



Development of al-Qaeda in the Western Sahel Region

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Development of al-Qaeda in the Western Sahel region and current operational capabilities of JNIM

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Executive Summary

This short paper explores how Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the predominant coalition of al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliates in the region, is structured and financed and how its component parts relate to one another. The paper will outline how the various groups constituting JNIM train and operate jointly and the extent of their use of trafficking routes and overlap with regional organized crime. It addresses the extent to which the spillover of JNIM activity from Mali and Burkina Faso into the Atlantic/Gulf of Guinea littoral states represents a threat to their stability. It also addresses the impact of political instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere on counterterrorism (CT) activity and the impact on terrorism of external state and non-state assistance.

The paper seeks to diagnose the challenges posed by JNIM considering its local and regional circumstances on the ground and to provide operationally relevant recommendations both for actions within the region itself and through the use of international resources. The recommendations seek to integrate CT with measures aimed at preventing and countering extremism, conflict resolution, and development goals. They also highlight that the needs vary between different countries in the region. For example, measures applied to Mali cannot easily be transferred to mitigate the challenges in Burkina Faso.

Today, there is a growing trend towards the communitization of jihad, the multiplication of increasingly local insurgencies, which should lead to a review of previous strategies.

Therefore, the authors recommend locally based solutions, with the international community and the United Nations (UN) providing support rather than dictating the development of the various strategies and tactics. Kinetic CT operations will still be needed but they should not be the primary instrument. Sustainable improvement in the security environment can only be achieved if these are combined with addressing the underlying causes of extremism and promoting stabilization and development.

Mali's international partners will need to deprioritize competition for influence and rediscover the unity of purpose that is still prevalent in the international community's response to the global threat emanating from the Islamic State (ISIS) and AQ. Mali and Burkina Faso themselves, supported by their neighbors and other international partners, will need to raise their sights above Bamako and Ouagadougou and focus on extending good governance and rule of law to their outlying populations. The UN will be essential to coordinate international support for local efforts to defeat JNIM, so it should not reduce the footprint or ambitions of United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)¹ and it should gear up to build resilience in the Gulf of Guinea littoral states.

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Introduction

The development and expansion of AQ affiliates in Mali, Burkina Faso, and their immediate neighborhood over recent years has aroused alarm not just in West Africa but throughout the continent and even globally. Whilst intense concerns persist, rightly, about Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and about African groups that have pledged their allegiance to ISIS, some observers, policymakers, and security agencies also perceive the increasing threat to stability in the Western Sahel as an urgent issue to address.² This is a region that continues to suffer from underlying ethnic and cultural fault lines, weak governance, political instability, and now a degree of unhelpful international rivalry.

It is important to begin with clear definitions, not least because of the complexity of the jihadi-terrorist forces active in the region. **JNIM is, strictly speaking, an AQ-affiliated coalition**, in which AQ regional affiliate al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is grouped with al-Mourabitoun, the Liberation Front of Macina, Ansar Eddine, and others. JNIM is geographically fluid, primarily based in Mali but with a strong Algerian connection. **Abu Ubaida al-'Anabi,³ the Algerian leader of AQIM, ranks among the top five global leaders of AQ.** However, with AQIM under intense pressure in Algeria, how the Algerian al-'Anabi relates within JNIM to its highly successful Malian leader, Iyad Ag-Ghali,⁴ is unclear. In a sense the main activity **of AQIM has been pushed south**, out of the Maghreb that its name references, and is both ideologically and organizationally above JNIM, and yet also just one component of it. In this paper, the authors will generally refer to this coalition as JNIM, except when referring specifically to its AQIM component.

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AQIM excepted, the component parts of JNIM originate from different parts of Mali, which remains the heart of JNIM's identity and activity. However, in recent years, **JNIM has expanded from Mali into Burkina Faso**, making use of its relationship with a local group called Ansarul Islam. At the end of 2021, **Ansaru in Nigeria pledged allegiance to JNIM,**⁵ showing the latter's growing reach outside its traditional heartland. JNIM has shown skill and consistency of purpose in tapping into the many existing conflicts and ethnic and cultural fault lines in the Sahel, intimidating, polarizing, and radicalizing frustrated communities across a wide and diverse area. To understand this, it is necessary to analyze the component groups of JNIM in greater detail.

Component groups of JNIM

The JNIM coalition came together in 2017, uniting into the "big family" of al-Qaeda in West Africa the following previously distinct original groups.⁶ These include:

- **Former fighters of the Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC)**, the previous name of AQIM. These include elements of Al-Mourabitoun, which was led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar,⁷ aka Abu Zeyd, until his death, when he was replaced by a Mauritanian Qadi (Islamic judge) named Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti. In this context it is worth mentioning that one splinter group of Al-Mourabitoun, the Mouvement de l'unicité pour le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest - Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), left the AQ family entirely and became Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which remains active in the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area.⁸

- **Ansar Eddine**, originally founded by Iyad Ag-Ghali at the beginning of the Malian crisis. Ag-Ghali is from a key Tuareg clan in the Kidal region and once served as a Malian diplomat in Saudi Arabia. He now leads the whole JNIM coalition. A warlord named Zaydan ben Hitta now controls the areas of Kidal and Gao and serves as the emir of Ansar Eddine for this region of Mali. The vast geographical area between Gao and Timbuktu and a good part of the Mauritanian border is controlled by Abû Talha Al-Lîbî,⁹ a Malian fighter who grew up in Libya.

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- **Katiba Macina** (or the Liberation Front of Macina) was founded in 2012 in Konna (Central Mali) by the Malian preacher, Muhammadun Saada Bari, also known as Amadou Koufa.¹⁰ As part of the regionalization of jihadist strategy in the Sahel, this Katiba (or battalion) now comes under the effective command of Ag-Ghali. Since March 2015, this Katiba has been conducting operations in central Mali against the Malian state and soldiers, deployed foreign forces, and the civilian population. Katiba Macina, which has strong community roots, is today the component of JNIM that appears to be the most structured with targeted attacks. Katiba Macina now controls all of central Mali up to the borders of Mauritania and the roads leading to the Senegalese border.

- **Katiba Gourma**. In the context of JNIM's ambition to expand its influence towards the countries of the Gulf of Guinea, there are indications of intense activity of another Katiba known as "Gourma." It is reportedly led by a Mauritanian national known as Abu Hamza, who controls an important part of the tri-border area of Burkina Faso, Benin, and Niger.¹¹ The area of operation of Katiba Gourma is around the forest that begins in Niger in the Tamou zone and extends to the north of Benin, passing through eastern Burkina Faso. The fighters of Katiba Gourma, which is attracting increasing attention, are said to cooperate especially with Katiba Macina.

- **Katiba Serma**, commonly known as "AQIM South," remains active in Mali in the Sikasso axis towards Côte d'Ivoire but also towards Guinea in the vicinity of the Yanfolia forest and the Haut-Niger Park in Guinea. It was founded in 2012 as part of AQIM. Its first commander was Malian national Souleimane Keita alias Al-Bambary, currently detained in Bamako.¹² Following his arrest in 2015 the Tuareg Mansur Al Ghassem replaced him but was killed in November 2018 in a French raid conducted by Barkhane.¹³ He is believed to have been replaced by one of his cousins, whose identity continues to be debated among experts on terrorist groups in the region.

Blurred structure or division of labor strategy?

JNIM still seems to be marked by a dual structure that is both complex and coherent. This situation is due to the current shifting alignments within the region's terrorist groups including defections of fighters to ISIS affiliates in the region, in particular from certain elements of the Katiba Serma. In this context, the evolution of the various *katibas* (an Arabic word meaning battalions or phalanxes) engaged in territorial expansion towards southern Mali, and even southern Burkina Faso, must be taken into account in any analysis of the structure of JNIM.

These *katibas* have a certain amount of management autonomy but receive strict operational instructions on targets from the JNIM central command. Their primary targets are security forces in Mali, Burkina Faso, northern Togo, and Benin, and they deploy highly mobile elements. Furthermore, they continue to maintain operational autonomy as far as their relations with traditional authorities, the management of the spoils of war, and the inclusion of influential religious leaders of the communities in the framework of the establishment of any local Shûrâ (Islamic consultative Assembly) are concerned.

This structure of networks, which gives the impression of dispersion, is in some respects also a division of labor between the sub-groups affiliated with JNIM. For example, the military command of Katiba Macina controls Timbuktu with elements belonging to the original AQ group. Similarly, Zeydan ben Hitta,¹⁴ in coordination with Iyad Ag Ghali, the head of the JNIM, is said to control Ansar Eddine elements operating in the vicinity of Kidal, in the Menaka region, and in part of Gao.

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In Burkina Faso, Jafar Dicko's Ansarul Islam has dedicated itself to pursuing JNIM objectives with intensive activity. It has also worked with other katibas that are part of the overall JNIM structure, seeking a foothold in northern Benin. Within Burkina Faso there is a clear division of labor between various regions. Ansarul Islam is often supported by Katiba Serma in operations around Bobo Dioulasso. When it comes to attacks in the Soum, part of the Oudalan, Katiba Macina is Ansarul Islam's preferred JNIM partner.¹⁵ In this **JNIM strategy of multiplying local "jihad"**, the traditional wing of Ansarul Islam has made it a priority to expand further within Burkina Faso, while elements of Katiba Macina and, to a lesser extent, Katiba Serma have a strategic focus on the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Cascades region of Côte d'Ivoire.

Expansion through breaches and creation of zones of instability

As outlined above, Katiba Gourma, from its location in the Burkina Faso-Benin-Niger tri-border area, is instrumental in the **expansion of JNIM towards the countries of the Gulf of Guinea**. Some analysts consider that this junction facilitates the establishment of zones for safe passage for fighters, resulting in **sporadic attacks in northern Benin, Togo, and even Ghana**.¹⁶ In this strategy, some groups of fighters belonging to Katiba Macina are charged by JNIM central command with opening passages for logistical purposes, through the installation of bases known by the Arabic term Markaz (meaning center or place of concentration). These Marakiz (plural of Markaz in Arabic) bases, which are multiplying in northern Benin, are manned forward bases for regrouping fighters and ensuring supplies to strategic withdrawal zones and navigable tracks. This preliminary base-structure is a central element in the preparation of the establishment of more substantive bases in the region, which would allow these fighters to create sustained insecurity in this region.

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Interestingly, some expansive JNIM activity in eastern Burkina Faso and northern Benin has not led to inter-group fighting and competition over resources. There is an **element of deconfliction or even cohabitation between elements of Katiba Macina and ISGS**. This same cooperation between Katiba Macina and ISGS can be observed in the Komandjari, a border region between Benin and Burkina Faso. Experts are divided as to whether this could lead to a lasting settlement between JNIM and ISGS or whether the global rivalry between ISIS and AQ, and their local competition for resources, fighters, and control of transit routes will inevitably lead to further fighting between the groups.¹⁷

JNIM is, however, strategically and tactically astute, and it has long understood that its environment is susceptible to efforts aiming to shape the local conditions to its advantage. This approach revolves around the creation of zones of instability and the instrumentalization of inter-community conflicts, such as those linked to pastoralism involving perennial tensions between livestock herders and settled farmers. JNIM takes advantage of the frustration of communities with failures of governance in relation to their interests and grievances; the inability of national and local authorities to provide services, security, and rule of law; and in some cases, human rights violations perpetrated by local, regional, and international armed forces.¹⁸ Political instability allows JNIM to prosper by seeking out areas that are conducive to **alliances with "persecuted" communities** where there may be local incubators of grievances. JNIM manages to present itself as the protector of local populations suffering from insecurity. In cases where such a strategy is not effective, it is supplemented by intimidation driving out school principals, magistrates, and other local figures of influence and replacing them with JNIM sympathizers.

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JNIM Financing

The mode of financing terrorist groups, in general, is still a matter of debate among experts after so many years of approximations and suppositions. In order to analyze this complex aspect of the evolution of groups like JNIM, it will be necessary to integrate the interdependence between terrorist groups and the changes that have occurred in the control of territories and spaces. This is all the more necessary given that there is extensive restructuring of groups, which includes both the formation of alliances and autonomization of individual groups, as can be observed in the case of JNIM.

The primary funding sources of JNIM are zakat (or Islamic alms-giving—sometimes levied by force); tax levied on trade; the clandestine artisanal mining of gold, extortion, and looting; and income derived from various forms of smuggling. However, regarding this last point, there is doubt about the extent to which JNIM is directly involved in drug smuggling, for example. Rather, they appear to **tax all commerce, licit and illicit, along transit routes that they control**. This may take the form of charging to provide security for transportation or may be viewed more crudely as a protection racket, extorting the smugglers, and therefore contributing to the financing of terrorist groups and actions.¹⁹

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There has been much debate about the extent of financing of terrorist groups by drug dealing. The local ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan even weaponized their opposition to narcotics against the Taliban, whose insurgency was substantially funded by the proceeds of the Afghan poppy industry (and later by methamphetamines).²⁰ In the case of JNIM, apart from the period of leadership of Mokhtar Belmokhtar a.k.a. Abu Zeyd, who was active in cigarette smuggling,²¹ **drug selling has never been a feature**. Drug smuggling is mainly controlled by the Arab tribes of Tlemsi who, in addition to profiting from hostage-taking, also receive payment for the transit of drugs along routes that they control. These drug routes—mainly involving consignments of cannabis—pass through Morocco, Mauritania, and the region of El Hank, located in the desert near the Malian and Algerian borders. Some experts also mention other routes centered around Oued Mzarrab,²² an important watering stop in the Sahara en route for the Menaka region of Mali. The route to Europe passes through the Azawad region of Libya, sometimes involving elaborate detours through the Red Sea via the Balkans to reach European countries such as Italy.

However, one growing but generally **overlooked source of income is the resale of livestock with rebates and passage fees paid to JNIM**. The resources derived from this are reported by some observers to be as important as the exploitation of clandestine artisanal gold mines,²³ even though **revenue from these gold mines is itself significantly greater than it was five years ago**.²⁴ In fact, behind what is often referred to as "zakat" are extensive cattle looting operations by JNIM elements along all the transhumant²⁵ trails used to move livestock from one grazing ground to the next. The resources from this looting are also channeled to maintain the fighting capabilities of JNIM.

JNIM has become a major player in the resale of looted livestock in West Africa, acquired both during attacks and during military operations against Fulani communities in the region. Moreover, this new funding niche is becoming so profitable that Dogon militiamen are increasingly selling stolen or forcibly taken livestock to transhumant populations heading to Côte d'Ivoire and even Senegal.

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The local, regional and wider international response

The evolving strategy and growing challenge of JNIM has generated a response, in particular centered on Mali, supported by international partners and the UN. Most notably, France led the regional CT and counter-insurgency response known as Operation Barkhane that lasted from

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2014 until 2022. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 2071 (2012) in 2012²⁶ and established MINUSMA the following year. In 2017, Resolution 2374 (2017)²⁷ established a Security Council Committee, supported by a Panel of Experts, to oversee sanctions against those threatening the peace, security, and stability of Mali.

Unfortunately, these and other **Malian and international efforts have not yet turned the tide against JNIM. Meanwhile, local consent to the prevailing approach has fractured with coups d'état taking place in Mali in 2020 and 2021.**

This led to the end of Barkhane and increased Malian reliance on the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC) that has progressively replaced the French-led alliance as the Malian authorities' CT partner of choice.²⁸ The involvement of foreign PMCs like Wagner in CT and counter-insurgency operations is widely assessed as problematic in terms of human rights and other compliance and best practice recommended for conflict-affected states to achieve lasting success in terms of peace and stability.²⁹

The involvement of foreign PMCs like Wagner is widely assessed as problematic in terms of human rights.

MINUSMA has also come under increasing pressure from the coup-government in Mali³⁰ and is reportedly considering its options in the wake of these developments, which have left it over-stretched and exposed. The question is whether to increase its troop strength or concentrate on its top priorities and minimize its footprint. **A more radical option would be to withdraw its uniformed personnel altogether and reduce to a political mission in Bamako.**

Today, the fight against terrorism needs a reorientation, if not a real paradigm shift. There is a **communitization of jihad, which requires a review of the classic strategy of security cooperation with the countries of the region.** It is no longer a question of mobilizing national armies supported by international partners against jihadist incursions. What is happening in **the region is increasingly a matter of insurgency on the part of local populations and communities,** making militarized methods adopted to date largely obsolete. If the international community does not integrate this new paradigm, it risks plunging the countries of the region into inter-communal conflicts that are now aggravated by the privatization of security management and the use of self-defense militias and other volunteer formations, including PMCs, largely outside government control.

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Recommendations

1. Given the complex nature of the overlapping security challenges outlined in this paper, Mali and its surrounding region are not susceptible to one-size-fits-all solutions. JNIM's success has been based on its exploitation of specific local conditions, with AQ's global doctrine being a secondary concern. Whilst AQ ideological validation and international reputation matter to JNIM, it does not take instructions from AQ-core and does not need external material support. In a sense the chain of command is even inverted, with AQIM part of JNIM, and its "Islamic Maghreb" identity largely subsumed and geographically shifted from the tough CT environment of Algeria to the more promising Western Sahel arena. **Hence CT, counterinsurgency and counter-extremism solutions need to be based around the specific local Sahelian circumstances and based on local Sahelian solutions.** International support will be needed but international intervention—French, Russian, UN, or other—will not succeed unless it is based firmly on a locally designed and accepted overarching strategy.

Therefore, German and European decision makers could explore:

- a) If engagement with key governments within JNIM's area of operations in Mali and Burkina Faso remains challenging for the time being, while concurrently JNIM pushes southwards, **explore opportunities to intensify cooperation with and security assistance to the littoral countries of the Gulf of Guinea to ensure that this push southward is not successful.**

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- b) **Intensify cooperation with the African Union, which seems to be open to African-led and African-owned counter terrorism initiatives** and explore in how far the lessons learned from African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM)/African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) be a potential blueprint for similar engagement in the region.
- c) For those that have not yet done so, develop and maintain appropriate capacities of security forces, in particular **intelligence services to effectively monitor the situation on the ground**. This should include adequate language and technical capacities, as well as the provision of appropriate resources for the strengthening of active contacts on the ground.
- d) For those that have not yet done so, **develop and maintain effective monitoring mechanisms of social media platforms, messenger services and other internet-based communication** and financing tools to ensure early detection of preparation of terrorist operations. This could also involve increased cooperation with the providers of such services.

2. Kinetic CT operations will remain important but, as in other conflict regions, will not be able to produce sustained improvement in security if used as the only or primary tool. France and Barkhane, especially, achieved a series of high-profile successes but the situation in Mali and its environs has continued to deteriorate. **CT solutions need to be fully integrated with strategies to address the underlying causes of terrorism, to prevent and counter extremism and to promote stabilization and development.** The phenomenon of the "communitization of jihad" and the evolution towards local insurgencies present a challenge to the established mechanisms of the "war on terror." In addition to mitigating the clash between international approaches and local perceptions, it will be necessary to evolve towards a greater emphasis on endogenous strategies.

Therefore, German and European decision makers could explore:

- a) **Maintain existing contacts with local communities, established through the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) or through the engagement of European personnel in MINUSMA and utilize these to map local grievances, build local trust and targeted humanitarian deliveries more successfully.**
- b) Use these contacts to **engage with power brokers within local communities to explore how these could be adequately supported** to enable these to increase the resilience of their communities against attempts by JNIM to recruit, exploit and force these communities into cooperation.

3. International rivalry for influence in Mali and the wider region is unhelpful to CT, as well as measures to prevent and counter extremism, the delivery of good governance, stabilization, and development. Whilst acknowledging that the Security Council and the international community are more divided now than was the case when Mali first became a focus of CT efforts, **unity of purpose must still be the objective if success is to be achieved.** There is still a large measure of Security Council agreement on combating ISIS and AQ. A zero-sum approach will not serve the interests even of the more successful competitor, so rivalry must be set aside in favor of a consensual approach.

Therefore, German and European decision makers could explore:

Engage actively in listing proposals of relevant individuals, such as leaders, facilitators, and key propagandists of JNIM to the 1267/2253 ISIL and al-Qaida Sanctions Committee of the United Nations Security Council to ensure that this global sanctions list remains adequately targeted to the evolving threat posed by JNIM and its component groups. This should also involve the provision of updated biographical and biometric data, such as finger prints and photos for already listed members of JNIM.

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This process could complement the already ongoing autonomous introduction of individuals and entities to restrictive measures against ISIL/Da'esh and Al-Qaeda and persons, groups, undertakings and entities associated with them in the European Union.

4. Good governance and basic standards of human rights and rule of law provide the only lasting basis for stabilization in Mali and the wider region. There is a need to fight JNIM on the ground they have chosen, showing that they do not offer a meaningful solution to local disputes or popular concerns. **Central and local authorities need to recover their people's confidence that they are understood, represented, and protected.** This needs to project again from Bamako and Ouagadougou beyond the capital cities and their immediate regions and be felt by outlying populations.

Therefore, German and European decision makers could explore:

Engage with local elites, including national political power brokers and intensify the engagement with civil society organizations in Burkina Faso and Mali to maintain the ability not highlight the centrality good governance, the respect for human rights and rule of law for a sustainable fight against terrorism by addressing the root causes that push communities voluntarily or involuntarily towards the support of terrorist operations.

5. The UN will be needed to coordinate international support for these affected states, and the UN response will need to factor in not only Mali and Burkina Faso but also the Gulf of Guinea littoral states that are increasingly threatened and impacted by JNIM.

Building resilience in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and elsewhere will yield dividends in countering JNIM's strategy of regional expansion. Consequently, given the central role of the convening power of the organization, the UN should not reduce the footprint or the ambitions of MINUSMA.

Therefore, German and European decision makers could explore:

- a) **Maintain support for and discuss the appropriate adjustment of the mandate of MINUSMA**
- b) Actively support the efforts of the United Nations to find substitutes for the withdrawing European military forces, currently part of MINUSMA's troop contingent to prevent a slow undermining of MINUSMA's ability to operate effectively.
- c) Highlight the importance of MINUSMA's role not only in the provision of security but also as a transmission structure that guides international assistance and humanitarian aid to Mali to decision makers within the current Malian government structure and explore opportunities on how the current mandate of MINUSMA can be adjusted to increase the acceptance of its work to the current government of Mali.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://minusma.unmissions.org/>
- ² See for example: S/2023/21, Report of the Secretary General, Situation in Mali, 6 January 2023, https://minusma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2023_21-en.pdf
- ³ United Nations Security Council, Narrative Summary for Reasons of Listing, Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, QDi.398, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/abu-ubaydah-yusuf-al-anabi
- ⁴ United Nations Security Council, Narrative Summary for Reasons of Listing, Iyad Ag Ghali, QDI 316, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/iyad-ag-ghali
- ⁵ Thirteenth report of ISIL, al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, S/2022/547, para. 32, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>
- ⁶ Twentieth report of the ISIL, al-Qaida and Taliban Monitoring Team, S/2017/573, paras. 1, 30, 37-39, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/monitoring-team/reports>
- ⁷ United Nations Security Council, Narrative Summary for Reasons of Listing, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, QDi.136, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/mokhtar-belmokhtar
- ⁸ Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, Islamic State recognizes oath of allegiance from jihadists in Mali, Longwar Journal, 31 October 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/islamic-state-recognizes-oath-of-allegiance-from-jihadists-in-west-africa.php>
There is much to be said about the activity of ISIS affiliates in the region, including the evolution of ISGS and how it relates to ISIL-Core and West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, this analysis would go beyond the scope of this particular policy paper and will be addressed in the second policy paper in this series.
- ⁹ See: Abd al-Rahman Talha al-Libi CEP Profile: <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/abd-al-rahman-talha-al-libi>
- ¹⁰ The current status of Muhammadun Saada Bari a.k.a. Amadou Koufa is unclear. In November 2018, reports claimed that Amadou Koufa was killed during an operation conducted by the French-led Barkhane force against a camp of Katiba Macina in the vicinity of Mopti and Tenenkou in central Mali. See: Andrew Lebovich, The death of a jihadist: A chance to curb Mali's conflict, European Council of Foreign Relations, 13 December 2018, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_death_of_a_jihadist_a_chance_to_curb_malis_conflict/
This claim was immediately rejected by al-Qaeda, see: Middle East Online, AQIM denies Mali leader killed in French-led attack, 12 December 2018, <https://middle-east-online.com/en/aqim-denies-mali-leader-killed-french-led-attack>
Indeed, Koufa resurfaced in a video in 2019, see: BBC News, 'Dead' Mali jihadist Amadou Koufa reappears in video, 2 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47428246>
Furthermore, in 2022, he seemed to have commanded forces in Mali, see: Baba Ahmed, Attacks in central Mali kill 3 civilians, 15 soldiers, AP, 28 July 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/africa-army-mali-west-terrorist-attacks-bc2a209b5f449ab27ec7dd49b150546d>
- ¹¹ Interview with regional expert, January 2023

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- 12 See: Daniel Eizenga, Wendy Williams, The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel, Africa Security Brief No 38, December 2020, page 3, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASB-38-EN.pdf>
- 13 See: Daniel Eizenga, Wendy Williams, The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel, Africa Security Brief No 38, December 2020, page 3, <https://africacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ASB-38-EN.pdf>
- 14 Information from important religious leader, interviewed on 15 January 2023
- 15 Information from a former humanitarian expert, interview on 17 January 2023
- 16 See: Promediation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, North of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. The new frontier for jihadist groups?, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/documents/261825/13432629/North+of+the+countries+of+the+Gulf+of+Guinea+-+The+new+frontier+for+jihadist+groups.pdf/97cbceda-85c1-33fc-45fd-50f8ddaaa0ab?version=1.2&t=1625138447487>
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The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a nonprofit and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. CEP builds a more moderate and secure society by educating the public, policymakers, the private sector, and civil society actors about the threat of extremism. CEP also formulates programs to sever the financial, recruitment, and material support networks of extremist groups and their leaders. For more information about our activities, please visit counterextremism.com.

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