



Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel

By Katherine Zimmerman

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Key Points

- Sahel-based Salafi-jihadi groups including al Qaeda and the Islamic State coordinate and cooperate across organizational divides united by common objectives, shared histories, and ethnic ties, creating a unique ecosystem of ideology and terror.
- The Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel is strengthening rapidly. The number of attacks will continue to rise and will become deadlier as groups' capabilities improve.
- The groups' coordinated effort to transform Sahelian society and governance into their vision under Islam has helped destabilize the region and has created additional opportunities for Salafi-jihadi growth.

The land that stretches across western Africa hosts a network of Salafi-jihadi groups that is expanding as local conditions deteriorate. Porous borders, weak and resource-strapped governments, and rising insecurity driven by both poorly equipped militaries and intra-communal conflict create opportunities for al Qaeda- and Islamic State-linked groups to strengthen in West Africa's Sahel region, which includes Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.¹ Over the past decade, the number of groups operating in the Sahel has increased, and in the past year, the number of terror attacks has doubled.² These Sahel-based Salafi-jihadi groups coordinate and cooperate across organizational divides united by common objectives, shared histories, and ethnic ties, creating a unique ecosystem of ideology and terror.

Conditions in the Sahel region make the operating environment complex, even without the presence of Salafi-jihadi groups. The Sahel borders the Sahara desert, and the population is seminomadic. Trade and migration routes connect the region, and communal identities—especially ethnic identities today—and relationships are crucial. Desertification has led to

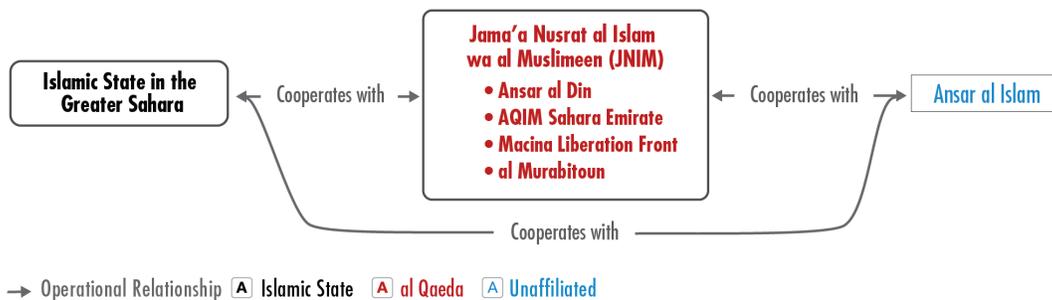
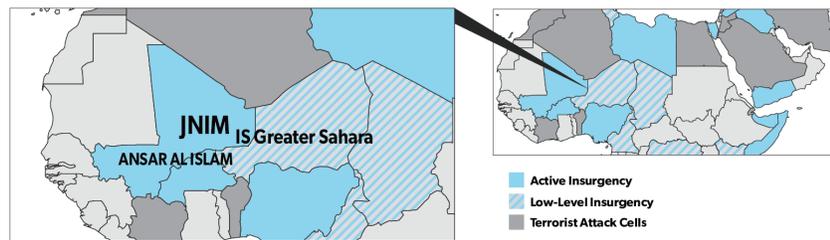
increased conflicts between farmer and herder communities over access to water and arable land.³

The states themselves are fragile. State institutions play a marginal, if any, role in the daily lives of most. The governments are effectively absent from the peripheries of their countries. This is where the Salafi-jihadi groups are growing (Figure 1).

The Rise of the Salafi-Jihadi Network

The Salafi-jihadi network in the Sahel began outside the region and can be traced back to the Algerian civil war. One of the two main Islamist factions fighting the Algerian government was the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).⁴ The GIA formed in 1992 under the leadership of Algerians who had fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The GIA's brutality during the Algerian civil war killed civilians and combatants alike, and in 1998, a faction splintered from the GIA over the group's massacres of civilians. That faction called itself the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC)⁵ and continued to conduct terror attacks in the name of Islam against the Algerian government and military.

Figure 1. Salafi-Jihadi Base in the Sahel



Source: Author.

The GSPC courted al Qaeda in the early 2000s and sent fighters to Iraq between 2003 and 2006. Osama bin Laden recognized it as an affiliate in September 2006.⁶ In January 2007, the GSPC rebranded as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). By this point, the group had expanded its vision beyond overthrowing the Algerian government.

AQIM began insinuating itself into Sahelian society in the 2000s, especially in northern Mali. AQIM established itself in the local society and economy, including trafficking networks, through cultivating relationships with communities by providing assistance, marrying into the communities, and recruiting members.⁷ A senior Algerian AQIM member, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, epitomizes this effort: He married into a Bérabiche Arab family from Timbuktu and eventually earned the moniker “Mr. Marlboro” for his role in cigarette trafficking.⁸

The group’s looser structure—organized into *katiba* (brigades) and *sariya* (companies)—permitted AQIM units operating in the Sahara desert in northern Mali, Niger, and southern Algeria to resemble the local population more closely, with AQIM’s Sariyat al Ansar led by and composed of Tuaregs.⁹ Additionally, AQIM found support among some key local powerbrokers, such as an Ifoghas Tuareg named Iyad ag Ghali, who subscribe to AQIM’s ideology.¹⁰

AQIM’s focus for its jihad, however, remained the Algerian state, and its activities in the Sahel, including a major kidnapping-for-ransom racket, provided the group with resources.¹¹

The first major splinter from AQIM occurred in October 2011. A group of AQIM militants broke away to establish the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).¹² These militants were predominately Malian and Mauritanian and included figures such as Ahmed al Tilemsi, Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, Omar Ould Hamaha, Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, and Sultan Ould Bady. All were critical of the Algerian-dominated AQIM leadership under Abdelmalek Droukdel—rumor has it that the split was driven partly by the division of a ransom payment¹³—and instead focused MUJAO’s energy on jihad in the Sahel. MUJAO continued to follow the same Salafi-jihadi ideology as AQIM did, but it contextualized the ideology in West African Islamic history. MUJAO cemented its stronghold in 2012 during the Tuareg rebellion that spiraled into conflict in northern Mali in the Gao region, which includes a key trafficking hub.¹⁴

A separate group established under the leadership of Ghali, a local powerbroker who had worked as a hostage negotiator previously for AQIM, rose to power during the 2012 Tuareg rebellion. That group, called

Ansar al Din, drew heavily from Ghali's followers in the Kidal region in northern Mali, bordering Niger and Algeria. It then used a partnership with secular rebel groups in Mali's north to expand its influence before turning on those groups and consolidating control, including control over Timbuktu, a trading outpost.¹⁵ Ansar al Din, with MUJAO and AQIM, delivered basic governance through providing public services and security in northern Mali during this time.¹⁶

Like Ansar al Din, the Macina Liberation Front uses insurgent tactics to weaken competing authorities and backfill governance.

The second major splinter from AQIM occurred at the end of 2012, when Belmokhtar left AQIM with his followers. Belmokhtar had been involved in al Qaeda's strategy for Mali in 2012.¹⁷ Yet he disagreed with other AQIM leaders,¹⁸ and AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, allegedly suspended Belmokhtar from command in October 2012.¹⁹ Belmokhtar announced his departure from AQIM in December 2012 with his brigade, al Mulathamun (the Masked Ones), which became known as al Muwaqqi'un Biddam (Signers with Blood). Belmokhtar's separation from AQIM only made formal what had already been in practice: He had operated fairly independently from AQIM in the years prior.²⁰ Within six months, Belmokhtar's men had carried out two major terror attacks—one in In Amenas in eastern Algeria and another in Agadez and Arlit, Niger.²¹

In August 2013, AQIM's two splinters—MUJAO and al Mulathamun—merged to form al Murabitoun, uniting as the group in the Sahel focused on terror attacks against French and other Western targets.²² The leaders of both groups—Tilemsi and Belmokhtar, respectively—pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al Muhajir al Masri, an Egyptian who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets and the Americans possibly sent by al Qaeda to West Africa.²³ A French military intervention that began in January 2013 had weakened the Salafi-jihadi groups in Mali, including Ansar al Din and AQIM, especially the French targeting of Salafi-jihadi leaders, which may have been a factor in Tilemsi's and Belmokhtar's

decision-making. It has continued to work with Ansar al Din.

A new Malian group calling itself the Macina Liberation Front appeared on the scene in January 2015, when it claimed responsibility for attacks in central Mali.²⁴ The group's leader is Amadou Diallo Koufa, a charismatic and radical ethnically Fulani preacher from the region. Koufa fought with Ansar al Din under Ghali, participating in one of the main campaigns for Konna in January 2013.²⁵

Koufa's group draws partly on the Fulani identity, though not exclusively, and actively expanded the Salafi-jihadi insurgency from the north into the communities in central Mali. Personal relationships built with members of Ansar al Din established close ties between the two groups, especially a relationship that ran through a Macina Liberation Front member, Hassan Dicko, to an Ansar al Din brigade that operated in southern Mali.²⁶ Like Ansar al Din, the Macina Liberation Front uses insurgent tactics to weaken competing authorities and backfill governance.

Sahrawi announced his loyalty—and that of his followers—to the Islamic State in May 2015, calling into question the unity of effort that the Salafi-jihadi groups in the Sahel had achieved.²⁷ A small faction that had been part of MUJAO splintered from al Murabitoun with Sahrawi to form the initial members of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Sahrawi's group did not conduct its first attacks until September 2016, and Islamic State leadership and media largely ignored his group until mid-October 2016, after a spectacular attack on a Nigerien prison.²⁸

Since then, the group has become one of the most active in the Sahel, operating in the tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. For example, ISGS claimed the October 2017 ambush of US and Nigerien troops in Tongo Tongo, Niger, that killed four US servicemen. Its attacks intentionally stoke ethnic tensions and intercommunity conflict in the region. The group's total membership has remained in the low hundreds,²⁹ relying heavily on support networks and working with the other Salafi-jihadi groups in the region.³⁰

The Salafi-jihadi network expanded into Burkina Faso by the end of 2016. A new group calling itself Ansar al Islam launched a low-level insurgency among disenfranchised Fulani in northern Burkina Faso in December 2016, founded by a radical Burkinabe preacher, Malam Ibrahim Dicko.³¹ Similar to how

the Macina Liberation Front leaders received their start, Dicko had fought in Mali in 2013.³² His connections to Ansar al Din and the Macina Liberation Front established an enduring relationship between those Malian groups and the Burkinabe Ansar al Islam, including providing training and operational support.³³ After his death in May 2017, his brother Jafar took command of the group. Ansar al Islam remains independent from al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliations, but in addition to the support from the al Qaeda-linked groups, its members have received support from ISGS.³⁴

In early 2017, the al Qaeda followers in the Sahel united to form Jama'a Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM).³⁵ The March 2017 video statement announcing the merger included Ansar al Din leader Ghali, AQIM's emir in the Sahara Yahya Abu al Hammam, Macina Liberation Front leader Koufa, al Murabitoun commander Mohamed Lahbous, and AQIM shari'a official Abu Abdul Rahman al Sanhaji. These groups had already been coordinating their activities. For example, AQIM and al Murabitoun worked together to conduct a series of attacks against hotels in Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, and Mali in 2015–16. The merger formalized their relationships, bringing together around 700–800 fighters under a single leadership body.³⁶ JNIM now presents a unified Salafi-jihadi front across the effort in Mali (Figure 2).

Today's Salafi-jihadi Network in the Sahel

JNIM, ISGS, and Ansar al Islam all work together today in the Sahel region. Their shared ideology—Salafi-jihadism—defines a set of common objectives that includes instituting shari'a-based governance, according to their interpretation, through weakening the state and removing Western influence. Cross-organization relationships have created personal networks that facilitate this cooperation, along with individuals with ties to all three groups.³⁷

Membership among the groups remains somewhat fluid, as factions decide which group is best suited to achieve aims. ISGS has incorporated defections from JNIM including a faction from the

Macina Liberation Front and the Salaheddine Brigade—which had been loosely affiliated with JNIM and commanded by a longtime Salafi-jihadist—that bolster cross-organization relationships.³⁸ Additionally, the efforts of the three groups to stoke intercommunal conflict has created pockets of support for the Salafi-jihadis among communities that perceive them as defenders against other local, ethnically based militias.

The resulting Salafi-jihadi ecosystem in the Sahel is strengthening rapidly. The number of attacks will continue to rise and will become deadlier as groups' capabilities improve. The trajectory of ISGS attacks shows this pattern. ISGS attacks have been particularly effective at targeting Malian and Nigerien soldiers. Salafi-jihadi influence will also strengthen as local governance breaks down and vulnerable communities accept the protection of these groups. Indicators that Salafi-jihadi groups are instituting governance are growing, too. For example, JNIM supporters have opened schools in parts of Mali.³⁹

Meanwhile, counterterrorism operations in the Sahel—led by the French military with US support—have not prevented the spread of the Salafi-jihadi network. The Salafi-jihadi network's ability to integrate into parts of the population and use local conflicts to insinuate itself further into communities has overlaid Salafi-jihadi influence and interests on the local dynamics. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have been unable to address the security challenges in their countries, even with significant external assistance. Both ISGS and JNIM have ambitions to destabilize the littoral states to the Sahel, including Benin, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Togo. Salafi-jihadists may already be moving into northern Benin.⁴⁰

The Salafi-jihadi network will continue to expand in the Sahel, where regional states are weak and local conditions have made communities vulnerable. The groups play on identity politics and local relationships to strengthen. Their coordinated effort to transform Sahelian society and governance into their vision under Islam has helped destabilize the region and has created additional opportunities for Salafi-jihadi growth.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Stephen J. Townsend, "A Secure and Stable Africa Is an Enduring American Interest," testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, January 30, 2020, <https://www.africom.mil/about-the-command/2020-posture-statement-to-congress>.
2. Jessica Donati and Courtney McBride, "Terrorist Attacks Increase in Africa's Sahel, U.S. Warns," *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/terrorist-attacks-increase-in-africas-sahel-u-s-warns-11572636479>.
3. UN Economic and Social Council, "Deadlier Conflicts, Climate Change Threaten Cross-Border Herding in West Africa, Delegates Tell Economic and Social Council, Peacebuilding Commission," press release, December 3, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ecosoc7015.doc.htm>; and Michael W. Baca, "My Land, Not Your Land: Farmer-Herder Wars in the Sahel," *Foreign Affairs*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-08-21/my-land-not-your-land>.
4. Most of the Algerian and Sahelian groups are best known by their French acronyms and will be referenced throughout as such. GIA stands for Groupe Islamique Armé.
5. GSPC stands for Groupe Salafist pour la Prédication et le Combat.
6. Andreas Hagen, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Leaders and Their Networks," Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, March 27, 2014, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-leaders-and-their-networks>.
7. Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation," July 18, 2012, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/mali-avoiding-escalation>; and Andrew Lebovich, "The Local Face of Jihadism in Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 6 (June 2013), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-local-face-of-jihadism-in-northern-mali>.
8. Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda Turn African in the Sahel?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2010, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf.
9. Mohamed Fall Ould Bah, "The Political Economy of Conflicts in Northern Mali," Institute for Security Studies, April 22, 2013, <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/the-political-economy-of-conflicts-in-northern-mali>.
10. Iyad ag Ghali is one such powerbroker. He was born into a notable Ifoghas Tuareg family and worked with al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) as a hostage negotiator in the early 2000s. He radicalized fully while working in Saudi Arabia as a member of Mali's diplomatic staff.
11. AQIM became al Qaeda's richest affiliate through kidnapping-for-ransom payments and revenues from smuggling. For details of ransom payments, see Rukmini Callimachi, "Paying Ransoms, Europe Bankrolls Qaeda Terror," *New York Times*, July 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/30/world/africa/ransoming-citizens-europe-becomes-al-qaedas-patron.html>. See also Yaya J. Fanusie, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Financial Assessment," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, December 7, 2017, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/12/07/al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghreb-relies-on-drugs-human-trafficking-to-fund-terror-activities>.
12. MUJAO stands for Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest.
13. Crisis Group, "Mali: Avoiding Escalation."
14. Bah, "The Political Economy of Conflicts in Northern Mali."
15. For more details on Ansar al Din's expansion during this time, see Alix Halloran and Katherine Zimmerman, *Warning from the Sahel: Al Qaeda's Resurgent Threat*, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, September 1, 2016, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/warning-from-the-sahel-al-qaedas-resurgent-threat>.
16. Andrew Lebovich, *Reconstructing Local Orders in Mali: Historical Perspectives and Future Challenges*, Brookings Institution, July 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/lebovich_mali.pdf.
17. Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM and Its Allies in Mali," Washington Institute, February 5, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/aqim-and-its-allies-in-mali>.
18. For example, Mokhtar Belmokhtar pushed back on AQIM's hostage taking as not a practice of jihad. A letter from AQIM's leadership to the Shura Council of Belmokhtar's brigade details his complaints and the organization's complaints of him. Rukmini Callimachi recovered the letter in Timbuktu, Mali. The text is available through Wayback Machine, "Al-Qaida Papers," https://web.archive.org/web/20151220214727/http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/_international/_pdfs/al-qaeda-belmokhtar-letter-english.pdf.
19. Belmokhtar and his al Mulathamun (the Masked Ones) Brigade had been under the command of AQIM's emir of the Sahara region Nabil Abu al Qama, who was killed September 2012. He was passed over to succeed al Qama for a rival commander, Djamel

Okacha (Jamel Akkacha), also known as Yahya Abou el Hamame (Yahya Abu al Hammam), and suspended from command of his unit. Sahara Media, “Sahara Media Publishes the Details of the Death of al Qaeda leader Nabil Abu al Qama,” September 16, 2012, <https://www.saharamedias.net/%d8%b5%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d9%85%d9%8a%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%b4%d8%b1-%d8%aa%d9%81%d8%a7%d8%b5%d9%8a%d9%84-%d9%85%d9%82%d8%aa%d9%84-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%af%d9%8a-%d9%81/>; Sahara Media, “Abdullah al Shanqiti, the New Emir of the al Furqan Brigade in al Qaeda,” November 27, 2012, <https://www.saharamedias.net/%d8%b9%d8%a8%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84-%d9%87-%d8%a7%d9%84-%d8%b4%d9%86%d9%82%d9%8a%d8%b7%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d9%85%d9%8a%d8%b1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%ac%d8%af-%d9%8a%d8%af-%d9%84%d9%83%d8%aa%d9%8a%d8%a8/>; and Lebovich, “AQIM and Its Allies in Mali.”

20. See the letter recovered by Rukmini Callimachi in Timbuktu, Mali, for a list of complaints against Belmokhtar. Wayback Machine, “Al-Qaida Papers.”

21. In January 2013, Belmokhtar’s men attacked a natural gas plant near In Amenas in eastern Algeria, holding hundreds of hostages and resulting in the deaths of at least 39 foreigners. His group was also behind attacks in Agadez and Arlit, Niger, in May 2013. Geoff D. Porter, “Terrorist Outbidding: The In Amenas Attack,” *CTC Sentinel* 8, no. 5 (May 2015), <https://ctc.usma.edu/terrorist-outbidding-the-in-amenas-attack/>; and BBC, “Niger Suicide Bombers Target Areva Mine and Barracks,” May 24, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-22637084>.

22. The al Murabitoun name references the Almoravid dynasty (*al murabit* in Arabic) and the idea of being prepared to fight to protect Islamic lands, which the Almoravids are known for in their defense of the Muslim region of the Iberian Peninsula. The name also connotes the idea of being prepared to fight as a fortress. Interestingly, the Almoravids were known during their time as the Masked Ones. Dario Cristiani, “Al-Murabitun: North Africa’s Jihadists Reach into History in Their Battle Against European ‘Crusaders,’” *Terrorism Monitor* 11, no. 19 (October 2013), <https://jamestown.org/program/al-murabitun-north-africas-jihadists-reach-into-history-in-their-battle-against-european-crusaders>.

23. The initial announcement did not provide a name for the new emir of al Murabitoun. Abu Bakr al Mujahir al Masri’s name surfaced after the French killed him in eulogies. Thomas Joscelyn, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar Now Leads ‘al Qaeda in West Africa,’” *Long War Journal*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/08/mokhtar-belmokhtar-now-leads-al-qaeda-in-west-africa.php>; and Rida Lyammouri, “Key Events That Led to Tensions Between Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi Before Splitting,” *SahelMemo Consulting*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.sahelmemo.com/2015/12/07/key-events-that-led-to-tensions-between-mokhtar-belmokhtar-and-adnan-abu-walid-al-sahrawi-before-splitting>.

24. The group’s first official statement under its own name did not come out until May 2016, however.

25. UN Security Council, “Amadou Koufa,” February 4, 2020, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/amadou-koufa>.

26. According to French intelligence, Hassan Dicko, also known as Abou Leila, was a key link between the Macina Liberation Front and Ansar al Din’s Khalid ibn Walid Brigade. Rémi Carayol, “Mali: Keita and Koufa, the Disturbing Terrorist Duo of the South,” *Jeune Afrique*, December 3, 2015, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/280602/politique/mali-keita-koufa-linquietant-duo-terroriste-sud>.

27. Confusion followed Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi’s announcement. The leader of al Murabitoun at the time was not clear after French forces had killed Abu Bakr al Muhajir and then his successor, Ahmed al Tilemsi, in December 2014. Sahrawi had made a move to assume control—and sought to block Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s efforts. Sahrawi’s views on jihad and Islam called for a more radical approach—and reporting from when MUJAO governed indicates Sahrawi pushed for immediate application of harsh shari’a law. In the end, Sahrawi was not able to draw the majority of the group to join him with the Islamic State. Belmokhtar announced that al Murabitoun remained loyal to al Qaeda and signed his group off as “al Qaeda in West Africa” shortly thereafter. See Katherine Zimmerman and Emily Estelle, “A New ISIS Branch in the Sahel?,” *Critical Threats Project* at the American Enterprise Institute, November 15, 2016, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/a-new-isis-branch-in-the-sahel>; and Joscelyn, “Mokhtar Belmokhtar Now Leads ‘al Qaeda in West Africa.’”

28. The Islamic State’s central media branches recognize Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) attacks today but label them as conducted under the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which is an operationally distinct group in Nigeria and the Lake Chad area. ISGS and ISWAP share attack signatures and facilitators, likely in an attempt to connect their two areas of operations. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Fifth 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*, January 20, 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/53>; and Zimmerman and Estelle, “A New ISIS Branch in the Sahel?”

29. Pauline Le Roux, “Exploiting Borders in the Sahel: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara,” *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, June 10, 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/exploiting-borders-sahel-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs>.

30. Carley Petesch, “AP Interview: Al-Qaida, IS Affiliates Team Up in West Africa,” *Associated Press*, February 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/f30c35fe93f185d68b44ce553d5a9426f>.

31. Emily Estelle, “How Ansar al Islam Gains Popular Support in Burkina Faso,” *Critical Threats Project* at the American Enterprise Institute, May 9, 2019, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/how-ansar-al-islam-gains-popular-support-in-burkina-faso>.

32. Jeune Afrique, “Burkina—Mali: le Jihadiste Ibrahim Malam Dicko Joue à cache-cache,” April 6, 2017, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/424162/politique/burkina-mali-jihadiste-ibrahim-malam-dicko-joue-a-cache-cache>.
33. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Third 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*, January 15, 2019, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/50>.
34. Human Rights Watch, “We Used to Be Brothers: Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali,” December 7, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/07/we-used-be-brothers/self-defense-group-abuses-central-mali>.
35. SITE Intelligence Group, “Ansar Dine and AQIM’s Sahara and Murabitoon Branches Announce Merger,” March 2, 2017, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/ansar-dine-and-aqim-s-sahara-and-murabitoon-branches-announce-merger.html>.
36. Estimates were 700–830 members in January 2019. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Third 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*.
37. For example, the late leader of a group tied to Jama’a Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen, Almansour ag Alkassoum, had been a key liaison. See Héni Nsaibia, “Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS),” ACLED, March 21, 2018, <https://acleddata.com/2018/03/21/targeting-of-the-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs>.
38. The Salaheddine Brigade, or Katiba Saleheddine, is a group that had been led by Sultan Ould Bady, a veteran member of AQIM and MUJAO who turned himself in to Algerian authorities in August 2018. Nsaibia, “Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS);” and Caleb Weiss, “Veteran Malian Jihadist Surrenders to Algeria,” Long War Journal, August 12, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/veteran-malian-jihadist-surrenders-to-algeria.php>.
39. UN Security Council, *Twenty-Fourth 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*, July 15, 2019, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/570>.
40. Josue Mehouenou and Sophie Bouillon, “Benin Attack Stirs Worries of Jihadist Menace,” AFP, February 14, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/benin-attack-stirs-worries-jihadist-menace-110529964.html>.

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