

*Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)*

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**Name:** Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)

**Type of Organization:**

- Insurgent
- non-state actor
- regional
- terrorist
- violent

**Ideologies and Affiliations:**

- Al-Qaeda affiliated group
- Islamist
- jihadist
- Salafist
- Sunni
- takfiri

**Place of Origin:**

Mali

**Year of Origin:**

March 2017

**Founder(s):**

Iyad Ag Ghaly

**Places of Operation:**

Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal

**Overview**

***Executive Summary:***

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), meaning “The Support Group for Islam and Muslims,” is an al-Qaeda affiliated group based in Mali that has in recent years expanded its operations to neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Senegal.<sup>1</sup> As a formal al-Qaeda affiliate in Africa, JNIM is dedicated to dismantling regional governments and implementing sharia (Islamic law) in areas where it operates.<sup>2</sup>

The jihadist group was officially founded on March 2, 2017, when the Sahara branch of [al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#) (AQIM)—a formal al-Qaeda affiliate that operates primarily in Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Libya, Tunisia, and Niger—merged with local Salafist groups Ansar al-Dine (AAD), [al-Mourabitoun](#), and Macina Liberation Front (MLF or Katiba Macina). [Iyad Ag Ghaly](#), the former emir of AAD, was announced as the new group's leader.<sup>3</sup>

Ghaly founded Ansar al-Dine (AAD) in December 2011, after AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel sought to expand AQIM activities into the Sahel, specifically in northern Mali.<sup>4</sup> AAD—strengthened by AQIM's continued military, financial, and logistical support—quickly proved formidable as it captured a number of towns, including Tessalit and Timbuktu, between January and April 2012.<sup>5</sup> Another active AQIM splinter group, al-Mourabitoun, carried out the November 2015 lethal attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali's capital. Al-Mourabitoun has since taken the lead in AQIM operations, including a high-profile attack on a U.N. base in northern Mali in June 2016.<sup>6</sup>

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The formation of JNIM represented al-Qaeda's new emphasis on "unity" in order to expand the operational and geographical capacities of the organization and successfully implement sharia law in the Sahel region.<sup>8</sup> Strategically speaking, JNIM boasts an expansive operational cache as the component groups have honed various skill sets as well as built geographical and local knowledge. According to the Institute for Security Studies, the merger provided nascent groups, such as the Mali-based Macina Liberation Front led by Amadou Kouffa, the chance to learn from more militarily seasoned groups like al-Mourabitoun.<sup>9</sup>

In the March 2017 announcement of JNIM's founding, Ghaly affirmed his allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukdel, the emir of AQIM; Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's emir; and Haibatullah Akhundzada, the Taliban's overall leader.<sup>10</sup> In his role as JNIM emir, Ghaly stated in an April 3, 2017 interview with al-Qaeda's weekly al-Massar publication that France was his "historic enemy" as it threatened al-Qaeda and its allies as "agents who occupy our lands, attack our religion, and steal our wealth."<sup>11</sup> As of 2022, violence in northern and central Mali has increased more than 300 percent since 2017. Accordingly, media sources regularly cite JNIM or an affiliated terrorist group as the culprit for much of the violence in the area.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, as JNIM gained increasing influence across the Sahel, the group has found itself in conflict with ISIS. When ISIS lost its territorial caliphate in Iraq and Syria, JNIM took advantage of ISIS's seemingly weakened position among the wider extremist nexus and asserted more dominance throughout the Sahel. Given the power struggle between the two groups, JNIM and ISIS have attempted to position themselves as alternatives to the Malian government, which has been criticized for severely neglecting the needs of the Malian public since 2012, following the Tuareg rebellion.<sup>13</sup>

Since its formation, JNIM has continually clashed with French counterterrorism forces in the Sahel region, deployed under Operation Barkhane—France's anti-terror mission in Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Niger, and Mauritania from 2014 until 2022. One of the notable clashes occurred in February 2018 when French forces launched three simultaneous raids on JNIM forces and their affiliates in northern Mali, killing over 20 jihadi fighters and six JNIM leaders.<sup>14</sup> In response, JNIM militants attacked the French embassy and army headquarters in Burkina Faso's capital. JNIM has also targeted the U.N. Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a military counterterrorism partnership between Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Chad. In June 2018, JNIM launched the first attack on the headquarters of the G5 Sahel Joint Forces in Sévaré, Mali.<sup>15</sup>

On March 12, 2020, JNIM released a statement claiming the group would be willing to engage in dialogue with the Malian government, on the condition that French troops and the U.N. peacekeeping mission withdraw from the country. The statement came after a February 2020 announcement by former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who claimed he had sent his high representative, Dioncounda Traoré, to central Mali to initiate communication with jihadist groups, in the hopes of achieving a ceasefire. The militants Traoré spoke to allegedly included Ghaly and Amadou Kouffa.<sup>16</sup> However, authorities from France—which had more than 5,000 troops in the country at the time—advised Bamako against negotiating with the jihadists.<sup>17</sup>

As negotiations between the terror group and the central government came to a standstill, Bamako asserted an independent position in its fight against JNIM, withdrawing from the G5 Sahel on May 15, 2022. Bamako claimed the reason it sought to withdraw from the group was the lack of progress in the fight against JNIM militants and other al-Qaeda and ISIS linked groups. The move led to international criticism, with the U.N.'s top political official for Africa, Assistant Secretary-General Martha Pobe, calling the decision "unfortunate and regrettable."<sup>18</sup> Given Mali's decision to leave the G5 Sahel and France's complete military withdrawal from the country in August 2022, Mali is now contending with an intractable conflict as JNIM and competing extremist groups continue to relentlessly launch attacks on Malian security forces and foreign troops stationed in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Further providing ammunition to JNIM's ambitions for increased support and legitimacy among the Malian public was Mali's decision to partner with mercenaries from the Russian Wagner Group to combat AQIM and JNIM fighters. Following the deployment of around 1,000 Wagner mercenaries, accusations of indiscriminate killings were alleged by the U.N. and the United States (U.S.) in April 2022. Accordingly, reports circulated that more than 300 civilians were killed following a counterterrorism operation in central Mali's Moura area. According to media sources, "Wagner's operations are mainly located in central Mali and mainly target the Fulani community, of which JNIM presents itself as the protector." JNIM has capitalized on these accusations with their propaganda framing the intentions of Bamako and its Kremlin-affiliated partners as an "ethnic war against Muslims."<sup>20</sup>

### ***Doctrine:***

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JNIM adheres to the Salafi strain of Islam followed by the al-Qaeda network. Like AQIM, JNIM perceives all non-Islamist governments as illegitimate and, accordingly, seeks to replace them in the countries in which the group operates.<sup>21</sup> Given that JNIM is an alliance of four separate jihadist groups, the goals and objectives of the group are regionally specific, with JNIM focusing on its influence across Mali and neighboring countries. The terrorist group reportedly seeks to preserve relations with local communities to expand their operational outreach. The organization also relies heavily on the idea of unity as the four groups that came together to form JNIM were once disjointed but are now serving under one banner.<sup>22</sup>

JNIM, as well as its affiliated groups, seeks to impose its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam on the region. However, there have been instances where the militants have attempted to judiciously approach their goals by adopting a system of shadow governance, allowing for some local autonomy in areas under JNIM's control.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Organizational Structure:***

Following the announcement of JNIM's formation in 2017, Ghaly claimed that the four AQIM factions had united "into one group" operating under "one emir" after al-Qaeda "sought unification according to Sharia law."<sup>24</sup> While operating under a new name and new emir, JNIM appears to remain under the aegis of al-Qaeda. Ghaly also stated that he renewed bayat (allegiance) to al-Qaeda founder Ayman al-Zawahiri, AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel, and Taliban emir Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the relationship between JNIM, AQIM, AAD, and al-Mourabitoun has shifted from collaboration to a structured hierarchy with AQIM at the top.<sup>26</sup>

AQIM oversees the allied militant groups and provides strategic guidance, direction, and resources. Although scholars claim the affiliates conform to JNIM's strategy, al-Mourabitoun has asserted that it will remain operationally autonomous from the larger group. Additionally, according to the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, JNIM was further supported by AQIM to reassert al-Qaeda's presence in Mali after France's intervention in the country in 2013.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to all al-Qaeda outfits, JNIM also has an emir or leader as its head. The emir is the ultimate authority on strategic and operative decisions and appoints officials to positions within the terror group. Iyad Ag Ghaly serves the role of JNIM's emir, and works closely with Abu Abdul Rahman al Sanhaji, the head judge and deputy leader of al-Mourabitoun, as well as [Yahya Abu Hammam](#), the emir of AQIM in West Africa and the Sahel, and [Amadou Kouffa](#), a JNIM senior leader and former emir of MLF.<sup>28</sup>

Ghaly also reportedly appoints regional emirs across Mali. [Salem Ould Breihmatt](#), an explosives expert designated as a terrorist by the U.S. and sanctioned by the EU, is the JNIM emir of Arbinda and Serma in the Mopti Region of Mali, and [Sidan Ag-Hitta](#), another senior JNIM leader designated as a terrorist by the U.S. and sanctioned by the EU, is the commander of Kidal Region, Mali.<sup>29</sup>

It is unknown whether JNIM has its own central decision-making body or if it defers to al-Qaeda central. However, JNIM has its own propaganda division, az-Zallaqa media production company, to promote narratives.<sup>30</sup> The most common themes among distributed content are martial prowess and jihad, victimization of Muslims primarily throughout the Sahel, and dehumanization of the enemy. Content published in az-Zallaqa includes images of training camps, drone shots of military formations, and videos of successful operations. The publication also features speeches from JNIM and AQIM leaders and announcements honoring the lives of JNIM militants, both dead and alive.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Financing:***

According to scholars on the region, JNIM's principal sources of funding are kidnappings and extortion. JNIM officials also reportedly tax smugglers and traffickers seeking safe transit through JNIM-controlled territories. Additionally, JNIM is reportedly facilitating cocaine-trafficking, human trafficking, and taxation on local populations within its area of control. The populations are allegedly taxed in exchange for goods and services, including "security" and "governance." It is uncertain if JNIM, like other al-Qaeda affiliates, receives funding from supporters abroad, including individuals and non-governmental organizations fronting as charities that divert funds towards the terror group.<sup>32</sup>

JNIM obtains significant funding from ransoms paid for the safe delivery of abductees, incentivizing the kidnapping of high-profile individuals such as local leaders and militiamen. Kidnapping persons with political clout also enables JNIM to destabilize local power structures and instill fear within targeted populations. While most abductees are Malian, one foreigner, South African Stephen McGown, was released by JNIM in July 2017 after an alleged ransom payment of 3.5 million euros.<sup>33</sup>

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### **Recruitment:**

In a 2018 interview in the al-Qaeda affiliated *al-Masra* newsletter, Ghaly stated that JNIM's military policy is to continue "expanding geographically as much as possible, undermining (the) enemy by attacking him wherever he may be, inciting the people to do the same and protecting them, and securing popular support."<sup>34</sup> JNIM follows the al-Qaeda blueprint of winning the hearts and minds of local populations to establish itself as a legitimate alternative to the Malian government.<sup>35</sup> JNIM reportedly uses revenue from its criminal operations to pay local Malians to join its ranks. Also, by providing basic services such as security and governance to local populations, JNIM projects itself as a viable organization that provides more resources and safety than the Malian government.<sup>36</sup>

Additionally, the jihadists have exploited intercommunal tension between Mali's Fulani and Dogon ethnic groups by recruiting along ethnic lines.<sup>37</sup> The age of Fulani have aligned with militant Islamist groups. Furthermore, those that took up arms with the insurgents have indirectly created a pathway to radicalization for other members in the Fulani community as increased stigmatization of their ethnic group could persuade the disaffected towards groups that provide outlets for acceptance and even vengeance.<sup>38</sup>

### **Training:**

JNIM boasts around 2,000 fighters spread throughout northern and central Mali.<sup>39</sup> According to imagery distributed by JNIM's propaganda arm, az-Zallaqa, JNIM trains these fighters in several training camps across Mali. Research published by the U.S. Department of Defense has stated that training operations consist of both physical exercises and propaganda. Additionally, trainees are given a manual of comprehensive instructions for conducting terror operations.<sup>40</sup>

In terms of weaponry, JNIM has likely exploited the proliferation of arms in West Africa. JNIM militants are reportedly skilled in crafting explosives, utilizing improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED), suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDS), and suicide vests. Additionally, because JNIM has adjusted its strategy to include more high-casualty and high-profile attacks, JNIM militants have amassed advanced military equipment from raids on army posts and police stations.<sup>41</sup>

### **Also known as:**

- Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin<sup>42</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ryan CK Hess, "Lassoing the Haboob: Countering Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin in Mali, Part I," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 133, [https://media.defense.gov/2020/Nov/23/2002540355/-1/-1/DO\\_HESS%20PART%201.PDF](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Nov/23/2002540355/-1/-1/DO_HESS%20PART%201.PDF) Rahma Bayrakdar, "Al Qaeda's Growing Threat to Senegal," *Critical Threats*, February 18, 2021, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/al-qaedas-growing-threat-to-senegal>.

<sup>2</sup> "Currently listed entities," Government of Canada, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrnt/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrmt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>.

<sup>4</sup> "Iyad Ag Ghali," United Nations Security Council, last updated September 23, 2014, [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/individual/iyad-ag-ghali](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/iyad-ag-ghali).

<sup>5</sup> "IYAD AG GHALI," United Nations Security Council, February 25, 2013, [https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq\\_sanctions\\_list/summaries/individual/iyad-ag-ghali](https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1267/aq_sanctions_list/summaries/individual/iyad-ag-ghali).

<sup>6</sup> Conor Gaffey, "Peacekeeping in Mali: The U.N.'s Most Dangerous Mission," *Newsweek*, June 12, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/mali-un-mission-northern-mali-conflict-aqim-africa-peacekeeping-468907>. Additionally, in early 2017, al-Mourabitoun established ties with local Libyan tribes and marginalized groups to further expand its operations into Libya. "Challenges in Countering Terrorism in Libya." Joint open briefing of the Counter Terrorism Committee, the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, and the Libya Sanctions Committee, June 22, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Concept-Note-Joint-open-briefing-on-Libya-22-Jun-17.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> "Challenges in Countering Terrorism in Libya," Joint open briefing of the Counter Terrorism Committee, the 1267/1989/2253 ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee, and the Libya Sanctions Committee, June 22, 2017, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Concept-Note-Joint-open-briefing-on-Libya-22-Jun-17.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda Groups Reorganize in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/analysis-al-qaeda-groups-reorganize-in-west-africa.php>; Lina Raafat, "The Schism of Jihadism in the Sahel: How Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are Battling for Legitimacy in the Sahelian Context," *Middle East Institute*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/schism-jihadism-sahel-how-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-are-battling-legitimacy-sahelian>.

<sup>9</sup> Iliam Assanvo and Ibrahim Maïga, "Mali's jihadist merger: desperate or dangerous?," *Institute for Security Studies*, April 3, 2017, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/malis-jihadist-merger-desperate-or-dangerous>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Islamic State Claims Al Qaeda Started a War in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/analysis-islamic-state-claims-al-qaeda-started-a-war-in-west-africa.php>; "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," U.S. Department of State, accessed August 15, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/#AAD>; Hauke Waszkewitz, "Jihadism's Staying Power in North

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**Key Leaders**



**Iyad Ag Ghaly**  
Emir



**Mokhtar Belmokhtar**  
Al-Mourabitoun emir, co-founder



**Mohamed Lahbous (a.k.a. Mohamed Ould Nouini)**  
Military commander of al-Mourabitoun and co-founder of JNIM (deceased)



**Abu Abdul Rahman al Sanhaji**  
Head judge and deputy leader of al-Mourabitoun, which he represents in JNIM



**Yahya Abu Hammam**  
AQIM senior leader in West Africa and the Sahel



**Amadou Kouffa**  
Senior leader of Jama'at Nusrat Al-Islam Wal-Muslimin, founder of Macina Liberation Front



**Salem Ould Breihmatt**  
Commander, Mopti Region



**Sidan Ag-Hitta**  
Commander, Kidal Region

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**Abu Dujana al-Qasimi**

Spokesman



**Abd al-Rahman Talha al-Libi**

Commander, Timbuktu Emirate



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**History:**

*Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM)*

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**Violent history:**

- **December 25, 2023:** JNIM militants ambush the Mourdiah military base in central Mali. The number of casualties is not confirmed, although JNIM later releases a statement claiming it killed “dozens” of soldiers.<sup>43</sup>
- **December 17, 2023:** JNIM releases Gerco van Deventer, a South African paramedic held by JNIM since 2018. The South African charity Gift of the Givers secured Van Deventer’s release for a sum of \$500,000. On November 3, 2017, Van Deventer was kidnapped in Libya south of the capital of Tripoli. About a year later, he was relocated to Mali and sold to JNIM.<sup>44</sup>
- **November 26, 2023:** JNIM militants carry out multiple attacks in Djibo, ambushing military bases, homes, and three displacement camps. At least 40 civilians are killed and another 42 are injured.<sup>45</sup>
- **November 26, 2023:** JNIM militants carry out multiple attacks in Djibo, ambushing military bases, homes, and three displacement camps. At least 40 civilians are killed and another 42 are injured.<sup>46</sup>
- **September 7, 2023:** JNIM militants carry out two attacks on a passenger boat near Timbuktu and an army base in Bamba. The attacks kill 64 people.<sup>47</sup>
- **April 23, 2023:** JNIM carries out a double suicide bombing in Sevare, central Mali. The explosions kill 13. The assailants reportedly targeted the camp as it was housing Russian combatants from the Wagner Group. That same day, JNIM militants ambush soldiers in the Koulikoro region, killing 10.<sup>48</sup>
- **April 18, 2023:** JNIM militants ambush an official Malian delegation near Nara. The ambush kills Assimi Goita's chief of staff along with at least three other people.<sup>49</sup>
- **January 2023:** JNIM carries out a number of attacks in the first few weeks of the year, killing at least 27 and wounding many others. On January 2, the group targets a defense post and a local toll station in Marka-coungo and Kassela, towns just outside of Bamako. The raids kill seven. On January 8, the militants ambush a gendarmerie post in Sebekoro, southwestern Mali, and a custom post in Didieni, north of Bamako. One soldier was killed that day. The group then targets Malian troops on January 10, carrying out assaults in the regions of Mopti and Segou. At least 14 soldiers are killed in the attacks. Another four soldiers were killed in another ambush north of Bamako in Kayes region on January 15. The geography of the attacks suggest JNIM is advancing closer to Bamako.<sup>50</sup>
- **November 24, 2022:** Suspected JNIM fighters ambush security forces in Kpendjal, north Togo. At least 17 soldiers are killed.<sup>51</sup>
- **October 29, 2022:** Suspected JNIM militants ambush a military convoy near Kikideni locality, eastern Mali. The attack kills at least 15 security forces.<sup>52</sup>
- **October 24, 2022:** Suspected JNIM militants attack a military barracks in Djibo, Burkina Faso. The attack kills at least 10 and injures 50 others.<sup>53</sup>
- **October 17, 2022:** A roadside bomb detonates near Tessalit, northern Mali. The explosion kills three U.N. peacekeepers and injures three others. Media sources believe al-Qaeda linked groups are responsible for placing IEDs in the area.<sup>54</sup>
- **October 14, 2022:** A passenger bus strikes an IED in Bandiagara region, central Mali. The explosion kills 10 and injures dozens more. No group claims responsibility, but the Malian government believes the MLF is responsible.<sup>55</sup>
- **September 26, 2022:** JNIM militants ambush a military convoy taking supplies to a town in Gaskinde, northern Burkina Faso. The militants kill 11 soldiers and injure 28 others, including 20 soldiers. The military reports 50 other soldiers are missing.<sup>56</sup>
- **August 13, 2022:** JNIM ambushes Russian mercenaries in Bandiagara central Mali. The attack kills four soldiers. The Russian private military firm Wagner Group does not comment on the attack.<sup>57</sup>
- **August 11, 2022:** JNIM militants detonate an explosive device in Niamey, Niger’s capital. The explosion kills two.<sup>58</sup>
- **August 4, 2022:** JNIM militants launch several attacks in Bam province, Burkina Faso. The attacks kill four soldiers and nine civilians.<sup>59</sup>
- **August 1, 2022:** JNIM fighters ambush Garbougna village, Tillabéri Region, northwest Niger. The attack kills three civilians.<sup>60</sup>
- **July 23, 2022:** MLF fighters ambush Mali’s main military base in Kati. The militants kill at least one soldier and injure six others. The terror group claims the attack was a response to governmental collaboration with Russian mercenaries.<sup>61</sup>
- **June 17, 2022:** Suspected MLF militants launch a series of attacks in the village of Diallassagou and two surrounding towns in the Bankass circle of central Mali. The attacks kill more than 130 civilians.<sup>62</sup>

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- **May 11, 2022:** JNIM militants ambush security forces in Kpekankandi, Togo, near the border of Burkina Faso. The militants kill eight Togolese soldiers and injure 13 others. The attack demonstrates JNIM's expanding geographical operations, as they have threatened not only Mali, but northern parts of coastal Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Togo.<sup>63</sup>
  - **April 24, 2022:** Militants launch three attacks on army bases in Sevare, Niono, and Bapho, central Mali. The attacks kill six soldiers and injure 20 others. The MLF claims responsibility.<sup>64</sup>
  - **March 29, 2021:** Unidentified assailants attack an army post near Kafolo, Ivory Coast, killing two. Later that day, a police post is attacked in Tehini, killing a gendarme. Although no group claims responsibility, it is suspected that the assailants belong to the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), a JNIM affiliate.<sup>65</sup>
  - **December 28, 2020:** An armed vehicle carrying French soldiers strikes an explosive device in Mali, killing three. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>66</sup>
  - **September 6, 2019:** JNIM militants ambush an army patrol in Soum province, Burkina Faso. One soldier and five assailants are killed.<sup>67</sup>
  - **March 17, 2019:** Gunmen launch an overnight raid on a military base in the village of Dioura in the Mopti region, killing at least 23 soldiers. The gunmen briefly seize the military base. Malian officials suspect jihadist militants linked to a Tuareg militia and al-Qaeda. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>68</sup>
  - **February 22, 2019:** French troops carry out an operation involving air and ground assets in Timbuktu, killing several militants, including Yahya Abu Hammam, JNIM's second in command.<sup>69</sup>
  - **November 12, 2018:** Three Malians are killed and 30 wounded when two suicide bombers detonate vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices near U.N.-owned villas in the city of Gao. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>70</sup>
  - **August 30, 2019:** JNIM attacks a military base in Tongomayel, Burkina Faso. One soldier is injured in the attack. The militants claim to have captured vehicles, weapons, and ammunition, and to have blown up the barracks.<sup>71</sup>
  - **July 30, 2018:** JNIM fires 10 mortars at a polling station in the Northern Mali town of Aguelhok, temporarily disrupting voting for the presidential elections.<sup>72</sup>
  - **July 29, 2018:** Militants attack polling stations and burn ballot boxes in several towns in northern and central Mali. Local officials accuse JNIM affiliate al-Mourabitoun.<sup>73</sup>
  - **July 1, 2018:** A JNIM suicide bomber attacks a French military patrol in the city of Gao, killing two civilians and wounding dozens.<sup>74</sup>
  - **June 29, 2018:** A suicide bomber and infantry attack on the G5-Sahel headquarters in Sevare, Mali, leaves six dead. No group officially claims responsibility, but authorities suspect JNIM.<sup>75</sup>
  - **April 14, 2018:** Four JNIM suicide bombers attack the Timbuktu airport using vehicles disguised as U.N. and Malian military vehicles. One U.N. peacekeeper and at least 15 attackers are killed.<sup>76</sup>
  - **March 2, 2018:** Simultaneous attacks on the French embassy and an army headquarters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, leave seven Malian soldiers and nine attackers dead. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>77</sup>
  - **December 28, 2017:** Two IED attacks destroy at least one Malian army vehicle. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>78</sup>
  - **November 24, 2017:** Four U.N. peacekeepers and a Malian soldier are killed in two separate attacks near Indelimane and Douentza, Mali. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>79</sup>
  - **October 26, 2017:** Three U.N. peacekeepers are killed in an IED attack on a road between Aguelhok and Tessalit, Mali. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>80</sup>
  - **October 25, 2017:** JNIM attacks guards for the French company SATOM, burning several trucks and killing both civilians and soldiers.<sup>81</sup>
  - **October 23, 2017:** JNIM attacks two separate police posts in the Segou region of Mali and ambushes a Malian vehicle near Tenenkou.<sup>82</sup>
  - **August 3, 2017:** A JNIM IED wounds four French soldiers near Tessalit, Mali.<sup>83</sup>
  - **July 17, 2017:** JNIM is suspected of firing mortars at a French-U.N. military base in Tessalit, Mali.<sup>84</sup>
  - **July 8, 2017:** JNIM wounds three French soldiers with an IED near Tessalit, Mali.<sup>85</sup>
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- **June 18, 2017:** AQIM kills at least two civilians and three members of security forces in an attack on a resort near Bamako, Mali.<sup>86</sup>
- **June 1, 2017:** Several French soldiers are wounded in a mortar attack on a U.N. peacekeeping camp in Timbuktu. JNIM claims responsibility.<sup>87</sup>
- **May 3, 2017:** At least one U.N. peacekeeper is killed and nine others wounded when a U.N. base in the northern city of Timbuktu is hit by rocket fire. The U.N. reports that JNIM claims responsibility for the attack.<sup>88</sup>
- **April 5, 2017:** A JNIM IED kills a French soldier in Mali.<sup>89</sup>
- **March 5, 2017:** AQIM, under its new name Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), attacks a military base in central Mali, killing 11 soldiers.<sup>90</sup>

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**Designations:**

*Designations by the U.S. Government:*

- **February 26, 2013:** The U.S. Department of State designates Iyad ag Ghali as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.<sup>91</sup>
- **September 5, 2018:** The U.S. Department of State designates JNIM as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (under Executive Order 13224).<sup>92</sup>
- **August 21, 2019:** The U.S. Department of State designates Salem Ould Breihmatt and Sidan Ag-Hitta as Specially Designated Global Terrorists.<sup>93</sup>

*Designations by Foreign Governments and Organizations:*

- European Union—adds Sidan Ag-Hitta and Salem Ould Breihmatt to its terrorism sanctions list on June 20, 2022.<sup>94</sup>
- United Nations—adds Iyad ag Ghali to its sanctions list on February 25, 2013.<sup>95</sup>

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### Associations:

#### *Ties to Extremist Entities:*

- [ISIS](#)

For two years following JNIM's founding, al-Qaeda and ISIS militants across the Sahel united under a common banner to expel Western forces from the region. According to military leaders from the United States, France, and West Africa, the militants carried out increasingly forceful attacks targeting villages and army bases. However, on May 8, 2020, it was reported in ISIS's weekly *al-Naba* newspaper that al-Qaeda started a "war" against ISIS militants in West Africa. *Al-Naba* criticized JNIM's leadership, specifically Iyad Ag Ghaly and Amadou Kouffa, for undermining jihad in favor of negotiating with the Malian government. JNIM sought to diffuse the tension by releasing booklets—indirectly targeted at ISIS sympathizers skeptical of JNIM's motives—calling for unity among all jihadists.<sup>96</sup>

On May 7, 2020, ISIS revealed in *al-Naba* that it engaged in tense clashes with al-Qaeda militants in Mali and Burkina Faso. ISIS accused JNIM of instigating the violence as the jihadist camp allegedly mobilized large forces to attack and prevent supplies from getting to ISIS strongholds in Mali and Burkina Faso. According to ISIS, JNIM amped up attacks beginning April 17. Unverified claims from JNIM sources insist that ISIS proposed a ceasefire on May 5, but it was rejected by JNIM. Furthermore, on May 28, ISIS released a statement on Telegram claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic served as punishment for the forces that have fought against ISIS. Additionally, ISIS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi claimed that ISIS would retaliate against al-Qaeda in Africa due to attacks initiated by the latter insurgent camp. Although specific countries are not listed, Mali and Burkina Faso have since seen increasingly hostile clashes between ISIS and JNIM forces.<sup>97</sup>

- [Ansarul Islam](#)

Ansarul Islam is a Burkinabe splinter group of JNIM.<sup>98</sup> Ibrahim Malam Dicko was an ethnic Peul commander who founded the local insurgency in the northern provinces of Burkina Faso in 2016.<sup>99</sup> As of 2022, Ansarul Islam primarily consists of Peul fighters who mostly carry out attacks in northern and eastern Burkina Faso as well as near the borders of Mali and Niger.<sup>100</sup>

According to media sources, Ibrahim Dicko died in May 2017 of thirst and exhaustion following a French-led raid on the jihadist group's hideout in Foulsaré forest. Jafar Dicko, who was reportedly influenced by Amadou Koufa, the leader of Katibat Macina, quickly replaced his brother. Scholars on the region claim that Dicko lacks his brother's leadership skills, leading to less activity from the group.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Danielle Paquette and Joby Warrick, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Groups Are Working Together in West Africa to Grab Large Swaths of Territory," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-islamic-state-sahel-west-africa/2020/02/21/7218bc50-536f-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-islamic-state-sahel-west-africa/2020/02/21/7218bc50-536f-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html); Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Islamic State Claims Al Qaeda Started a War in West Africa," *Long War Journal*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/05/analysis-islamic-state-claims-al-qaeda-started-a-war-in-west-africa.php>; Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: JNIM Addresses Detractors, Sends Message of Unity," *Long War Journal*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/analysis-jnim-addresses-detractors-sends-message-of-unity.php>

<sup>97</sup> Mina al-Lami, "Africa's Sahel Becomes Latest al-Qaeda-IS Battleground," *BBC News*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52614579>; Hassan I. Hassan, Twitter post, May 27, 2020, 5:54 p.m., <https://twitter.com/hxhassan/status/1266019995659702273>.

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<sup>99</sup> "Ansarul Islam," Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, accessed August 6, 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansarul-islam>.

<sup>100</sup> "EU Fight against Terrorism: One Group and Three Individuals Added to the EU Sanctions List over Terrorism," Council of the European Union, June 20, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/20/eu-fight-against-terrorism-one-group-and-three-individuals-added-to-the-eu-sanctions-list-over-terrorism>; "Ansarul Islam," Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, accessed August 6, 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/ansarul-islam>.

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### **Media Coverage:**

#### *JNIM Formation*

Upon the announcement of JNIM's formation, media coverage volleyed between two narratives. Some media sources such as *Newsweek* claimed the merger was an attempt by al-Qaeda to reassert influence against the growing presence of ISIS in the region, while other sources, such as the Associated Press, claimed the extremist group was opportunistic of Mali's ongoing crisis.<sup>102</sup> Given Mali's fragile security environment, and Bamako's increasingly strained and underequipped security forces, JNIM was faced with favorable circumstances to assert power in the region. Morocco World News noted that JNIM's formation was not only a threat to Mali, but to North Africa as well, as other radical groups will look to JNIM and attempt to "carry out other attacks, larger in number and scale." Saad Eddine Lamzouwaq, "ISIS, AQIM, and Polisario: How Do Terrorist Threats in the Sahel Affect Morocco?," *Morocco World News*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/06/218501/isis-aqim-and-polisario-terrorist-threats-sahel-affect-morocco>. Following JNIM's announcement, France 24 mentioned that neighboring governments will come to see Mali "as a launchpad [for extremists] for attacks against other countries in the region." Accordingly, Africa News noted that Mali's delay in implementing the necessary security forces in its jihadist-heavy northern region has made neighboring west African countries vulnerable to increased attacks.<sup>103</sup>

Online publication Middle East Eye as well as Morocco World News, focused on the internal shifts among violent extremist groups in the region. Leaders who lost sway within their local groups, such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar of al-Mourabitoun, shifted allegiance to JNIM to reassert their authority within the AQIM network.<sup>104</sup> Other media sources focused on how JNIM was the manifestation of AQIM's resilience. According to Alia Brahimi of Al Jazeera, AQIM "withstood the chokehold of the Algerian security services, U.S. drones, and the French-led intervention in Mali, to launch a range of attacks in recent years, whether storming a beach resort in Ivory Coast or conducting a low-level insurgency in northern Mali."<sup>105</sup>

France 24 further noted that since the four local leaders were all in the same video, they easily can collaborate and meet with one another, demonstrating "that it is impossible to monitor this huge region militarily."<sup>106</sup> The immediacy in which JNIM's leadership could convene within what Saad Eddine Lamzouwaq of Morocco World News called a "geographical safe haven" is critical when each leader has "ties with local ethnic communities and tribes" that can be leveraged against the "weakness of some central governments."<sup>107</sup>

As of 2022, international coverage on JNIM remains frequent as the insurgent group has subjected Mali to increasing levels of violence for the past five years with no prospect of slowing down. Although media sources are not always precise in their differentiation of attacks attributed to JNIM or AQIM, the consensus remains that the terror group remains beyond the control of Malian and foreign forces.

<sup>102</sup> Conor Gaffey, *Newsweek*, June 6, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-africa-al-qaeda-africa-boko-haram-621443>; "3 Mali Islamic extremist groups merge, pledge to al-Qaeda," Associated Press, March 2, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/3-mali-islamic-extremist-groups-merge-pledge-to-al-qaeda>.

<sup>103</sup> "Islamist groups in Mali merge, pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda," Africa News, March 3, 2017, <https://www.africanews.com/2017/03/03/islamist-groups-in-mali-merge-and-pledge-allegiance-to-al-qaeda/>.

<sup>104</sup> Malek Bachir, "EXCLUSIVE: Notorious leader of Saharan al-Qaeda group loses power," Middle East Eye, May 9, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-notorious-leader-saharan-al-qaeda-group-loses-power>; Hassan Masiky, "Algerian Ineptitude Leads to Resurgence of Al-Qaeda Across the Sahel and Sahara," Morocco World News, March 8, 2017, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/03/210406/algerian-ineptitude-leads-resurgence-al-qaeda-across-sahel-sahara>.

<sup>105</sup> Alia Brahimi, "ISIL after Mosul: Insurgency and rivalry," Al Jazeera, March 19, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/3/19/isil-after-mosul-insurgency-and-rivalry>.

<sup>106</sup> "Three jihadi groups active in Mali announce merger," France 24, March 3, 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170303-three-jihadi-groups-mali-announce-merger-al-qaeda>.

<sup>107</sup> Saad Eddine Lamzouwaq, "ISIS, AQIM, and Polisario: How Do Terrorist Threats in the Sahel Affect Morocco?," Morocco World News, June 2, 2017, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/06/218501/isis-aqim-and-polisario-terrorist-threats-sahel-affect-morocco>.



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**Rhetoric:**

*JNIM statement, July 2022*

“We say to the Bamako government: if you have the right to hire mercenaries to kill the defenseless innocent people, then we have the right to destroy you and target you.”<sup>108</sup>

*Iyad Ag Ghaly, April 3, 2017*

*In an interview with al-Qaeda's al-Massar publication:*

“Our enemies are the enemies of the Muslim people, Jews and Christians, but France remains our historic enemy in this part of the Islamic world. France and its supporters, such as the US, Germany, Sweden, and West African countries that have joined them: Chad, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Niger.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “Al-Qaeda affiliate claims attack on Mali military base,” Deutsche Welle, July 23, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/al-qaeda-affiliate-claims-attack-on-malis-largest-military-base/a-62574838>.

<sup>109</sup> Malek Bachir, “France is our first enemy, says 'emir' of new al-Qaeda affiliate,” April 7, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/france-our-first-enemy-says-emir-new-al-qaeda-affiliate>.