Islamic State's local branch, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has since become one of JNIM's greatest threats.

Reconstituting al-Qa`ida's Sahelian Forces: The Rise of JNIM

As part of its rebuilding activities inside the Sahel, al-Qa`ida made a concerted effort to work toward better integration of its various groups within the Sahel into the overall AQIM hierarchy. This was accomplished by a series of mergers that saw the emergence of an AQIM sub-group, JNIM, which is predominantly composed of Sahelians and focused exclusively on the Sahel and expansion into West Africa.

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448   Caleb Weiss, "Alleged statement from Mokhtar Belmokhtar denies his group swore allegiance to the Islamic State," FDD's Long War Journal, May 15, 2015.

449   Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly."

450   Ibid.

451   Ibid.

452   Ibid.

453   Ibid.

454   Héni Nsaibia, "The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On," Instituto Per GLI Studi Di Politica Internazionale, March 3, 2021.

455   Ibid.

456   Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa."

In many ways, the consolidation of al-Qa`ida's Sahelian forces were heralded by a series of large-scale attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast. For instance, in November 2015, gunmen from al-Murabitoon and AQIM's Saharan Emirate launched a joint raid on a hotel in Bamako, Mali.[457] A month later, al-Murabitoon announced that it had officially merged into AQIM and now constituted its Katibat al-Murabitoon.[458] Then in January 2016, gunmen from the newly fledged Katibat al-Murabitoon and AQIM's Saharan Emirate perpetrated a similar joint attack on another hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.[459] And in March 2016, the two groups again conducted a joint operation on a beach resort in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast.[460] By conducting these joint operations in disparate locations across the Sahel and West Africa, the two groups not only showed the benefits of consolidation and cooperation, but that again, AQIM was able to penetrate deep into West Africa by perpetrating Ivory Coast's first jihadi terrorist attack.

The benefits of consolidation of the local Sahelian jihadi groups were again expounded upon when all al-Qa`ida groups in the Sahel merged together in March 2017. That month, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the emir of Ansar Dine, announced the creation of the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)—a merger between his Ansar Dine and its sub-units, particularly its southern Katibat Macina, al-Murabitoon, and AQIM's Saharan branch—and pledged its allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's then overall emir; Ayman al-Zawahiri, the overall emir of al-Qa`ida; and Hibatullah Akhundzada, the Afghan Taliban leader.[461]

The creation of JNIM represented the culmination of over two decades of al-Qa`ida activity in the Sahara and Sahel. Wherein this activity was initially limited to meetings with allied groups, support missions for weapons, and the creation of a southern base for its Algerian-based branch, over time the operations became more focused on local support building, recruitment, and societal integration that led to a brief jihadi-ran government in northern Mali. Though local Sahelians were involved in all of these things, these efforts were largely run by Algerians or other outsiders to the local milieu. Initial experiments in locally focused franchises were successful to varying degrees, though they lacked any ostensible unifying or cohesive structure that allowed for a uniform strategy for all of al-Qa`ida's various groups across the region. This is all but apparent following the French intervention wherein the different groups were dispersed and carved out specific territory around the Sahel. From there, each group implemented different strategies and tactics in dealing with both hostile troops and the locals within their respective areas of operation. Thus, JNIM's birth was necessitated by the practical and strategic need for al-Qa`ida to organize its efforts in the Sahel under a single banner.

This view is largely consistent with the justification given by Iyad Ag Ghaly at JNIM's founding. In the inaugural communique, Ag Ghaly stressed that the logic behind JNIM's formation was to be more consistent with al-Qa`ida's overall strategy for jihadi unification and governance.[462] This statement tracks with several developments at the time in both the Sahel and around the world. For instance, this was a common theme espoused by various al-Qa`ida branches and leaders, including Ayman al-Zawahiri and his deputies, regarding the myriad of jihadi factions inside northwestern Syria in 2016 and early 2017.[463] According to al-Zawahiri, those jihadis in Syria could not govern properly without

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457 Rukmini Callimachi and Nabih Bulos, "Mali Hotel Attackers are Tied to an Algerian Qaeda leader," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015.

458 Weiss, "Al Murabitoon, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, has reportedly rejoined AQIM …,"

459 "Burkina Faso attack: Foreigners killed at luxury hotel," BBC, January 16, 2016.

460 "Al Qaeda claims deadly Ivory Coast attack on resort," Al Jazeera, March 14, 2016.

461 Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa."

462 Ibid.

463 See Thomas Joscelyn, "Ayman al Zawahiri discusses al Qaeda's goal of building an Islamic emirate in Syria," FDD's Long War Journal, May 8, 2016; Thomas Joscelyn, "Zawahiri's deputy sought to 'unify' Syrian rebels," FDD's Long War Journal, March 3, 2017.

unity. Ag Ghaly's statement, in which he talked about 'distinguishing between times of vulnerability and empowerment,' is thus likely a reflection of al-Qa`ida's conclusion that full implementation of sharia would not be possible in areas where the jihadis did not have a firm grip on power. And without a unified command, firm territorial control itself could not be possible.

Conclusion

After the 2013 French intervention that pushed AQIM and its allies from its occupation over much of northern Mali, the various jihadi groups were forced to rebuild, both in terms of reputation following their strict rule of northern Mali and units, and territorially following the French-led intervention against them, the latter which required the consolidation and movement of units to more favorable locations. This rebuilding thus began the process of taking the locus of jihadi attacks southward, away from northern Mali. This can be seen by the attacks perpetrated by Katibat al-Mulathameen and MUJAO and their eventual merger to form al-Murabitoon in 2013. Moreover, Ansar Dine, forced out of some of its strongholds of northern Mali, created several sub-groups that allowed it to operate outside of its traditional area of operations. These included such *katibaat* (or battalions) as Katibat Gourma in 2014 and Katibat Serma near the borders with Burkina Faso, and Katibats Macina and Khalid Ibn al-Walid in central Mali, all in 2015. Additionally, these movements southward also helped in the creation of Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso, giving al-Qa`ida its first locally affiliated group in the country in 2016. And by 2017, these groups merged with AQIM's Saharan Emirate to form JNIM.

At the same time as the consolidation of forces and movement away from much of northern Mali, AQIM units that remained in areas such as Timbuktu in the wake of the French intervention had to begin the process of rebuilding their social stature among the locals. This was accomplished through the use of *dawa*, or public outreach, in which AQIM utilized public lectures, gatherings, and local messaging to improve its image among the locals. It is through these activities that al-Qa`ida has been able to maintain a strong presence, albeit more limited, in Mali's north. This tactic followed the same basic tactic of *dawa* utilized by various other al-Qa`ida groups across the African continent.

Al-Qa`ida members in the Sahel were able to accomplish these objectives by again utilizing several tactics contained within al-Qa`ida's "Imperial Playbook." For instance, AQ was able to *create new groups*, such as al-Murabitoon, Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso, and the various sub-units of Ansar Dine in central Mali. By performing *dawa* activities in remote areas of northern Mali, especially in the Timbuktu region, AQIM was especially able to *integrate itself within the local society* by regaining some of its favor lost among the locals during its harsh occupation, but also by *exploiting local grievances* to gain sympathy. For its part, al-Qa`ida's Sahelian franchises, particularly al-Murabitoon, had to *deal with defections* from its ranks in 2015 in which the new splinter group, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, was initially dealt with in a passive manner.

Part 7: Al-Qa`ida's Transformation into a Fully Sahelian Enterprise (2017-Present)

This section serves as an exploration into the third and final research question of this report: What does al-Qa`ida's past southward expansion reveal about its possible future trajectories in West Africa? Al-Qa`ida's gradual expansion over the last 30 years from Algeria to Mauritania and to Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger, and even Nigeria is a direct result of the tactics utilized by the organization over the various time periods as outlined in this report. As JNIM's violence persists unabated, it has continued to rely on the tactics, or "plays," for its historical expansion model. This reliance on tactics of success from the past now threatens the security of several littoral West African states. As one looks at the potential future of al-Qa`ida in northwestern Africa, the trajectory of the group does not bode well for the various regional states.

This section starts with a brief discussion about how JNIM exploits local communal dynamics in central and southern Mali, as well as in northern Burkina Faso; these tendencies not only contribute to its staying power in those respective areas, but also assist in its recruitment of various West African ethnicities. This section then turns to exploring just how JNIM's violence is expanding deeper into West Africa. In this regard, particular focus is paid to Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Benin. Lastly, this section also looks at the attempted rebirth of al-Qa`ida's franchise in northwestern Nigeria, Ansaru, and what that could mean for wider West Africa.

7.1: JNIM Acting as Local Politicians in Mali

JNIM and its rivals in ISGS have both largely contributed to the overall increase in violence across the Sahel and the wider expansion of the insurgency over the last four years. While initially limited to just Mali, violence attributed to jihadis has since taken place across vast swaths of territory in both Burkina Faso and Niger.

Before investigating JNIM's approach to violence, the scale of that violence bears stating forthrightly. Indeed, governments and international organizations alike have sounded the alarm of worsening jihadi violence across the Sahel. For example, the U.S. State Department noted in its "Country Reports on Terrorism" for 2019 that "Burkina Faso alone saw a 250% increase in terrorist activity from 2018 to 2019."[464] In 2020, U.S. officials from several government agencies working in the Sahel expressed concern over the rapid security deterioration.[465] Meanwhile, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies reported that 2020 was "the deadliest year of militant Islamist violence in the Sahel, with an estimated 4,250 fatalities, an increase of 60 percent from 2019."[466] And the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reported in January 2021 that the Sahelian violence had internally displaced at least two million people.[467]

Local entrenchment

Another facet that helped lead to al-Qa`ida's current moment of a full "Sahelization" has been its entrenchment within local communities, especially following the French-led intervention in 2013 and following the formation of JNIM in 2017. JNIM has been able to supplement the paucity of government institutions in large areas of the Sahel with its own by establishing various sharia courts, schools, and other local government and policing efforts within communities.[468] Indeed, this has been a key component of JNIM's strategy since its founding. As Iyad Ag Ghaly stated in a 2017 interview with AQAP's Al-Masrah newspaper, "the politics of the people is in their religion and in the establishment of sharia, starting with the rite of *Tawhid* [oneness of God] and passing through the rest of the pillars of Islam – and providing the people with the necessary needs such as security, livelihood, electricity, water, medicine, and the like as much as possible."[469] As stated by researcher Troels Henningsen, "JNIM has been increasingly able to implement a comprehensive strategy to shape power brokers and social networks, which has allowed JNIM to strengthen their horizontal ties across ethnic, social, and economic fault lines. The strategy includes political, violent, and information lines of effort to create a governance structure in parts of Mali, and later Burkina Faso."[470]

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464 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," U.S. Department of State, June 2020.

465 Sirwan Kajjo, "US Officials Concerned About Rising Violence in Africa's Sahel," VOA News, March 11, 2020.

466 "Islamic State in the Greater Sahara Expanding its Threat and Reach in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020.

467 "Sahel internal displacement tops 2 million as violence surges," UNHCR, January 22, 2021.

468 Ibid.

469 Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, Al-Masrah No. 45, April 2017, accessed at Jihadology.

470 Henningsen.

But while many propaganda videos have focused on *dawa* or other aspects of community relations, others have been more about order and control through threats of violence. In the same address that AQIM Sahelian commander Djamel Okacha celebrated the Berabiche Arabs in 2018, he in turn threatened other communities of northern Mali against supporting the local Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC).[471] The MOC, created by the Algiers Peace Accords in 2015 that the Malian government signed alongside various Tuareg groups and officially deployed in 2018, is the legal body responsible for organizing joint patrols between the Malian military and the myriad of armed groups in northern Mali.[472] Though the MOC has struggled to actually work as intended in preventing clashes between the various non-jihadi militant groups of northern Mali, al-Qa`ida made it a point to target the MOC as it represented a significant threat to the social order it was attempting to create. For example, in January 2017, AQ conducted a massive suicide bombing on an MOC base in Gao, Mali, which left dozens of people dead and significantly delayed the mechanism's progress.[473]

Exploiting Ethnic Tensions in Mali and Burkina Faso

Similar to its activities across northern Mali, such as in Timbuktu, Kidal, and Gao, JNIM has played a complicated game within Mali's central regions of Mopti and Segou. As JNIM, and in particular its ethnic Fulani-majority Katibat Macina, has expanded across central Mali, the jihadi group has exacerbated ethnic tensions and local politics, which have boiled over into even greater conflict in the region.[474]

The United Nations and independent agencies such as Human Rights Watch have long documented the rise in ethnic conflict inside central Mali since JNIM's Katibat Macina was founded in 2015.[475] These conflicts have typically involved members of central Mali's main ethnic groups, the Fulani, Bambara, and Dogon. In each case, the observers note that this conflict began from and was exacerbated by "extremist armed groups."[476] In particular, the majority of this ethnic strife has been between Fulani herders, traditional hunters from ethnic Bambara communities, and ethnic Dogon farmers.[477] Not long after JNIM was founded in March 2017, JNIM took explicit responsibility for attacking Dozos who were raiding a Fulani camp.[478] In doing so, this marked the first time the group has waded into ethnic conflict.

Since then, JNIM has continuously placed itself in the middle of this tension. Within a span of three days in July 2018, the United Nations documented five cases in which JNIM took part in explicitly ethnically oriented communal violence against Bambara or Dogon people near Djenne or Koro in Mali's central Mopti region.[479] For its part, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has also long documented JNIM's role in stoking the flames of these tensions and directly taking part in skirmishes alongside Fulani self-defense groups.[480]

471　Caleb Weiss, "JNIM official warns competing militia groups in northern Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, October 24, 2018.

472　Ibid.

473　Caleb Weiss, "AQIM claims massive suicide attack on Malian base," FDD's Long War Journal, January 18, 2017.

474　Esha Sarai, "Ethnic conflicts in Mali Exacerbated by Extremist Presence," VOA News, June 14, 2019.

475　"Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali;" Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation of communal violence in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, July 17, 2018.

476　"Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali;" Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation of communal violence in Mali."

477　"Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali;" Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist Exploitation of communal violence in Mali."

478　Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda entity involved in communal violence in central Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, March 27, 2017.

479　Ibid.

480　"Mali: Spate of Killings by Armed Groups," Human Rights Watch, April 5, 2017.

This phenomenon of al-Qa`ida's exploitation of ethnic tensions, however, has not been exclusive to central Mali. Inside northern Burkina Faso, self-defense militias and government-supported volunteers have become more commonplace in the fight against JNIM.[481] The self-defense militias, known as the Koglweogo, and the state-backed volunteer forces, or the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP), have perpetrated their own fair share of massacres in the name of combating jihadis.[482] Showing its double-speak between its messaging and actions, JNIM has also portrayed itself as a shield from these Burkinabe government-empowered ragtag militias. In essence, for many communities within the Sahel, JNIM has thus at times either posited itself as an instigator of violence in favor of a specific community or a community defense force for another specific community.

Al-Qa`ida as Peace Enforcers

As these conflicts have continued and violence expanded, however, JNIM has since taken on a seemingly counterintuitive role in many local communities: peace enforcers. Since at least 2018, the jihadi group has organized, participated in, or brokered dozens of peace deals between Fulani, Bambara, and Dogon communities or with the Dogon self-defense militia, Dan Nan Ambassagou, Dozos, and various Fulani militias.[483] But these efforts are not always reached peacefully. For instance, JNIM has often surrounded the Dogon's fields and "threaten[ed] to attack them if they enter, and by setting up roadblocks to prevent Dogon villages from accessing food supplies."[484] This same tactic has also been enacted on Bambara communities, such as the months-long siege of the central Malian village of Farabougou in late 2020.[485]

By 2020, JNIM's unofficial media channels on WhatsApp were awash with videos from these law-and-order efforts. For example, the group published at least three videos from these meetings throughout the month of July that year. In each video, a JNIM figure clearly lays out the group's agenda for its peace deals. According to the Danish Institute of International Studies, JNIM's agreements in these deals are usually fairly similar: "the jihadists set several conditions to allow farming, logging and herding, namely: to expel Dan Nan Ambassagou; a ban on arms; introduction of sharia-based family laws and taxes; a ban on any contact with the Malian state and army; and respect for customary agreements governing the use of land and resources."[486] Showing the importance JNIM has placed on these efforts, many of these negotiations are handled by senior leaders within the group, including the emir of Katibat Macina, Amadou Kouffa, and Iyad Ag Ghaly himself.[487]

But as the Bambara and many Dogon people are also Muslim, JNIM has made sure to capitalize on the larger anti-government mentality within both communities rather than the explicit violence itself as this has helped it recruit new members into its ranks from these additional communities.[488] As reported by Reuters on these peace deals, "the militants told villagers their problem was with the government, not civilians, according to the officials. Feeling defenseless, villagers embraced the

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481 Romane Da Cunha Dupuy and Tanguy Quidelleur, "Self Defense Movements in Burkina Faso: Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups," Noria Research, November 2018; Sam Mednick, "In Burkina Faso, arming civilians to fight jihadists. What could go wrong?" New Humanitarian, March 9, 2020.

482 "Burkina Faso: Witness testimony confirms armed group perpetrated mass killings," Amnesty International, March 20, 2020; Anna Schmauder and Annabelle Willeme, "The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland," Clingendael, March 9, 2021.

483 Boubacar Ba and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, "When jihadists broker peace," Danish Institute for International Studies, January 20, 2021.

484 Ibid.

485 "Mali soldiers air drop provisions to village besieged by suspected jihadists," Reuters, October 20, 2020.

486 Ba and Cold-Ravnkilde.

487 "Dans le couliesses de l'accord Niono au Mali," RFI, April 12, 2021.

488 Aaron Ross, "Where state is weak, Mali militants broker talks between rival clans," Reuters, August 28, 2020.

peace offering."[489] For instance, one of the top commanders for al-Qa`ida in central Mali is himself a Dogon.[490] Moreover, one of the group's top ideologues who was killed alongside AQIM's overall emir Abdelmalek Droukdel in June 2020 was also a Dogon.[491]

In doing so, JNIM has also placed itself in a position to provide governance for these communities. As documented by Edoardo Baldaro, "Katibat Macina started to act as the central political and administrative authority in the area. By mixing sharia-based and traditional forms of rule and management, the group has built a veritable jihadi system of governance, with the more or less voluntary support of local traditional authorities."[492] He goes on to state that "the group now administers justice; regulates social behaviors and the access to and exploitation of the land; delivers essential services; and collects taxes through the imposition of the zakat [alms giving]."[493]

This has not only contributed to JNIM's staying power in central Mali, but by tapping into more localized dynamics that have allowed it to recruit more heavily among more traditionally West African ethnicities, this has allowed JNIM better opportunities at further geographical expansion. This expansion deeper into West Africa, which is predicated upon JNIM's more localized approach to the region's varying ethnic and communal dynamics, is discussed in the following section.

7.2: Al-Qa`ida's Expansion Beyond the Sahel into Broader West Africa

JNIM's consolidation of power and expansion of violence inside Mali is just part of al-Qa`ida's overall regional growth, as its allies in Burkina Faso have also continued to kill and rampage across significant swaths of territory in the country. At the same time, AQ's Nigerian franchise, Ansaru, has officially restarted its operations, threatening to further exacerbate the localized violence plaguing northwestern Nigeria. And lastly, JNIM itself has drastically pushed into littoral West Africa, particularly Ivory Coast and Benin.

Ansaroul Islam and Expanding Violence in Burkina Faso

Ansaroul Islam, al-Qa`ida's local affiliate inside Burkina Faso, has continued its rampage across most of northern Burkina, attacking local officials, churches, towns, and even schools.[494] By February 2018, AI had caused tens of thousands of people to be internally displaced while many more became refugees fleeing to Mali.[495] Indeed, by 2018, both Ansaroul Islam and JNIM shared the blame for most of the violence inside Burkina Faso accounting for the majority of that year's documented 200 jihadi attacks in the country.[496] State responses to the violence were also heavy-handed and continued the cycle of violence by pushing more people into joining AI's cause.[497]

In more recent years, however, AI has suffered many setbacks from its rivals in the Islamic State. For instance, segments of AI in Burkina's Centre-Nord region, Seno Province, and other areas of Soum

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489 Ibid.

490 "Mali: Oumar Ongoiba, le nouveau visage dogon des djihadistes liés à Al Qaida dans le centre," *Nordsud Journal*, April 24, 2020.

491 Wassim Nasr, "Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership," Newlines Institute, February 8, 2021.

492 Edoardo Baldaro, "Violence, Dysfunctional States, and the Rise of Jihadi Governance in the Sahel," Italian Institute for International Political Studies, March 3, 2021.

493 Ibid.

494 Birgit Schwarz, "Witness: Waging War on Burkina Faso's Schools," Human Rights Watch, May 26, 2020.

495 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

496 Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency."

497 Nsaibia and Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso."

Province defected to ISGS in 2018.[498] These defections have likely affected AI's ability to operate more autonomously, as in the Islamic State's telling of clashes with the group openly identifies AI as part of JNIM.[499] Many observers have thus questioned AI's current abilities and status.[500] JNIM still claims a significant number of attacks inside northern Burkina Faso, but it does not delineate which of its sub-groups, including AI, carries out specific attacks. As a result, it is unclear how many operations are undertaken by AI exclusively and how many are perpetrated by other JNIM sub-groups.

Resurgent Ansaru and Potential Attempt at a Revival

It is also important to look at the potential rebirth of Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria in the context of the wider escalating violence across the Sahel since 2017. This resurgence also co-exists at a time when communal and criminal violence inside northwest Nigeria has risen exponentially over the last two years.[501] These two events present al-Qa`ida with a unique opportunity to potentially revitalize its Nigerian operations in order to create a contiguous battlefield with its upper Sahelian-based outfits. As this author and Jacob Zenn have articulated, the potential rebirth of Ansaru in northwestern Nigeria, which has been assisted, in part, by JNIM in the Sahel, has the potential to create an 'arc of insurgency' across much of greater West Africa, in that al-Qa`ida-loyal militants would be active from Mali to Nigeria.[502]

Since Ansaru entered a state of dormancy around 2015, northwestern Nigeria has become a bastion of banditry and communal violence.[503] The bandits, operating from Nigeria's Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, and Niger states, have been responsible for many of the northwest's deadliest attacks.[504] Local researchers have found that many of these armed bandit gangs, as of 2020, are comprised of ethnic Fulani who have engaged in various violent crimes, as well as cattle-rustling across Nigeria's northwest.[505]

Within this context, Ansaru is attempting to exploit several conditions inside the northwest and the wider Sahel to mount its comeback inside Nigeria. First, it has tried to blur the lines between general banditry and jihadi attacks. Nigerian journalist and researcher, Idris Mohammed, who has covered the growing instability across northern Nigeria with a focus on Ansaru, found that Ansaru has often provided weapons or manpower to the armed gangs in many of these attacks.[506] Yusuf Anka, another Nigerian journalist focusing on armed banditry in the northwest, also found that Ansaru was mixing with bandit leaders.[507]

This phenomenon is what researcher Héni Nsaibia has dubbed the "jihadization of banditry," wherein

498 Ibid.

499 Ibid.

500 Pauline Le Roux, "Ansaroul Islam: The Rise and Decline of a Militant Islamist Group in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 29, 2019.

501 Lisa Schlein, "Thousands Flee Violence in Northwestern Nigeria for Safety in Niger," Voice of America, March 2, 2021; Wuraola Solomon and Ebun Afolabi, "Escalating Violence in Northern Nigeria," Africa Portal, September 29, 2020.

502 Zenn and Weiss.

503 Nkasi Wodu, "Not All Violent Problems Require Violent Solutions: Banditry in Nigeria's North-West," Council on Foreign Relations, July 23, 2020.

504 Ibid.

505 "Addressing Armed Banditry in the North-West Region of Nigeria: Exploring the Potentials of a Multi-Dimensional Conflict Management Approach," West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2020.

506 Zenn and Weiss.

507 Yusuf Anka, "Jihadis Gaining Grounds in Nigeria's NorthWest," HumAngle, May 19, 2020.

jihadi organizations have often transformed local bandit or criminal networks into allied groups.[508] While this represents a long occurring phenomenon between criminals and jihadis, in recent years this has become especially relevant for Katibat Macina in Mali and Burkina Faso, which has been able to utilize Fulani gangs as auxiliary forces across those two states.[509] One consequence of this strategy is that it is incredibly difficult to distinguish Ansaru's operations from normal bandits or other criminal organizations. While this is likely a conscious choice by Ansaru to hide the true extent of its activities in order to not draw more international attention to it, it makes it challenging to document via open source Ansaru's attacks or other operations. It should be noted that local researchers investigating this exact phenomenon in northwestern Nigeria have found that local bandits have largely not been subsumed under Ansaru or other jihadis' operations, instead either existing in some form of mutual cooperation or antagonism.[510] This report does not argue Ansaru will fully subsume bandits, but rather utilize some bandit groups for its own gains.

Secondly, Ansaru, like its al-Qa`ida allies elsewhere in the Sahel, has been trying to also weaponize Fulani grievances. Much like with the armed gangs, Ansaru has also facilitated and maintained relationships with the larger Fulani communities of the northwest.[511] As a result, the jihadi group has been able to use these connections for recruitment and to grow a support base needed for this attempted comeback. In this regard, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has found that Ansaru "deployed clerics to discredit democratic rule and the state government's peace efforts, a 'hearts and minds' campaign aimed at winning support from rural communities."[512] These hearts and minds campaigns are common among jihadi groups and are part of wider ideological activity labeled under *dawa*, or proselytization efforts, to bring local community under the jihadis' strict form of Islam.

These efforts largely conform to al-Qa`ida's overall *modus operandi*. Moreover, the *dawa*-based approaches being used by Ansaru in northwest Nigeria mirror similar efforts conducted by al-Qa`ida groups in the wider Sahel and North Africa.[513] This approach has even been broadcast by the group itself in its first ever Fulfulde-language (the language of the Fulani across West Africa) audio message released in May 2019.[514] That production featured a spokesman for the group calling on the Fulani of northwestern Nigeria to support Ansaru and its efforts against the state, while lecturing about various religious aspects of the fight.[515]

To be clear, Ansaru's revival has been undertaken under al-Qa`ida's banner, as advertised by the group itself and al-Qa`ida's various outlets. Since its public resurgence in late 2019, a series of claims of responsibility have been issued by various al-Qa`ida outlets on behalf of Ansaru. For instance, Ansaru said it was responsible for a January 2020 ambush on the convoy of the Emir of Potiskum of Nigeria's Yobe State as he was traveling through Nigeria's northwestern state of Kaduna.[516] A month later, the

508 Héni Nsaibia, "In Light of the Kafolo Attack: The Jihadi Militant Threat in Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast Borderlands," Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 24, 2020.

509 Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency."

510 James Barnett, Murtala Ahmed Rufa`i, and Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, "Northwestern Nigeria: A Jihadization of Banditry, or a 'Banditization' of Jihad?" *CTC Sentinel* 15:1 (2022).

511 Zenn and Weiss.

512 "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem," Africa Report No. 288, International Crisis Group, May 18, 2020.

513 Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It;" Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, May 2013; Ross. See also al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "From the Depths of the Sahara," Al-Andalus, December 2015; al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, "The Dawah Convoy of the Mujahideen in the Greater Sahara," Al-Andalus, February 2014.

514 Abdulbasit Kassim, "In addition to its 1st Fulfude message, #Ansaru released more messages ...," Twitter, May 25, 2019.

515 Ibid.

516 Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru publicly returns to Nigeria," FDD's Long War Journal, January 17, 2020.

group said it repelled a Nigerian military offensive against it.[517] Both claims were issued by al-Qa`ida's Al-Hijrah Media, an outlet that issued claims for various AQ branches and allies globally. Its third and last official claim of responsibility, in which it said it killed "25 apostates" in Kaduna in August 2020, was issued by AQ's Thabat News, a rival outlet to the Islamic State's Amaq News Agency that operated in the same capacity as Amaq News.[518]

Moreover, media produced by the group itself has documented Ansaru's clear ideological affinity to the global jihadi organization. For instance, in November 2021 a video from the group surfaced online featuring more traditional al-Qa`ida imagery in which clips of Usama bin Ladin, the September 11 attacks, and visual eulogies for several dead al-Qa`ida leaders were shown.[519] And in December 2021, another video was released online in which Ansaru publicly congratulated the Afghan Taliban for its capture of Afghanistan. This statement, which was released months after it was produced, followed similar statements released by other al-Qa`ida branches and franchises.[520]

These propaganda links culminated in the group openly professing its allegiance to al-Qa`ida. In early January 2022, Ansaru released a statement online, which was promoted by various al-Qa`ida accounts on Telegram, in which it confirmed it had sworn *bay`a* to AQIM at some point in 2020.[521] While AQIM has not yet confirmed the group's loyalty as of the time of publishing this report, other al-Qa`ida-linked entities have. On January 14, 2022, al-Qa`ida's Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), a centralized media clearinghouse for various AQ branches and allies, announced it is the exclusive publisher for all future Ansaru productions.[522] In the same statement, the GIMF also confirmed Ansaru's *bay`a* to AQIM. It remains to be seen, however, if al-Qa`ida's central leadership or AQIM will publicly announce Ansaru into its hierarchy. It is possible, if not likely, the formal process of accepting the group into AQIM's hierarchy has already occurred behind closed doors.

As the jihadi violence continues to push farther south into both Burkina Faso and Niger, this has allowed Ansaru to utilize connections with JNIM. For example, the ICG has also found evidence of JNIM supplying Ansaru with weapons captured from military raids across the Sahel.[523] A rising Ansaru thus fits into AQ's broader agenda for the Sahel and West Africa. Violence perpetrated by JNIM continues to expand out of Mali and into its neighboring states.[524] At the same time, Ansaru has been involved with rising violence in northwestern Nigeria. Ties between JNIM and Ansaru have already been documented by organizations working on the ground such as the ICG, as well as local journalists, but as Ansaru continues to grow and expand in Nigeria, it is possible its long-term goals exist in trying to integrate its insurgency into a contiguous theater for al-Qa`ida in West Africa.

Expansion of Violence into Littoral West Africa

Compounding Ansaru's involvement in violence taking place inside northwestern Nigeria, not far from the borders of Niger and Benin, JNIM inside Burkina Faso has continued to push southward into littoral West Africa. As such, the concept of an "arc of instability," in which jihadi violence rampages

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517   Caleb Weiss, "Nigeria claims to have killed 250 Ansaru members in Kaduna state …," Twitter, February 6, 2020.

518   Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda-linked group claims attack in northwestern Nigeria," FDD's Long War Journal, August 8, 2020.

519   Caleb Weiss, "Ansaru congratulates the Taliban in Afghanistan, promotes Al Qaeda ties," FDD's Long War Journal, December 20, 2021.

520   Ibid.

521   Weiss, "Ansaru reaffirms its allegiance to al Qaeda."

522   Aaron Zelin, "Ansaru being formalized into AQ's media system after they publicly announced …," Twitter, January 14, 2022.

523   "Violence in Nigeria's North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem."

524   Nsaibia, "In Light of the Kafolo Attack;" Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency;" Nsaibia and Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly."

from Mali to Nigeria across West Africa, threatens to be a reality.

When this violence is mapped out, al-Qa`ida's significant expansion into broader West Africa becomes that much clearer. In this regard, this author compiled data on all al-Qa`ida-linked violence from 2014-2018 for FDD's Long War Journal, compiling attacks from AQIM, Ansar Dine (and its various sub-groups), al-Murabitoon, and Ansaroul Islam (Figure 8). Additionally, this author also utilized data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) to accommodate missing attack entries from 2013 and 2018-2021 across both the Sahel and wider West Africa, beginning in 2013 to account for the French-led intervention in Mali.[525] In addition to the aforementioned groups above, ACLED data was also utilized to accommodate attacks from Ansaru and JNIM and its various sub-groups. This data shows a stark deterioration in the overall security of the Sahel from 2013-2021 that has seeped deeper into littoral West Africa.
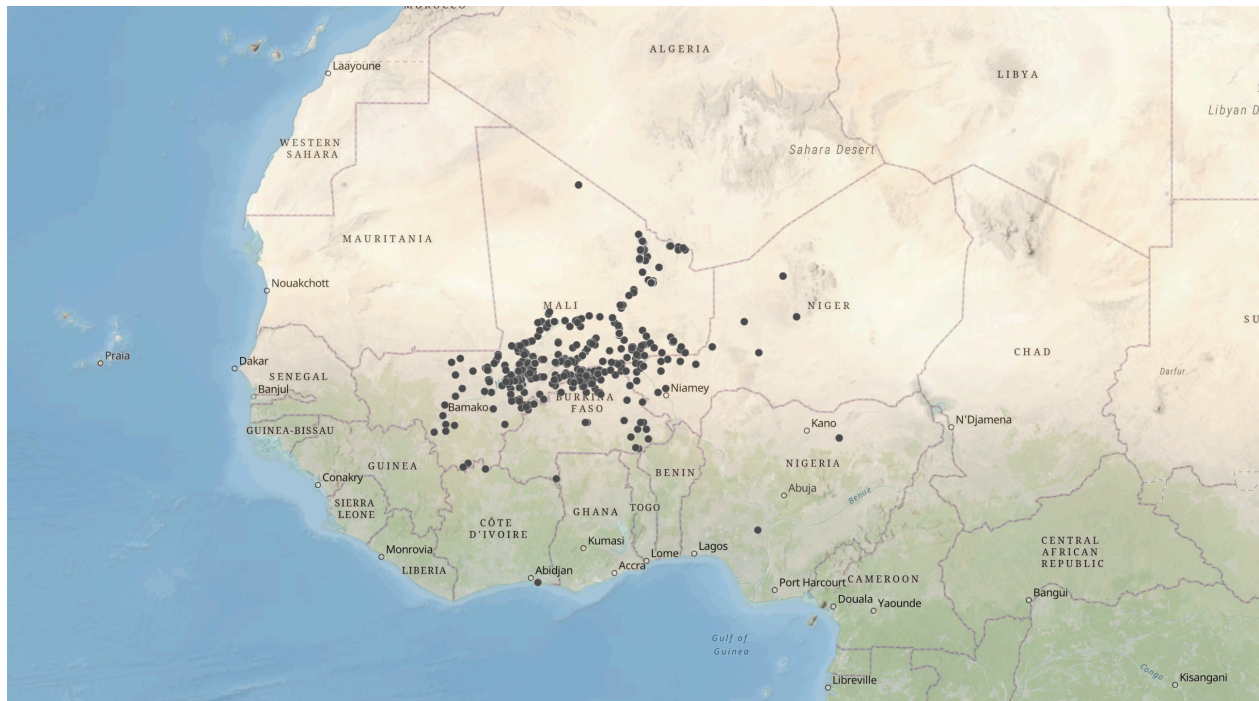

Figure 8: Jihadi attacks in the Sahel and West Africa from 2013 (the year of the French-led intervention in Mali) to March 2017 before the creation of JNIM (Sources: FDD's Long War Journal, ACLED)

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525   FDD's Long War Journal dataset, containing over 600 incidents, utilized open-source reporting from local media outlets, reporters, activists, international observers, and from the jihadis themselves. This datasheet was supplemented with additional data from ACLED on attacks from AQIM, JNIM, al-Murabitoon, Ansaru, and Ansar Dine (and its various sub-units).
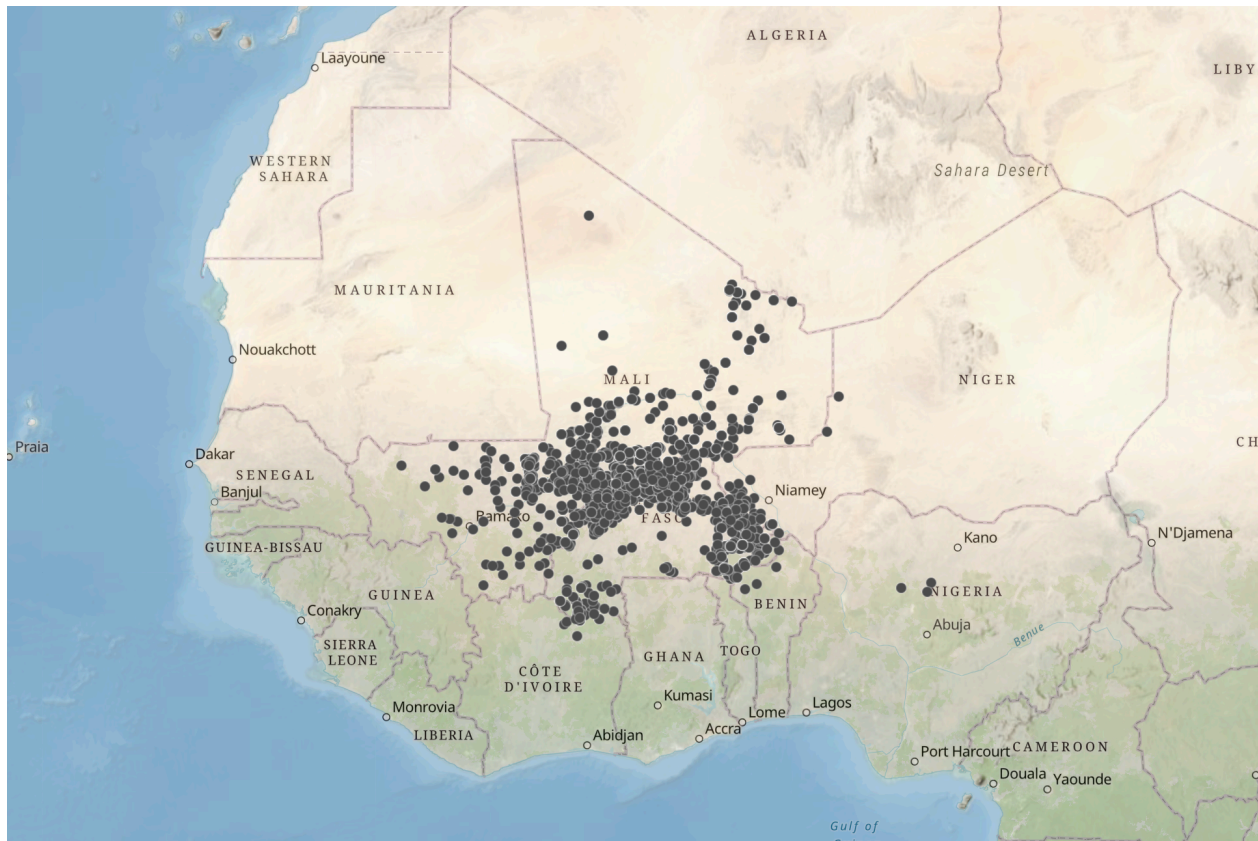
Figure 9: Jihadi attacks in the Sahel and West Africa from March 2017 (the year of JNIM's creation) to December 2021 (Sources: FDD's Long War Journal, ACLED)

More recently, however, jihadi violence emanating from Burkina Faso has crept closer to the littoral West African states and is now threatening countries like Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin. All three countries have now witnessed attacks perpetrated by militants linked or belonging to JNIM, creating more regional fears around the group's growth and expansion.

Looking first at the Ivory Coast, the country, which saw its first jihadi terrorist attack in March 2016 in the aforementioned attack at Grand Bassam, has since transformed into one of a threatening insurgency rather than of one-off, high-profile attacks. For instance, militants belonging to JNIM's Katibat Macina were reported to be living in Ivory Coast's northeastern regions within the Comoe National Park in May 2020.[526] That month, a joint Ivorian-Burkinabe operation was also launched to uproot the jihadis from the park.[527] According to *Jeune Afrique*, the Comoe National Park had been used by Katibat Macina as a refuge, rear base, and transit route for quite some time prior to the operation.[528] A month later, Katibat Macina retaliated by targeting an Ivorian military base near the northern town of Kafolo, killing at least 10 soldiers.[529] Jihadi militants then went quiet in Ivory Coast until early 2021. Since January 2021, suspected militants from Katibat Macina have struck at least 12 additional times (as well as two thwarted bombings, including a car bombing) in northern Ivory

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526 "Burkina Faso-Cote D'Ivoire: Les secrets de l'operation antieerroriste 'Comoe,'" *Jeune Afrique*, June 10, 2020.

527 Baudelaire Mieu and Katarina Hoije, "Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso Raze Jihadist Camp Near Border," Bloomberg News, May 24, 2020; "Un premiere operation antidjihadiste conjointe entre le Burkina Faso et la Cote D'Ivoire," *Ouest-France*, May 24, 2020.

528 Ibid.

529 Weiss, "Jihadists target military outpost in Ivory Coast."

Coast, representing a significant increase in activity.[530]

Worrying still, Katibat Macina has seemingly begun to transfer tactics used in both Mali and Burkina Faso into northern Ivory Coast. Since April 2021, Ivory Coast has reported at least four improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in the country's north and with an additional two attempted bombings (one of which allegedly was a rudimentary car bomb).[531] On April 1, for example, a civilian vehicle struck an IED near Kafolo in the Savanes district.[532] Meanwhile, on April 12, an Ivorian gendarme vehicle struck another IED just south of Kafolo.[533] On May 3, an IED failed to explode on a security patrol in Bole in the Zanzan district.[534] A fourth IED was detonated on Ivorian troops near Kafolo on May 26, though no one was injured.[535] On June 12, an IED killed one Ivorian soldier and two gendarmes near Tehini in the Zanzan district.[536] And on July 16, Ivorian troops destroyed a VBIED (vehicle-borne improvised explosive device) in the Savanes region, documenting the first such instance of militants using car bombs.[537] This trend is disturbingly similar to the situations in both Burkina Faso and Niger wherein a slow trickle of initial IEDs eventually gave way to larger and more frequent attacks.[538] The fact that IEDs, including car bombs, are becoming an increasing threat in northern Ivory Coast does not bode well for the country's trajectory in dealing with a fledgling insurgency.

Even further, Katibat Macina has also been able to penetrate northern Benin. The littoral West African country first fell victim to a jihadi attack in May 2019 when militants belonging to or working for Katibat Macina kidnapped two French tourists and killed their Beninese guide in Benin's Pendjari Park.[539] In February 2020, one Beninese police officer was killed by suspected Katibat Macina militants when a police station in Benin's Parc W, another nature reserve in the country's north, fell under attack.[540] It was 2021, however, that jihadi attacks inside northern Benin escalated. According to data compiled by this author, northern Benin fell victim to at least six jihadi attacks last year. All assaults took place inside Benin's northern Alibori and Atakora Departments, including the country's first recorded IED in December 2021.[541] The violence, which is largely emanating from Katibat Macina in Burkina Faso and exacerbated by local conditions, does not appear to be abating.[542] In the first week of 2022, at least two Beninese soldiers were killed after their vehicle hit an IED in the country's north.[543] And between February 8 and February 10, 2022, at least nine people were killed in three additional

530   Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Ivory Coast Witnesses Surge in Jihadist Activity," FDD's Long War Journal, June 16, 2021.

531   According to data kept by this author; "L'armée ivoirienne fait exploser un véhicule de type 4x4 piégé dans le nord du pays," IvoirTV, July 16, 2021.

532   Sahel Security Alerts, "#Cote_d_Ivoire #Kafolo: dans la matinee du 01.04.2021, un véhicule transportant des civils …," Twitter, April 1, 2021.

533   Sahel Security Alerts, "#Cote_d_Ivoire #Kafolo: selon infos rapportees, un vehicule de Gendarmerie a saute sur …" Twitter, April 12, 2021.

534   "Terrorisme – Menace djihadiste: Du nouveau sur la derniere attaque de Kafolo, comment des jeunes locaux on tete recrutes," L'infodrome, May 24, 2021.

535   Weiss, "Analysis: Ivory Coast Witnesses Surge in Jihadist Activity."

536   Ibid.

537   "L'armée ivoirienne fait exploser un véhicule de type 4x4 piégé dans le nord du pays."

538   Héni Nsaibia, "The Fledgling Insurgency in Burkina's East," ACLED, September 20, 2018; Héni Nsaibia, "Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger," ACLED, June 19, 2019.

539   Christophe Châtelot, "Le Bénin confronté au défi sécuritaire après l'attaque du parc de la Pendjari," Le Monde, May 15, 2019.

540   "Bénin : attaque d'un poste de police dans le nord du pays," TV5Monde, February 10, 2020.

541   Cochimau S. Houngbadji, "Bénin: des militaires blessés dans une nouvelle attaque djihadiste signalée à Porga," Benin Web TV, December 12, 2021.

542   Caleb Weiss, "Jihadist attacks flow into littoral West Africa," FDD's Long War Journal, December 3, 2021; Kars de Bruijne, Héni Nsaibia, Leif Brottem, and Clionadh Raleigh, "Under the Microscope: Inside the Attacks on Porga and Keremou," Clingendael, December 22, 2021.

543   "Benin army vehicle strikes land mine as security fears in north grow," Reuters, January 6, 2022.

IEDs inside northern Benin.[544] As with the advent of IEDs inside the Ivory Coast, the use of IEDs inside Benin signals a worrying trend brewing within the country.

Katibat Macina has also become a significant threat to the small West African state of Togo. Togo has played a defensive role against the current crisis emanating in the Sahel, as made evident by the launching of its Operation Koundjoare in 2018, which saw the deployment of hundreds of troops to its borders with Burkina Faso.[545] This operation has seemingly staved off attacks, though on November 9, 2021, Togo witnessed its first jihadi attack when militants belonging to Katibat Macina targeted a military outpost in Togo's Kpendjal Prefecture.[546] No soldier was hurt during the assault, but the jihadi raid showed the littoral state that despite the military operation in its north, it is still susceptible to jihadi violence.

Togo's neighbor Ghana, while not publicly known to have suffered a jihadi attack, is still greatly threatened by Katibat Macina's violence. For instance, the group has undertaken several attacks inside Burkina Faso not far from Ghana's borders, as seen in Figure 9. Further, conditions inside northern Ghana could prove to be fertile recruiting ground for JNIM. Ghana's northern regions have seen communal conflicts from local chieftaincies and issues related to local power, as well as conflicts regarding local populations of Fulani.[547] It is this latter dynamic that proves the most worrying. As discussed in this report, grievances of the Fulani across the Sahel have been exploited for recruitment and positioning of power purposes by al-Qa`ida. It is unclear how well JNIM could operate inside northern Ghana, however, recruitment among local Fulani may already be underway. This was made evident in June 2021 when JNIM utilized a Ghanian foreign fighter, identified as an ethnic Fulani recruited from the country's north, in a suicide bombing against French forces in Mali.[548]

Conclusion

Following al-Qa`ida's 2017 consolidation of its various groups inside the Sahel—which saw AQIM's Saharan Emirate and its al-Murabitoon battalion and Ansar Dine and its various sub-groups merge to form JNIM—the jihadis were better able to focus their operations under a unified command. This unification has allowed a rapid increase both in violence and the geographical spread of the jihadi violence across the Sahel. To that end, JNIM has been able to expand across central and southern Mali through its localized dealings with the various local ethnic groups and communities, which has allowed it to increase its social stature and public support.

Moreover, the 2017 creation of JNIM has also allowed jihadi violence to expand and now threaten wider West Africa. For instance, both JNIM and its local affiliate, Ansaroul Islam, continue to destabilize much of Burkina Faso. At the same time, the potential rebirth of Ansaru, al-Qa`ida's franchise in northwestern Nigeria, has severe implications not only for Nigeria but wider West Africa as a whole as it develops closer ties with JNIM. And several littoral West African states, including Ivory Coast,

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544 "French air raids kill 40 fighters in Burkina Faso," Al Jazeera, February 13, 2022; "Trois attaques ont fait au moins 9 morts dont un Français dans le nord du Bénin," France 24, February 11, 2022; "Five rangers, one soldier killed in Benin park ambush," Al Jazeera, February 10, 2022.

545 Pyalo Da-Do Nora, Amedzenu-Noviekou, Paul-Simon Handy, Jeannine Ella Abatan, and Michael Matongbada, "Togo ups its ante against terror threats," Institute for Security Studies, October 30, 2019.

546 "[Urgent] Togo : Attaque terroriste à Kpendjal," Togoweb, November 10, 2021.

547 Kaderi Noagah Bukari, Patrick Osei-Kufour, and Shaibu Bukari, "Chieftaincy conflicts in Ghana are mixed up with politics: what's at risk," Conversation, September 5, 2021; Kaderi Noagah Bukari and Nicholaus Schareika, "Stereotypes, prejudices and exclusion of Fulani pastoralists in Ghana," *Pastoralism* 5:20 (2015); Osman Alhassan, "Identity, citizenship, and the Fulani in Ghana," Danish Institute for International Studies, November 12, 2020.

548 Héni Nsaibia, "#Mali: Unofficial 13:25-minute long martyrdom video shows #JNIM fighter who …," Menastream, Twitter, June 26, 2021.

Benin, Togo, and to an extent Ghana, are now particularly threatened by JNIM's escalating violence. As a result, al-Qa`ida appears to be seeking a so-called 'arc of insurgency' across the Sahel and deep into West Africa.

The maneuvers undertaken during this period have been made possible by JNIM leveraging several of the tactics in al-Qa`ida's "Imperial Playbook." For example, al-Qa`ida affiliates were able to both *integrate themselves into local communities* and *exploit local grievances* in order to gain sympathy by presenting itself as so-called 'peace enforcers,' particularly inside central and southern Mali. Perhaps most importantly, al-Qa`ida affiliates have *looked toward new theaters*, specifically conducting attacks in the littoral West African states of Ivory Coast, Benin, and Togo (and the potential for attacks remains high inside Ghana), even as primary bases in central Mali and Burkina Faso have been solidified.

Part 8: Conclusion

This section reiterates the findings of this report and offers some implications for the policymakers and stakeholders invested in combating the violence and presence of al-Qa`ida in northern and Western Africa, especially as the group shows designs of expanding its geographic reach even farther.

8.1: Main Findings

This report has shown that over the last 30 years, al-Qa`ida and its branches and allies in the Sahel have followed what this report calls "al-Qa`ida's Imperial Playbook," as it has sought to expand its areas of influence southward and more into littoral West Africa. The organization's informal "playbook," this report shows, is composed of five fundamental tactics: befriending or creating militant groups operating in the midst of conflict; integrating themselves into communities where those militants exist; exploiting grievances of those communities to gain sympathy; addressing internal or external dissent either passively or aggressively; and looking toward new theaters once their base is solidified. Al-Qa`ida has subsequently utilized this playbook to expand southward in five distinct historical periods: 1992-1998; 1998-2006; 2006-2012; 2013-2017; and 2017-present.

Beginning in its first time period (1992-1998), which this report calls "al-Qa`ida's Arrival," AQ first moved into the Sahel around 1993 and 1994 as it supported the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in its fight against its native Algeria during that country's civil war. The connections between the GIA and al-Qa`ida were first formed in Afghanistan by Algerian foreign fighters during the Soviet-Afghan War but were predominately forged and solidified in both Sudan and Niger in the early 1990s. Moreover, as the GIA sought a safe rear base and a steady supply of weapons, money, and support, it utilized al-Qa`ida's networks in the Sahel in addition to forming its own in both Niger and Nigeria.

Moving into its second time period (1998-2006), referred to as "Creation of an Official al-Qa`ida Branch and Moves Southward," intense ideological battles over the nature of acceptable targeting of civilians eventually overtook the GIA, which prompted the creation of the splinter group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), with al-Qa`ida's assistance. Much like its predecessor, the GSPC initially looked to the Sahel as a viable rear base for its Algeria-focused mission. However, when its Sahel-based commanders began marrying into local tribes and families, bankrolling construction and other social support, and establishing deep and lasting relationships with local powerbrokers, politicians, and criminals, the GSPC began to take in flocks of local Sahelian recruits, members, and collaborators. This local influx greatly shifted the GSPC's calculus from being an Algeria-specific organization, to an outfit focused on both North Africa and the Sahel more generally. As such, the GSPC's leadership saw the Sahel as a viable space for kinetic operations, starting its attacks in Mauritania in June 2005.

Starting off its third time period (2006-2012), which is referred to as "AQIM's Initial Sahelian Expansion and State-Building," the GSPC officially became al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2007, with its focus remaining on expanding in the Sahel. Local efforts to establish a Mauritanian branch were made the same year, while the group also began to target Malian troops in 2009. Further social integration within the Sahel also meant more local recruits, which was reflected in AQIM establishing several local brigades in the late 2000s and early 2010s. As Tuareg rebellions occurred in the Sahara in the mid-2000s, AQIM took the opportunity to further integrate itself within the society of northern Mali. When a Tuareg rebellion inside Mali catapulted that country into conflict in 2012, AQIM took its newfound weaponry from the earlier chaos in Libya during Qaddafi's 2011 ouster to initially support the Tuaregs. Together, they succeeded in taking over half of northern Mali in 2012 and ruling over northern Mali with its draconian interpretation of sharia law. At the same time in around 2012, AQIM assisted in the creation of a pro-al-Qa`ida group inside Nigeria, Ansaru, offering al-Qa`ida its first official franchise in the country. The history of AQIM in the Sahel has not always been harmonious, as seen with two splinter groups emerging from the organization between 2011 and 2012, al-Mulathameen and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. These splinters, however, still cooperated with its parent organization AQIM and still operated in the Sahel in the name of al-Qa`ida.

Al-Qa`ida's fourth time period in the Sahel (2013-2017), which this report calls "Rebuilding of al-Qa`ida in the Sahel," was marked by a period of substantial rebuilding and reconstituting its forces away from its historical areas of operation following the French-led intervention against its forces in Mali. This was done by the merger of al-Mulathameen and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa to form al-Murabitoon in 2013, a move which was preceded by the two groups performing a large joint operation deep within Nigerien territory. Between 2014 and 2015, Ansar Dine, one of the al-Qa`ida-loyal organizations in northern Mali, created several sub-groups across central and southern Mali. Meanwhile, in 2016, al-Qa`ida members in Mali assisted local Burkinabe jihadis to form Burkina Faso's first jihadi organization, Ansaroul Islam.

By 2017, the year in which al-Qa`ida's fifth and current time period began, referred to as "al-Qa`ida's Transformation into a Fully Sahelian Enterprise," these outfits (except for Ansaroul Islam) publicly merged to form the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM). JNIM has since expanded further across central and southern Mali, especially by deeply ingraining itself within local conflicts and local communities to build public support. Additionally, its violence has continued to spread inside Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, Ansaru, al-Qa`ida's Nigerian franchise, has officially begun operating again, providing AQ with a franchise deep inside West Africa. At the same time, JNIM continues to push deeper into several littoral West African states. Combined with violence pushing from Ansaru's activities in northwestern Nigeria, JNIM's littoral West African operations now threaten to create a contiguous battle zone for al-Qa`ida across much of the Sahel and West Africa.

8.2: Implications for the Future

In closing, this report makes several suggestions about the policy implications of the foregoing study.

Recognize JNIM as a Model for Other AQ Branches

First, this report suggests that policymakers would be wise to recognize that JNIM serves as a model of success for other al-Qa`ida branches around the world.

As made evident throughout this report, al-Qa`ida has invested considerable time and resources into local integration within the Sahel. However, this phenomenon is not exclusive to this region alone. Indeed, AQ through its Somali branch, al-Shabaab, exists both squarely within the complex Somali clan system and as a comprehensive entity made up of members from various clans that provides

an alternative to traditional structures of society.[549] In Pakistan, al-Qa`ida and its ally, the Pakistani Taliban, have courted various powerful clans in the country's Tribal Areas that have worked to its benefit.[550] And in Yemen, relationships with local tribes have given al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) significant leverage of varying degrees throughout its existence.[551]

Led by native Sahelians, JNIM thus represents how al-Qa`ida's efforts inside the region have come full-circle: from outsiders establishing relationships and networks within the region to an organization led by Sahelians for Sahelians. As such, JNIM represents an ideal case study for al-Qa`ida's more global *modus operandi*, in that local issues, complaints, politics, and grievances are weaponized and exploited for its own benefit. Indeed, many of the tactics utilized by al-Qa`ida in the Sahel playbook can be seen elsewhere among al-Qa`ida in Africa, particularly with al-Shabaab. For instance, al-Shabaab was able to befriend a local Warsangeli clan militia in northern Somalia,[552] in which the clan pledged allegiance to the group thus becoming al-Shabaab's foot soldiers in Somalia's Puntland region.[553] In terms of the tactics of integrating itself into local communities and exploiting local grievances to gain sympathy, not only has al-Shabaab mastered the art of *dawa*, or community outreach projects, but it has also deftly maneuvered Somalia's complex clan system that has allowed it to co-opt much of Somalia's traditional authorities.[554] It has routinely dealt with internal dissent within its ranks, often through aggressive manners, such as when a series of senior leaders were killed by al-Shabaab's overall emir in 2013 and when al-Shabaab dealt with pro-Islamic State defectors starting in 2015.[555] And it has looked toward new theaters, such as its expansion into Kenya, as it has solidified its main bases inside Somalia.[556] Given the deep similarities in tactics deployed by al-Qa`ida's branches in both northwestern and eastern Africa, it is thus clear that this proverbial "Imperial Playbook" is of a standardized design.

Understanding the Nature Between AQIM-JNIM-Sub-Units

Second, this report suggests that policymakers take seriously an effort to understand the highly complex but deeply important hierarchical structures that characterize al-Qa`ida's presence in the Sahel. Namely, these points relate to the hierarchy of JNIM as well as the relationships between AQ in the Sahel and AQ Core.

While it is certainly true that JNIM has at times dealt with issues around 'rogue' units, or units conducting attacks without the explicit approval of higher commanders, this does not mean that JNIM is an incohesive entity without a central leadership body. JNIM has a clear organizational chart, with Iyad Ag Ghaly, Sedane Ag Hitta, and Amadou Kouffa filling the top three positions, respectively. JNIM has clear shadow government structures in which other key commanders are promoted as so-called governors. For instance, the aforementioned former AQIM Saharan commander Talha al-Libi acts as JNIM shadow governor for the Timbuktu region.[557] Moreover, the top leadership of JNIM is regularly

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549 Michael Weddegjerde Skjelderup, "Jihadi governance and traditional authority structures: al-Shabaab and Clan Elders in Southern Somalia, 2008-2012," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 31:6 (2020).

550 Muhammad Amir Rana, "The Taliban Consolidate Control in Pakistan's Tribal Regions," *CTC Sentinel* 1:7 (2008).

551 Sarah Phillips, "What Comes Next in Yemen? Al-Qaeda, the Tribes, and State-building," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2010.

552 The Warsangeli are a sub-clan of the Darod, the dominant Somali clan family of Somalia's northern Puntland region.

553 Mohamed Ibrahim and Jeffrey Gettleman, "Militant Alliance Adds to Somalia's Turmoil," *New York Times*, July 28, 2010.

554 Anzalone; Skjelderup.

555 Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *CTC Sentinel* 7:2 (2014); Jason Warner and Caleb Weiss, "A Legitimate Challenger? Assessing the Rivalry between al-Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia," *CTC Sentinel* 10:10 (2017).

556 Sunguta West, "Jaysh al-Ayman: A 'Local' Threat in Kenya," Jamestown Foundation, April 23, 2018; Caleb Weiss, "Kenyan governor claims Shabaab controls over half of northeastern Kenya," FDD's Long War Journal, January 16, 2021.

557 Nsaibia, "#Algeria/#Sahel: Talha al-Barbouchi was designated 'governor' of the Timbuktu Region ..."

consulted for the group's overall strategy. This can be seen by the meetings between JNIM leaders Iyad Ag Ghaly and Amadou Kouffa in videos from February 2021.[558] Appointments for killed commanders of JNIM's various sub-units have also been made and approved by JNIM's central leadership.[559]

Some authors have also contended that the demarcated areas of operation (AOs) for JNIM constituent groups, and the localized conditions found therein, negate the unity of JNIM.[560] However, it is much more likely these delineated AOs are a result of where specific units operated prior to the formation of JNIM and/or are based on ethnic or communal ties as opposed to the failure of JNIM to account and accommodate for the various local factors in which it exists. Such a move is likely a conscious choice by JNIM's central leadership to maintain clearly demarcated AOs. Neither scenario would necessarily mean that JNIM is not a "united" entity. Indeed, this report has documented how JNIM, and al-Qa`ida overall, have deftly maneuvered around such issues throughout its entire history in the region.

Lastly, it is important to delineate the nature of the relationship between JNIM and AQIM. Though these organizations exist relatively clandestinely, what can be made out from open source does not seem to indicate that the ties are necessarily weak. For instance, in the appointment of Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi as AQIM's emir following Abdelmalek Droukdel's demise in June 2020, it was a senior JNIM leader, Qutaybah Abu Nu'man al-Shinqiti (himself also a dual-hatted religious official in AQIM 'proper'), that announced al-Annabi's appointment.[561] Further, local fighters continue to extol global al-Qa`ida leaders in propaganda videos, showing the ideological affinity and pull that AQ still demands within the group.[562] And lastly, JNIM continues to be praised by other official al-Qa`ida branches, such as AQAP, and continues to identify itself as a branch of AQIM in its official releases.[563] Thus, it is clear that the relationship to and ideological affinity with al-Qa`ida's global network continues to be an important driver for JNIM. To caveat, however, the very clandestine nature of both JNIM and al-Qa`ida's central leadership means that there is likely much going on behind the scenes that does not make it to open source.

Consider Negotiations?

The third implication of this report is that it sheds light on what has become a vexing question: if and how any statist actors could consider negotiations with the groups discussed herein.

Several states, including Mali, Burkina Faso, and even France, have either considered or have already negotiated with al-Qa`ida to end or curb its reign of terror in the Sahel.[564] And for its part, JNIM has itself motioned it is willing to negotiate—albeit provided France leaves the region.[565] Whatever JNIM's actual willingness to negotiate a power-sharing agreement with the Sahelian states, it is clear that several local states are willing to pursue this route with the local al-Qa`ida branch. Meanwhile, other states, such as the European members of France's Task Force Takuba and the United States, have preferred a more military-focused approach to combating JNIM. In both pathways, policymakers and stakeholders must take al-Qa`ida's long history in the Sahel into account. This is especially true as

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558 Wassim Nasr, "#Mali la DGSE dévoile un montage d'une vidéo 'tournée par une source humaine …'," Twitter, February 2, 2021.

559 Caleb Weiss, "France reports killing Al Qaeda commander in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, November 13, 2020.

560 Eizenga and Williams.

561 Joscelyn, "AQIM names veteran jihadist as new emir."

562 Nsaibia, "#Mali: Unofficial 13:25-minute long martyrdom video shows #JNIM fighter who …"

563 Caleb Weiss, "AQAP congratulates JNIM for attacks on French soldiers," FDD's Long War Journal, January 30, 2021.

564 Sirwan Kajjo and Salem Solomon, "Mali Seeks to Negotiate with Jihadists in Efforts to End Violence," Voice of America, February 23, 2020; Sam Mednick, "Exclusive: Burkina Faso's secret peace talks and fragile jihadist ceasefire," New Humanitarian, March 11, 2021; "France's forever war in the Sahel," Economist, February 18, 2021.

565 "Mali militants say they are open to talks if foreign troops leave," Reuters, March 9, 2020.

European powers, including France and its allies in Task Force Takuba, leave Mali.

In this respect, it is important to look at how JNIM has utilized more localized peace agreements, which may serve as a model for how it would use a wider, more comprehensive peace deal to consolidate its forces and strength. For instance, since 2017, the ICG has documented at least 12 localized peace agreements between JNIM, communal militias, or other armed actors.[566] These agreements have usually been the result of sieges, conflicts, or other pressure brought forth by JNIM on the opposing party, in which the jihadi entity then allows for talks to reduce tensions in exchange for some form of peace. While these efforts have indeed likely reduced the violence on civilians, in some cases (although definitely not all), it was JNIM itself that was pressuring the civilians.[567]

As a jihadi organization and branch of al-Qa`ida, JNIM has sought to conquer territory and control local populations as part of its governing project. Indeed, JNIM now governs a significant swath of territory in not only Mali but in Burkina Faso.[568] In some cases, JNIM has leveraged the aforementioned peace agreements to further consolidate its power. In March 2020, it agreed to a peace deal with communal militias in Mali's Niono Cercle in its central Segou region, which saw the jihadi group agree to freedom of movement for the militias in exchange for compulsory sharia law.[569] While that peace agreement eventually broke down, it offers a potential look into how JNIM might seek to leverage wider, more national peace agreements for its own benefit. In exchange for some nominal concessions from the Malian government, for example, it could demand consolidation of its governance in various parts of the country. It is true that some civilians may look at jihadi governance as better than the alternative provided by the national government (or lack thereof), but it remains unclear how one could view open capitulation to JNIM as a meaningful victory.

Define Success Against JNIM

The fourth and most important implication of this report is bringing to the fore the question of what 'success' against JNIM and the broader universe of al-Qa`ida affiliates in northern and western Africa would ultimately resemble.

In this respect, it is important for local and international policymakers, practitioners, and all other relevant stakeholders to consider and define what exactly success against JNIM *would* look like. Some relevant questions to address this concern are: Does a national or international peace agreement with JNIM constitute success? If so, what conditions would need to be met, and also sustained, for any agreement to be considered successful? Is success purely in regard to military achievements or removing certain jihadi leaders from the battlefield? Is success the building of government capacity in the Sahel to address many of the root drivers of the conflict? Or is success the degradation of JNIM through meaningful defection work and/or counter-messaging to prevent new recruits?

The international community has not agreed on any standard definition for what 'success' would look like. This report does not necessarily offer any clear path forward; however, it does seek to serve as a reminder that any metrics to define success against JNIM must account for its history of operations, activities, and agendas in the Sahel and beyond, which have directly shaped its course and trajectory today.

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566 "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM," International Crisis Group, Africa Report N°306, December 10, 2021, p. 13.

567 Patricia Huon, "Mali conflict: 'It's not about jihad or Islam, but justice,'" *Guardian*, March 15, 2021.

568 Rida Lyammouri, "Literature Paper: Jihadist Armed Governance in Mali," Policy Center for the New South, Policy Brief, November 2021.

569 "Mali: le gouvernement mandate le Haut Conseil islamique pour négocier avec Ag Ghaly et Koufa," RFI, October 19, 2021.