Warning from the Sahel: Al Qaeda’s Resurgent Threat
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Key Points

- The combination of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)’s objectives, close ties to al Qaeda, support from aggrieved populations, and ability to field and regenerate advanced attack capabilities make it a potent long-term threat to US and European interests.

- AQIM’s objectives are to force the West to retreat from the region and to lead a Salafi-jihadi insurgency against current regimes. Its ultimate aim is to establish Islamic emirates in Africa that will unify into a caliphate.

- The US, France, and their partners need to renew their efforts to counter al Qaeda in the Sahel or risk AQIM developing a latent threat capability that may be directed against the US homeland or interests with little to no warning.

Al Qaeda is setting conditions in the Sahel that will threaten US and European interests. The Sahel is the transitional zone between Northern Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Al Qaeda’s affiliate there, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), is developing capabilities that threaten American interests in West Africa in a way that does not raise red flags in Washington. Its operations seem to be part of localized fighting, and its attacks remain below the threshold for a US or Western response. However, the combination of its objectives, close ties to al Qaeda, support from aggrieved populations, and ability to field and regenerate advanced attack capabilities make it a potent long-term threat. Western leaders make a serious mistake in underestimating the danger AQIM will pose in the future.

AQIM’s objectives are to force the West to retreat from the region and to lead a Salafi-jihadi insurgency against current regimes. It has killed two Americans in the past year while attacking West African hotels and retains the intent and capability to carry out similar attacks in the region, although it does not now pose a direct threat to the US homeland. Multinational corporations in the region, including US-based companies, are also among AQIM’s named targets.

Its ultimate aim is to establish Islamic emirates in Africa that will unify into a caliphate. AQIM is building a network among populations that do not necessarily share its ideology by successfully co-opting ethnic disputes and grievances in Mali. These methods are similar to those used by other al Qaeda affiliates, such as Jabhat al Nusra in Syria.
and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen.\(^3\) Integration into the local population will complicate future efforts to disaggregate and degrade AQIM’s network.

The increasing sophistication of AQIM’s attacks is a dangerous sign that the group is gaining strength despite ongoing international counterterrorism operations. It can now conduct attacks from the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea down to the Gulf of Guinea—a dramatic expansion of its reach over the past few years. It fields advanced terrorist capabilities in Mali, reconstituted after the 2013 French military intervention, and can use these capabilities against targets hundreds of miles away from its Malian sanctuary. Western efforts to contain, let alone defeat, al Qaeda in the Sahel region are failing.

**Interconnection with Local Ethnic Groups**

AQIM is building a support base and resiliency by integrating into local communities and deliberately developing constituencies within different ethnic groups. It co-opts local ethnic disputes and grievances to establish itself within

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**Figure 1. Ansar al Din and MUJAO Southward Advance: March 30, 2012-January 10, 2013**

* Ansar al Din and MUJAO seized Kidal in March 2012 with a coalition of secular Tuareg separatist groups during a Tuareg rebellion. Ansar al Din and MUJAO pushed out and defeated the secularists before seizing Gao in June 2012.

groups that may not share its ideology, but that share short-term objectives. It fosters relationships first along pragmatic lines—offering military capabilities or other resources to these groups—and elevates like-minded local powerbrokers to leadership positions in order to influence the decision-making process.

AQIM expanded its Malian base originally through a connection to the Tuareg ethnic group. Tuaregs left Libya and returned to northern Mali in 2011 after the collapse of the Qadhafi regime. The Tuaregs’ return sparked a renewed push for the liberation of the Azawad region in northern Mali, marginalized under the Malian state. AQIM leadership reached into the Malian Tuaregs through Iyad ag Ghaly, a local powerbroker who had served as an AQIM middleman. Ag Ghaly founded Ansar al Din, a Tuareg Salafi-jihadi group, in December 2011 at the behest of AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel. Ansar al Din, like nearly all of the al Qaeda-linked groups established at the time, did not bear the al Qaeda brand name and downplayed relations with AQIM. The group co-opted a Tuareg rebellion in 2012 by initially coordinating with Tuareg militias.

Ansar al Din then attempted to defeat the secularists and establish an Islamic state in northern Mali. Ansar al Din, along with an AQIM splinter group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), then began a southward advance to seize towns in central Mali, as depicted in Figure 1.

Tuareg grievances against the Malian state continue to generate space for AQIM to operate. Ansar al Din remains an insurgent force in northern Mali. Tuareg groups, such as the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), continue to challenge the state’s authority. AQIM’s links with local ethnic groups through its affiliates are shown in Figure 2.

The al Qaeda affiliate in Mali replicated its success among the Tuaregs with another ethnic group within which Ansar al Din may have supported the establishment of a new Islamist militia group. The Massina Liberation Front (MLF) operates in central Mali and claimed its first attack in January 2015. It draws heavily from the Fulani (Peul) people, who are primarily Muslim pastoralists from Senegal and Mauritania, found across West Africa to the Lake Chad region.
as shown in Figure 3.10 Amadou Koufa,11 the leader of the MLF, fought alongside Ansar al Din in the past.12 AQIM probably intended to attract broader support among the Fulani through creation of an independent group.

AQIM continues to expand its network in Mali through the country’s ethnic groups, increasing its overall strength. The MLF coordinated with a secular Fulani militia, the National Alliance for the Safeguarding of Peul Identity and the Restoration of Justice (ANSIPRJ), in an attack against a Malian army base in Nampala, in central Mali near the Mauritanian border, on July 17, 2016. AQIM militants may have also participated in the attack, according to a Malian army spokesman.13 The militants temporarily took control of the base, seizing weapons and vehicles before setting it on fire. Both the MLF and ANSIPRJ claimed responsibility for the attack.14 ANSIPRJ was established as a non-Islamist and nonseparatist group to protect the Fulani (Peul) from Malian army violations.15 The short-term alignment of the secular militias’ objectives with those of the AQIM network creates conditions similar to those in 2012 that enabled AQIM to carve out a stronghold in Mali initially. The ongoing conflict preserves ground conditions that have enabled AQIM to rebuild its capabilities in northern Mali.

French Intervention and AQIM Reconstitution

A French military intervention in 2013 disrupted the capabilities of AQIM and its affiliates in Mali. The French failed to convert this temporary disruption into a sustained degradation of the group’s capabilities. AQIM achieved resurgence after the French military claimed success and shifted focus to a regional counterterrorism mission in 2014.

AQIM greatly increased its capabilities in the Sahel in 2012. Ansar al Din and MUJAO worked within the Tuareg rebellion to establish control over terrain, and then began enforcing shari’a law by mid-summer 2012 in northern Mali.16 AQIM’s
affiliates routed secular resistance to their control in northern Mali and established what Ansar al Din called the Islamic Republic of the Azawad. A UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 2085) authorized and accelerated the timeline of the one-year deployment of an African-led force to recapture northern Mali in December 2012.

Ansar al Din and allied militias began a rapid advance to the south that threatened to capture the Mopti region in central Mali in early January 2013. This southward advance prompted the French military to begin Operation Serval with US military communications and transport support on January 11, 2013. The French-led offensive rapidly regained control of central Mali and key strongholds, including Ansar al Din’s de facto capital in Timbuktu in northern Mali. French military operations degraded Ansar al Din and MUJAO, targeting command and logistics centers.

French operations degraded AQIM’s military capabilities as measured by the group’s ability to conduct explosive attacks. The deployment of French and African troops to Mali predictably led to an initial uptick in explosive attacks in February and March 2013 as AQIM attacked the arriving forces. AQIM and its affiliates used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to disrupt the militaries’ ability to maneuver in northern Mali. The number of IED attacks dropped throughout the remainder of 2013, however, as French forces routed AQIM from its strongholds and conducted raids against AQIM-linked cells. The number of AQIM suicide attacks also dropped in 2013, possibly because of the French disruption of training camps and an absence of ready recruits in the face of a more powerful military force. There were no suicide attacks in Mali—a hallmark technique of Salafi-jihadi groups—in the first half of 2014.

French success against AQIM led to a transfer of authority from the French military to the African-led force that had been rehatted as a UN peacekeeping force. The UN established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013. MINUSMA forces have a peace-enforcing mandate, which permits them to use all necessary measures to stabilize the country and reestablish the Malian government’s authority. The French drawdown in Mali began in 2014. The French mission transitioned from an operation to restore Malian sovereignty and counter AQIM in Mali to a regional counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane, in July 2014.

The MINUSMA forces were not as well trained or as capable as the French forces, creating an opportunity for AQIM to reconstitute its network and rebuild its strength in northern Mali. AQIM had already gone through a reorganization process in Mali in August 2013; MUJAO, the AQIM splinter group, formally merged with a second AQIM splinter to form the al Murabitoun Brigade. Reports began emerging in early 2014 that Ansar al Din commanders were returning to strongholds in northern Mali. Figure 4 depicts the degradation of AQIM during the French intervention and its resurgence after the French withdrawal.

AQIM’s network reconstituted its IED capabilities by summer 2014, when the IED attack frequency began to increase, as seen in Figure 4. The rate of IED attacks in 2016 is higher than in winter 2013, the last time that IED attacks peaked in northern Mali, and it continues to accelerate. The number of IED attacks during the first half of 2016 nearly doubled the number of attacks during the same period in 2015. The temporary degradation in AQIM’s capabilities appears to have worn off.

In fact, AQIM’s affiliates in Mali continue to reconstitute and evolve more sophisticated attack method. AQIM conducted a Ramadan 2016 campaign, consisting of sustained low-level IED attacks in northern and central Mali and a coordinated media campaign from Ansar al Din and al Murabitoun. The number of IED attacks during Ramadan 2016 (June 5–July 5) surpassed the total number of attacks in the preceding month. AQIM also began conducting complex attacks—small- and medium-arms fire combined with an IED attack—over the past year to target MINUSMA forces on the ground. Only the AQIM splinter group, MUJAO, had demonstrated this capability before 2015. MUJAO conducted one complex attack in 2013, during its attempt to retake the city of Gao from the French during Operation Serval.
Suicide attacks are another advanced tactic that AQIM-affiliated groups in Mali used regularly. As AQIM and its affiliates resurged following the French intervention, they began deploying suicide bombers in July 2014 after seven months without a suicide attack. The majority of the initial attacks in 2014 and early 2015 targeted MINUSMA and French forces, with...
An Advanced Insurgency

AQIM is improving its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). The complex attacks combine two capabilities the groups had already developed: tactical ground operations and explosive attacks. They require a certain level of planning and training to conduct, indicating an improvement in the command-and-control cell within Mali. The tempo of the complex attacks has also been increasing throughout the first half of 2016. The suicide attacks require a steady supply of recruits, implying that the AQIM network has a sizeable recruiting pool, the ability to vet potential bombers, and training capabilities. The dispersion of the capability to conduct attacks among AQIM’s networked affiliates in Mali indicates a centralized effort to create redundancy of the capability among affiliated groups.

AQIM’s expansion has enlarged its target set to include hotels frequented by Westerners—tourists, NGO workers, and UN workers—reflecting this new set of capabilities and concerted efforts to target countries contributing troops to the MINUSMA mission. AQIM and Ansar al Din threatened countries that support the MINUSMA mission in the past, specifically the Ivory Coast in July 2015. AQIM attacked two hotels in southern Mali, in Sevare on August 7, 2015 and in Bamako on November 11, 2015, before striking beyond Mali’s borders. These attacks may have been practice runs before AQIM externalized the effort. It attacked the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on January 15, 2016, and the beachfront and the L’Etoile du Sud Hotel in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast, on March 13, 2016.

The success of AQIM’s hotel attacks revealed the development of the group’s capabilities, using well-trained teams that operated efficiently. Investigations following these attacks suggest that one team performed the attacks and another team provided logistical support. The attackers used explosives to gain access to the hotels and quickly subdued hotel security, taking many hostages. The militants likely understood the attacks to be suicide missions, and these attacks underscore AQIM’s renewed access to a large recruiting pool. The participation of Fulani attackers suggests that AQIM is increasingly incorporating Fulani networks into its recruiting pool.

Outlook: Intentions and Trends

AQIM’s base in Mali serves as a support zone for its regional objectives in the Sahel. AQIM seeks to remove Western, especially French, influence from the region. It has targeted French and multinational corporations in both the Maghreb and the Sahel to prompt their withdrawal and disengagement from West Africa. AQIM’s targeting of Western hotels in the Sahel region helps advance this objective and the objective of compelling MINUSMA troop–contributing countries to end their support for the mission and the Malian government. AQIM also intends to expand its area of influence throughout the Sahel region.

The AQIM leaders frame their group’s attacks against multinational companies as an effort to prevent the West from profiting from local resources. A senior AQIM leader called for attacks against multinational corporations and Western capitals in a September 2015 statement because the corporations are “considered to be the actual controllers in international decision-making.” The attacks against French and multinational companies are not new. An AQIM-linked group seized hostages at the Tigantourine gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria, and held the site for four days in January 2013. That same group targeted a French uranium mine and Nigerien military barracks in Niger in May 2013. AQIM continues these attacks today: it claimed credit for a rocket attack against a BP-Statoil gas plant in Algeria in March 2016.

AQIM prioritizes degrading support for MINUSMA. The hotel attacks are a significant escalation in this effort. AFRICOM commander General Thomas D. Waldhauser assessed in June 2016 that AQIM intends to attack two other MINUSMA troop–contributing countries, Ghana
and Togo, as depicted in Figure 5. Complex and suicide attacks also target MINUSMA supply lines and bases with the immediate objective of disrupting MINUSMA operations and a longer-term objective of raising the deployment casualty rate high enough to cause countries to remove their support for the peacekeeping operation. The MINUSMA mission is already the deadliest ongoing UN peacekeeping mission.37

AQIM’s intent to regionalize was present before the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), although AQIM’s expansion helps contest ISIS in the Sahel region. Indicators of the early intent include leadership statements such as a 2012 AQIM Shura Council letter that claimed AQIM was leading the jihad in the Sahara region.38 The high-profile hotel attacks achieve AQIM’s operational objectives and challenge ISIS in the region, which is a broad priority for the entire al Qaeda network.39

**Implications for US Policymakers**

There is a recognition in the West that the current force levels are insufficient to counter AQIM in Mali, and the responses to date will not roll back AQIM’s gains because conditions permissive to AQIM in Mali persist. The UN Security Council approved an increase in the number of MINUSMA troops on June 29, 2016, and authorized MINUSMA to adopt a “more proactive and robust posture.”40 The resolution also called for enhanced capabilities for the forces operating in a complex security environment and authorized French forces to intervene in support of the peacekeeping force when requested. The 2,000-troop increase and the addition of a small policing force does not address the repeated breakdown of peace negotiations between opposing factions and the ongoing contest over the future of the Azawad region in Mali. The multisided conflict in Mali continues to present AQIM with opportunities to expand its support base.

Al Qaeda leadership correspondence reveals awareness of and sensitivity to the American policy environment. The leadership based decisions on assessments of how US policymakers would react.41 They understood that a formal relationship between a group and the al Qaeda organization would draw the attention of US policymakers. This understanding of Western
reaction is also demonstrated in AQIM’s target set. The absence of an AQIM-directed attack against Europe or the United States in the past few years has led to a dangerous sense of complacency in the West. The sensational nature of ISIS’s attacks and media activity inflamed the policy community to a certain level of violence that a few years ago would have splashed across the newspapers’ front pages. AQIM’s attacks strike hotels in African nations that Westerners may frequent, but at a casualty level that some may dismiss as acceptable or may lead to reduced Western presence in these areas. AQIM is resurgent in the Sahel and can no longer be dismissed, as it once was, as a criminal smuggling and kidnapping-for-ransom racket.

Al Qaeda is setting conditions in the Sahel to use the region as a base from which to target the United States. Al Qaeda and AQIM leaders openly discuss such intent, and AQIM has carried out its recent threats against French and Sahelian interests. Indicators that AQIM is further advancing its capabilities include continued attacks in the Sahel region, particularly beyond Mali’s borders and further development of its TTPs. AQIM’s threat should not be dismissed as local or regional: it is operating in support of Al Qaeda’s global objectives. The US, France, and their partners need to renew their efforts to counter al Qaeda in the Sahel or risk AQIM developing a latent threat capability that may be directed against the US homeland or interests with little to no warning.

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Notes

Waldhauser_...APQ8_...06-21-16.pdf.
2. SITE Intelligence Group, “AQIM Officials Calls to Attack Multinational Corporations, Western Capitals,” September 29, 2015, http://www.thesiteintelgroup.com (subscription required). Abu Obeida Yusuf al Annabi, the head of AQIM’s Council of Notables, called for targeting the capitals, major cities, political institutions, and economic centers of “crusader” countries. He specifically called for targeting multinational companies because of their global footprint and their role in international decision making.
7. The Movement for Oneness (Unity) and Jihad in West Africa is more commonly referenced by its French acronym, MUJAO, which stands for Mouvement pour l’Unicite et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest.
8. The National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad is best known by its French acronym, MNLA, which stands for the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad.


11. Amadou Koufa was falsely rumored to have been killed in January 2013. He has called for the restoration of the Fulani caliphate of Sekou Amadou Hadj, better known as the Massina Empire, from the early 19th century. For a brief summary, see Anad Badkhen, “In Mali, Nomads Again Become jihadists and History Parodies Itself,” Los Angeles Times, June 6, 2015, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-badkhen-fulani-jihad-20150607-story.html.


37. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has a higher casualty rate for its peacekeeping troops, but is not a UN mission. For UN peacekeeping data on fatalities listed by year and incident type, see UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, “Fatalities by Year, Mission and Incident Type up to July 31, 2016,” August 15, 2016, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/fatalities/documents/stats_5a.pdf.


42. Examine, for example, the difference between al Shabaab’s Westgate Mall attack from September 2013 and any of AQIM’s attacks outside of Mali from 2015 to 2016. Al Shabaab, al Qaeda’s affiliate in Somalia, conducted a small-team ground assault against the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing 67 people. The attack lasted several hours, generating significant media attention from American and international mainstream media outlets. AQIM attacked two separate hotels in major West African cities in 2015-2016. The attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, killed 30 people, including Swiss parliamentarians, and the attack in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast, against three hotels killed at least 16 people. An American embassy delegation was present, but not injured. These two attacks generated significantly less interest from the media, which can be attributed in part to their scale in comparison to what ISIS has done.
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