



A Powerful New Al-Qaeda Affiliate is Shaking West Africa

— Megan Zimmerer, 24 August 2017



Two days ago, gunmen in Burkina Faso conducted a deadly terror attack, killing 18 at a restaurant in Ouagadougou. Shortly afterward, a similar attack occurred at a UN peacekeeping base in Timbuktu, Mali, killing 7 and wounding seven others. A third attack on the same day in Douentza, Mali, left yet another UN peacekeeper dead. Although authorities have not identified the assailants, the attacks are consistent with a trend of al Qaeda-affiliated violence in West Africa and the Sahel, particularly in Mali.

Terrorism is on the rise in Mali. Amidst an already-tangled web of governance and security problems, the 2017 merger of four terrorist groups presents an ever-growing threat to French, UN, and local forces in Mali, who have struggled since 2013 to extinguish the fire of militant insurgency in the north. Despite considerable foreign military intervention, Mali's terrorist threat is expanding and its humanitarian crisis grows more desperate every day.

The new group, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), comprises the following al-Qa'ida-affiliated groups in Mali: Ansar Dine, al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), al-Murabitoun, and Katibat Macina (a.k.a. The Macina Liberation Front). Since the merger in March, JNIM has conducted [numerous attacks](#), mostly targeting French and UN military sites.

So how are international powers combatting terrorism in Mali? Here's a basic overview of recent foreign intervention efforts:

International Forces Come to Bamako's Aid

In 2012, the international community received a distress signal from Bamako: rebel Malian forces had staged a military coup, and the interim government quickly found itself overwhelmed by [Tuareg-jihadist](#) alliance forces in the north.

In response to the Malian government's request, foreign interventionist powers deployed tens of thousands of troops in Mali in 2013, including the French-led Operation Serval, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), the Chadian Armed Forces for Intervention in Mali (FATIM), and the European Union Training Mission (EUTM). The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) soon replaced the AFISMA mission in 2013.

By 2014, the international interventionist powers had pushed the rebels back, restoring power to the central government of Mali. However, the civil unrest at the root of the conflict remained, and the strong military presence of western powers (especially France, Mali's former colonizer) enraged rebel forces and jihadists in Mali.

No End in Sight

[The UN Mission in Mali](#) has been active since 2013, employing a force of over 15,000 to stabilize the country and strengthen the rule of law. The UN conducts both direct and indirect peacekeeping operations, combating security threats and training Malian security forces to do the same. This is widely regarded as the most dangerous UN peacekeeping mission, with an unusually high rate of casualties for peacekeepers.

In August 2014, the French launched [Operation Barkhane](#), sending a force of 4,000 French soldiers to combat terrorism and stabilize regional security in five countries

across the Sahel: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad. The operation is ongoing, with no ostensible exit strategy.

In 2015, Algerian foreign minister Ramtane Lamamra mediated efforts to broker peace between estranged Arab and Tuareg populations in the north with the central and southern regions of Mali. The result was the [Algiers Accord](#): in exchange for peace, the Malian government promised partial autonomy to the north and increased representation for minority Arab and Tuareg ethnic groups in government.

[A recent UN security council meeting](#) assessed the situation in Mali, concluding that despite progress, international support is still vital to security and stability in Mali.

France's representative urged the use of sanctions against non-cooperative parties to compel compliance with the peace agreement. Other representatives emphasized a need for resolving the root causes of conflict: socioeconomic conditions, jihadist recruitment, and instability in neighboring countries, particularly Libya.

Last month, the presidents of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad created the [G5 Sahel Counterterrorism force](#), which French president Macron has agreed to support and coordinate with in its counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel. Although the French president has made no promises, this is a positive step toward an exit strategy. Despite an overwhelming amount of foreign intervention in Mali and the Sahel, terrorist groups not only remain intact, but appear to be growing stronger. The formation of the new al Qa'ida-affiliate JNIM will prove to be a formidable obstacle in counterterrorism and peacekeeping efforts.

Assessing the Future of the Region:

1. JNIM attacks will mostly target Mali, but other countries will be affected as well.

Despite being a composite force of terror groups from the Sahel, JNIM attacks will be concentrated in Mali for the foreseeable future. However, this hardly means that other countries will not be affected. Last month, JNIM released a [video showing six foreign hostages](#). Violence and insecurity in Mali over the past few years has sent [over 140,000 refugees](#) into neighboring countries. In a [report from last May](#), Sahel analyst Rida Lyammouri reports that 600 schools closed in the Sahel as a result of threats and insecurity. "After the French intervention in Mali," he stated, "this region provided ideal fallback for members of jihadist groups that fled Mali."

2. Counterterrorist forces will need to adjust their strategy to address the new threat.

The four groups that form the new al Qaeda-affiliate JNIM are collectively responsible for hundreds of attacks in the region over the past several years. Greater coordination of resources and manpower will increase their strength. In response, counterterrorist forces in Mali should work to increase coordination as well.

3. Ethnic tensions need to be addressed.

JNIM presents a unified front of ethnicities in Mali, a concept with which Malian military, police, and government forces still struggle. To address the grievances of potential recruits to JNIM, the Malian government should work to facilitate dialogue and to further incorporate ethnic minorities from the north in government and security positions.

4. Military intervention, especially by foreign powers, is not enough and often exacerbates the conflict while providing short-term solutions.

France's President Macron would be wise to facilitate and capitalize on the increased participation of the G5 Sahel force to ease its way out of Mali, which has long resented the post-colonialist presence despite its reliance upon France's military forces. Macron shows promising signs of sensitivity in his proposed foreign policy toward African countries. According to [a recent article from BBC](#), "the new president believes that partnership with the continent will be more beneficial if Africa is strong."

Following suit, all foreign intervention groups should focus on the goal of autonomous rule of law and security capacities in Mali. Operations such as police training are especially important, and military operations that exclude Malian forces should gradually decrease as the Malian military and security forces become increasingly competent.

International powers must continue to supply vital resources to counter the growing threat of jihadist extremism plaguing Mali. However, long-term solutions must prioritize strengthening the rule of law, training local military and security forces, and addressing ethnic grievances. France plays an important role in counterterror operations in Mali, but the strong military presence of a former colonial power exacerbates local

grievances. If Macron truly wants Africa strong, he will take steps to gradually reduce France's military role in Mali and the Sahel while supporting the UN mission and the G5 Sahel force.

Banner Photo Credit:

- I. "20110718 Mali arrests alleged al-Qaeda informants | مالي: اعتقال مُخبرين للقاعدة | Le Mali arrête des informateurs d'al-Qaida" by Magharebia, Flickr
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/magharebia/5954087853/in/photolist-a59fT8-6aFtgR-5E9Ubd-2mkET-aDjAmw-dXZNC2-5fqo8-z5Bw-dXZLNv-Bsrr-adgKhs-dXZK4t-2dcUT-awxQfi-6cgdZL-8YM7YR-BszV-7pj7M-dZVFyC-2jENM-Bs5p-5D4vky-3msknx-z1yU-5E5x6g-3279q-dXZM8R-2d9ed-2k7GF-3rukxz-3mddTd-3mddn1-5fqTT-BsKC-BsCN-81riAV-2k8jj-3rzTG2-4rbJAc-dY6sb1-3rAjEF-9jyDxD-4np47r-325nZ-9Bkark-4qCkh8-4rfUMy-4qCjMF-4qGpQJ-4pfKRg>