Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)
Group Profile
February 2018
Background

Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), or Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) in English, is a militant jihadist organization with presence in the Maghreb and West Africa, which seeks to incite the West African Muslim community to “remove oppression” and expel non-Muslim “occupiers.” Specifically, the group is opposed to France – who has maintained a military presence in Mali since 2012 – and its Western partners, including those involved in UN peacekeeping missions. Like its ideological forefathers in the Salafi-jihadist movement, the group’s goal is to ultimately impose Shariah Law in the entire region.

JNIM was officially formed in March 2017 by the merger between three existing jihadist organizations – Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabitoun, and the Sahara branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – all of them al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliates. The group would later also absorb the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), an Ansar al-Din affiliate in central Mali, reinforcing JNIM’s local credentials and territorial control, as well as making it the largest jihadi group in the Sahara.

Since its inception, JNIM has been recognized as the official branch of Al-Qaeda in Mali, with its leaders having sworn allegiance to AQ’s supreme leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the emir of AQIM, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud. It has also been stated by the group’s leadership that through their allegiance to al-Zawahiri, they have also pledged ultimate fealty to the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Afghan Taliban).

It is considered that JNIM’s emir is Iyad Ag Ghaly, the former leader of Ansar al-Din and a long-time leader of Mali’s Tuareg uprising. Senior leadership of the group include Djamel Okacha (aka Yahya Abu Al Hammam reportedly killed by the French military in Mali on 21 February 2019), deputy emir of JNIM and the former emir of AQIM-Sahara branch; Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the former emir of al-Murabitoun; Amadou Diallo (aka Amadou Mohamed Koufa – recently killed by French forces in Mali in November 2018), former emir of MLF; and Abu Abderrahman al-Sinhaji, a senior cleric of AQIM’s Sahara branch.

JNIM was designated by the Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group on 5 September 2018. It was also added to the list of UN sanctioned entities on 4 October 2018. Iyad ag Ghaly has been a US SDGT individual since February 2013.

Size, Membership & Organization

According to a recent report by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), as of September 2018, JNIM had between 1,000 and 2,000 fighters. JNIM gathers members from different ethnic groups, including Fulanis, Tuaregs, Bambaras, Sahelian and North African Arabs, as well as Muhajirun, providing the organization with unprecedented geographical and social reach within the Sahel. The group’s clear message of diversity and unity has allowed it to expand its networks, as well as its social and financial support, increasing its appeal for recruitment at a regional and global level. In contrast with AQIM – which comprises mainly North Africans, with
Algerians occupying the most important posts – JNIM tries to distance itself from the existing tribal contexts in the areas in which it operates. This is also aimed at highlighting the homogenous nature of its enemies and rivals, such as the Islamic State (IS).

While JNIM swore loyalty to the AQIM emir, JNIM was created as a single organization with sufficient independence to self-manage. As such, JNIM and its affiliates are able to operate with a great deal of autonomy, largely maintaining their organizational support structures, while acting under a unified ideology.

**Weapons & Funding**

JNIM inherited many of its revenue streams from AQIM and its other member groups, utilizing these well-established methods of income generation through their affiliates and contacts. It is believed that JNIM acquires a significant portion of its funding through kidnapping and extortion. JNIM acquires another important percentage of its funding from smugglers and traffickers, who pay a “tax” for safe transit through JNIM-controlled territories in the region. As the European demand has grown, some observers believe cocaine trafficking facilitation to be increasingly becoming JNIM’s most significant source of revenue. Moreover, JNIM has increasingly profited from the growth of human trafficking in recent years, linked to the sharp increase of migrants attempting to reach Europe. The group has also been known to engage in other types of taxation on local populations within its area of control, in exchange for goods and services. These services predominantly involve “security” and “governance”, at times also including access to education, electricity, healthcare, etc.

Another source of financing is made up by funds coming from supporters abroad, especially from non-governmental organizations, including charities, which in many cases, have a religious mission. Prior to the merger that created JNIM, it was alleged in 2013 for instance, that Qatari and Saudi charities were providing support to AQIM in Mali, while various individuals in Western European countries have also been arrested in the past for providing the group with monetary donations. It has also been speculated that AQIM has received state sponsorship in the past. The Algerian government, for instance, has previously accused Iran and Sudan of funding the group. While it is assessed as credible that JNIM may be currently receiving indirect sources of support, state-sponsored aid is unlikely.

In attacks conducted in recent years, JNIM has demonstrated it possesses a wide variety of weaponry at its disposal, taking advantage of the proliferation of arms in West Africa. In addition to possessing small arms, JNIM insurgents have also carried out attacks employing RPGs, mortars and rockets. Moreover, JNIM militants appear honed in the crafting of explosives, frequently employing IEDs, including VBIEDs, SVBIEDs and SVESTs. It is also assessed as credible that JNIM is in possession of more advanced military equipment, typically as a result of raids on army posts and police stations.
JNIM is predominantly active in Mali, but also conducts operations in Niger and Burkina Faso, in spite of the increased pressure exercised by the French-led coalition. In Mali, JNIM is specially active in the northern and central provinces of Gao, Timbuktu and Mopti, having expanded further into the southwest (particularly in Segou) over the past year. This has placed the capital Bamako under increased threat over the past year. In Niger and Burkina Faso, the vast majority of JNIM activity is restricted to the border areas with Mali, although it can be observed from the map below that. In Niger, this incorporates the western borders regions of Tillaberi and Tahoua. In Burkina Faso, most of JNIM activity is observed in the Sahel region toward the north of the country, as well as the provinces of Boucle du Mouhoun and Nord in the northwest. As can be seen in the map below however, JNIM’s reach also extends to central Burkina Faso, with an attack on Ouagadougou conducted in March 2018.

The group promotes combat action against security forces, rather than attacks on the population, branding itself as more moderate than its competitors (especially IS). In practice, this strategy has resulted in a series of complex attacks on government and military targets. Notable incidents include a major attack on France’s embassy in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on 2 March 2018, incorporating a VBIED and armed assault, killing eight Burkinabe security personnel and wounding over 90 people. JNIM also orchestrated an attack in April 2018 on a French military base and UN mission in Timbuktu, Mali, using mortars, rockets, small arms, and suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices to breach the base and injure seven French soldiers. After each operation, the group typically releases public statements linking the attack back to its overarching strategy. In addition to these high-profile complex attacks, several lower-level attacks are also regularly mounted against military assets, typically comprising armed attacks and IEDs.

While the majority of attacks are directed towards military targets, civilian casualties are also often resultant from JNIM activity. Civilian transport vehicles, for example, are frequently the target of explosive attacks, particularly in central Mali. These occur as a result of indiscriminate violence seeking to destabilize the state, as well as due to accidental detonations triggered by vehicles passing in proximity of roadside explosives intended for military forces. Other attacks on civilians, particularly targeting those associated with local militias, may be conducted along ethnic lines, despite JNIM’s all-inclusive ideology. A recent tactic employed by JNIM and other insurgent groups are attacks against the education sector, targeting schools, staff and students. Establishments teaching French or following practices deemed un-Islamic have been particularly targeted. Similarly, JNIM militants have often been known to physically punish individuals deemed to be in contravention of Sharia law.

While far lower in frequency, attacks against establishments and areas known to house foreign civilians are also attractive to JNIM militants. Most noteworthy was a complex attack against a luxury resort frequented by tourists west of Bamako in June 2017, which killed five civilians, including two French nationals, a Chinese and a Portuguese citizen. As such, areas frequented by foreigners in Bamako and Ouagadougou remain threat areas, despite only sporadic high-profile incidents against foreign assets recorded over the past two years. Such attacks should not be discounted in Niamey in the future. Of note, shortly after JNIM was formed, JNIM’s leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, specified 11 countries deemed to be its enemies, including: Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, France, Germany, Guinea, the Netherlands, Niger, Senegal, Sweden, and the United States; calling for lone offender attacks on nationals from those countries.

Additionally, foreign companies operating in the region, particularly French-owned are at risk. In early May 2018, AQIM, and by proxy its Islamist affiliates, issued a threat warning against western companies operating
anywhere from ‘Libya to Mauritania’, designating them as legitimate targets. Although French companies are emphasized in AQIM’s threat, all Western companies are potentially at risk. Soon after the release of this statement, in August 2018, a bus belonging to a Canadian mining company was targeted in an armed attack, with two employees killed and four others wounded. While no group claimed responsibility for the attack, the methodology corresponds to Islamist elements in the area. In addition to the threat faced by foreign organizations, NGOs have also been a prime target for insurgent groups in West Africa, with attacks against them doubling over the past couple of years. As a result, some agencies have been forced to periodically cease operations, while others have completely removed expatriates from their field offices in the region.

Kidnapping

A key JNIM strategy involves kidnapping. As described previously, ransoms paid for abductees provide a significant source of funding for the group, proving to be also a successful tactic in destabilizing local power structures and instilling fear within targeted populations. To this end, the group has resorted to mass kidnappings and the abduction of a number of local leaders and militiamen over the past two years.

Although the vast majority of JNIM’s kidnap operations target local nationals, the kidnapping of foreigners is a particularly profitable enterprise for insurgency groups in West Africa, which JNIM has also sought to take advantage of. JNIM’S constituents, particularly AQIM, are renown to kidnap Western hostages or, alternatively, “acquire” them from other criminal groups, to later demand a large ransom or other concessions, threatening to kill the hostages if their demands are not met.

While it has not been fully verified that JNIM itself has been responsible for the kidnapping of foreigners since its founding, they currently hold several hostages captured by AQIM and Ansar Dine over the past eight years, and have regularly released proof-of-life videos to encourage ransom payments. These victims include; Iulian Ghergut (a Romanian miner kidnapped in Burkina Faso in 2015), Ken Elliott (an Australian doctor kidnapped in Burkina Faso in January 2016), Beatrice Stockly (a Swiss missionary abducted in Timbuktu, Mali in January 2016), Gloria Navarez (a Colombian nun kidnapped in Sikasso, Mali in February 2017) and Sophie Petronin (a French humanitarian worker abducted in Gao, Mali in December 2016). Seven other foreign nationals have been reported kidnapped in the Sahel, including a Canadian national who was found dead a few days after his abduction. It has not been determined if JNIM is in possession of the remaining victims.

Islamist insurgents, particularly AQIM and its affiliates/offshoots, are believed to have made over USD 40 million in recent years by ransoming their hostages. Most recently for example, South African national Stephen McGown was released by JNIM in July 2017 after an alleged ransom payment of EUR 3.5 million – though the South African government denied having made any payments. McGown spent six years in captivity after his abduction from a hostel in Timbuktu, Mali, in 2011.
As can be seen from the above-listed cases and other past abductions in the Sahel, the majority of victims were vulnerable to attack, i.e. expatriates operating in high-threat environments and tourists abducted from unsecure areas. Periods of captivity are lengthy, often running into several years. In December 2018, JNIM released a video addressing the families of its hostages, demanding that ransom payments are made to secure their release and informing them of the group’s decision to discontinue the production of hostage videos. Focus is predominately placed on France, with JNIM blaming the French government for not facilitating the release of humanitarian worker Sophie Petronin.

Islamist insurgent groups largely refrain from kidnapping UK and US nationals due to their governments’ staunch opposition to negotiating with terrorists, preferring instead to target nationals from mainland Europe. In spite of this, and while JNIM particularly considers nationals of 11 countries a legitimate target, all foreigners are at high risk regardless of their nationality, as they are deemed potentially highly-lucrative assets.

**Outlook**

Despite counterterrorism operations by the military forces of France, G5 Sahel and the UN, as well as billions of dollars of international funding to secure the Sahel, JNIM and its affiliates will continue to wage an asymmetric war against enemies of its ideology. As such, it will continue focusing its attacks on government and security forces – national and international – in rural outposts, as well as Sahel urban areas, thus posing a significant collateral risk to civilians.

While the majority of activity is expected to remain low-level, incorporating small-scale bombings and hit-and-run style armed assaults, high-profile mass casualty attacks are almost certain. Such attacks will likely be complex in nature, targeting government and military facilities, as has been observed over the past year. Attacks targeting civilians will also remain a mainstay of the group’s operational methodology, although largely refraining from scenes of extreme violence associated with other jihadist groups such as IS.

Mali is likely to remain JNIM’s organizational base, particularly in the north and centre of the country, mainly due to the continued absence of state control, hindering progress on implementing a peace agreement between the government, ethnic factions, and armed groups. There, JNIM activity is expected to remain heightened over the next year or so in the provinces of Mopti, Koulikouro, Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal and Segou – progressively encroaching into Bamako’s surrounding districts. Outside of Mali, JNIM will remain most active in northern and north-western Burkina Faso, with occasional attacks also likely in western Niger. Attacks outside of these countries, including Mauritania and Chad, cannot be ruled out, particularly in view of the group’s clear expansionist ambitions. As JNIM continues to score success, it will increasingly attract foreign fighters and other groups’ defectors (particularly from IS), strengthening the insurgent organization in the short term.
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