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AQIM and Its Allies in Mali

[Andrew Lebovich](#)

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Although France's intervention likely staved off jihadist control over strategically crucial areas of Mali, AQIM and other factions will probably regroup.

The recent attack on the In Amenas gas facility in Algeria has brought renewed attention to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other jihadists in northern Mali. U.S. intelligence officials have indicated that AQIM may be planning attacks on Western targets, yet these officials are struggling to grasp the complex nature of the jihadist groups in the region. Many have interpreted reports of divisions within AQIM as signs of an embattled movement. Yet Washington must understand that although jihadist factions sometimes differ in focus, strategy, and operations, they continue, to some extent, to cooperate and work toward common goals.

Alongside AQIM, the key players that have emerged over the past fourteen months are Ansar al-Din, founded in November 2011 by the powerful Malian Tuareg figure Iyad Ag Ghali; the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO, to use the French acronym), announced in December 2011; and most recently, al-Muwaqun Bi-Dima, created in December 2012 by former AQIM commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar.

AQIM AND ANSAR AL-DIN

While relations between AQIM and Ansar al-Din were at least publicly ambiguous before and in the months after the January 2012 outbreak of the Tuareg rebellion in Mali led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), some analysts insist that the two cooperated from Ansar al-Din's creation. Press reports indicate that by early 2012, Ansar al-Din had acquired greater numbers of fighters -- including AQIM fighters under the command of Ag Ghali's cousin, AQIM commander Hamada Ag Hama -- and weapons from diverse sources. AQIM fighters are also believed to have taken part in fighting in the first months of the rebellion.

After the fall of northern Mali in late March and early April, Ansar al-Din exerted nominal control over the cities of Kidal and Timbuktu, as well as other villages. However, AQIM's presence in areas purportedly under Ansar al-Din's control was always part of the everyday reality. Ag Ghali, Belmokhtar, AQIM commander Abou Zeid, and AQIM's now-deceased Saharan emir Nabil Abu Alqama reportedly met in Timbuktu after the city fell. Abou Zeid as well as the current Saharan emir, Yahya Abou el-Hammam, quickly established themselves in the city, while Alqama was repeatedly seen in Kidal before his death in August. Additionally, the most visible face of Ansar al-Din in Timbuktu before and in the first days after the Islamist offensive was Sanda Ould Boumama, an Arab from Timbuktu who was previously suspected of being a member of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and subsequently AQIM. Boumama's presence in the group is emblematic of Ansar al-Din's efforts to demonstrate local recruitment in both northern and southern Malian communities.

Still, the relationship between these groups remained publicly unclear, and Ansar al-Din in turn nurtured these ambiguities as different factions within the group jockeyed for position and some sought a political solution to the violence in northern Mali that would stave off military intervention. Ag Ghali endorsed Burkina Faso-led mediation efforts on behalf of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with various Ansar al-Din leaders, including Ag Ghali, reportedly traveling to Algiers to partake in Algeria's own assiduous efforts to separate Ansar al-Din from AQIM and MUJAO. The January offensive, however, ended speculation that Ag Ghali in particular could be pulled away from AQIM and MUJAO, and the open cooperation among Ansar al-Din, AQIM, and MUJAO elements seemingly highlights Ag Ghali's commitment to the overall jihadist cause. The offensive also prompted the January 23 announcement by influential leaders from Ag Ghali's Ifoghas tribe of a new group, the Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad, or MIA. The leaders behind this group said that they intended to work for a negotiated settlement to the conflict in northern Mali, and they have quickly distanced themselves from Ag Ghali.

MUJAO: THE SPLINTER THAT WASN'T

MUJAO first announced its existence by taking credit for the kidnapping of three aid workers from Spain and Italy in October 2011 in the Algerian province of Tindouf. The group described itself as a breakaway from AQIM, criticizing the former's lack of dedication to jihad in favor of criminal activity. With the seizure of the northern Mali came a visible public change in MUJAO's relationship with the other jihadist groups. MUJAO, Ansar al-Din, and AQIM appeared to have roughly divided northern Mali's three regions amongst themselves, with MUJAO responsible for Gao and its environs.

In particular, the seizure of the north prompted MUJAO to settle its differences with AQIM, according to some observers; this peace was purportedly brokered by Ansar al-Din. In particular since April 2012, MUJAO has pursued a dual strategy that is at varying times hyperlocal and regional/international; originally believed to be composed largely of Mauritians and Gao Arabs, the group is rumored to have benefited from the support of local businessmen and notables believed to be linked to various illicit trafficking. All the same, residents' jubilant reaction to MUJAO's expulsion from Gao shows how little support it actually enjoyed. Nevertheless, the group has recruited regionally and internationally, recently flaunting a very diverse leadership hailing from Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, among other countries.

For all the recent jostling, the lines between the jihadist groups have always been blurred. For instance, while genuine animosities and divisions may have separated MUJAO's leaders from other AQIM commanders, several of these leaders were reportedly close to Belmokhtar and had spent years operating with him. It is no surprise, then, that Belmokhtar quickly set up his base of operations in Gao and reportedly provided crucial military assistance to MUJAO's fighters during various battles with the MNLA. Nor is it entirely surprising that MUJAO, an organization ostensibly founded to spread jihad in West Africa, largely struck Algerian targets, both in Algeria and in Mali -- possible precursors to the In Amenas assault, which took place under Belmokhtar's orders.

BELMOKHTAR: INDEPENDENT OPERATOR?

Even after Belmokhtar was purportedly "suspended" from the command of his battalion by AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel (a.k.a. Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud) in October 2012, he appears to have simply taken his fighters with him. According to MUJAO leaders, up until the French intervention, MUJAO fighters controlled Gao in conjunction with members of Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathimin. Moreover, the attack perpetrated on the In Amenas gas plant in Algeria by Belmokhtar's "new" group, al-Muwaqun Bi-Dima, also reportedly involved several commanders who had spent a number of years fighting alongside Belmokhtar.

However, Belmokhtar's separation from AQIM, apparently after divergences from AQIM's senior leadership, does not appear to have significantly impeded AQIM's operations. The In Amenas attack was reportedly planned for at least two months, meaning planning began during or just after Belmokhtar's purported departure. Further, it did not impede the movement of fighters and even commanders between different groups. This movement is best exemplified by Omar Ould Hamaha, a longtime AQIM member close to Belmokhtar (and possibly his father-in-law) who has since April 2012 been publicly identified as a leader in each of Mali's jihadist groups.

IMPLICATIONS

Evidence suggests that either the divisions between these militant groups are not significant enough to have a visible impact on operations or that the public narrative about divisions within these groups obscures a very different reality -- though these two possibilities are not mutually exclusive. There are, broadly speaking, two possible explanations.

First, ideological ties and goals shared by the jihadists and the fall of the north in April 2012 allowed them to overcome their differences. Each group remains committed to the implementation of sharia, and the groups' key leaders remain focused on Mali, even while attacking in Algeria and elsewhere.

Second, the divisions between these groups were always less significant than they appeared to be. It is also possible that the creation of MUJAO was part of what could be termed a "managed separation," whereby AQIM allowed itself to fragment in order to seek new opportunities for financing and recruitment while permitting other parts of the organization to focus on different populations or areas of operation. This could help explain why MUJAO was able to so quickly cooperate with an organization it had previously spurned, and the continued influence of leaders like Belmokhtar on the new organization could help explain why its military activities diverged so widely from its stated goals and targets.

FUTURE RISKS

As the French-led intervention progresses, there are risks as well as possible opportunities to deal with the jihadist groups. While cooperation, shared goals, and personnel exist between these groups, important differences and conflicts of personalities remain. Washington and its allies in Paris, in coordination with Algiers, should exploit these conflicts and attempt to accelerate any fragmentation among militant groups.

Additionally, there is a strong possibility that fighters could seek safe haven in other neighboring countries. Therefore, Washington should encourage greater border coordination and lines of communication so that these countries can rapidly join efforts and share intelligence. This kind of coordinated strategy could help inhibit the freedom of movement of militants without requiring a heavy investment in the kinds of kinetic counterterrorism tools, like armed drones, that can put civilian populations at risk.

Ultimately, the rapidly evolving circumstances make it difficult for even the most informed observers to really know where things will head in the near term. As such, Washington along with its allies in Western European and regional capitals must prepare for worst-case scenarios related to spillover, attempted attacks either at home or abroad, and a possible return to insurgent activities. While France preemptively intervened and likely staved off jihadist control of strategically crucial areas of Mali, the overall instability in the region and precedent from other jihadist organizations suggest that AQIM and its allies will likely lie low, regroup, and attempt to fight another day.

Andrew Lebovich is an analyst based in Dakar, Senegal, focusing on regional political and security issues.