

BACKGROUND

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)



Figure 1: Iyad Ag Ghaly, emir of JNIM. ROMARIC OLLO HIEN/AFP/GettyImages

In September 2018, the U.S. State Department designated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act.¹ JNIM, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Mali and West Africa, has been responsible for numerous attacks against both Westerners and regional security forces since its formation in March 2017. While it has yet to demonstrate either an interest in or the capability to target the United States directly, the group remains a "deadly threat" to U.S. allies in West Africa today.² This backgrounder is an overview of the history, leadership, and current strategic goals of JNIM.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

JNIM, whose name means the "Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims," seeks to incite the West African Muslim community to "remove oppression" and expel non-Muslim "occupiers."³ Specifically, the group stands 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 ultimate goal is for the entire region to be ruled under shariah law.⁴

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JNIM was formed by a merger between three existing jihadist organizations, a move which it claimed was inspired by the "togetherness and unification" demonstrated by factions in Syria, namely the union of Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in early 2017.⁵ The three West African organizations, which unified to create JNIM were all al-Qaeda affiliates: Ansar al-Din; al-Murabitoon; and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara branch. JNIM also absorbed the Macina Liberation Front (also referred to as the Macina Battalion), an affiliate of Ansar al-Din in central Mali, which reinforced JNIM's local credentials and territorial control.⁶ JNIM's emir is the former leader of Ansar al-Din, Iyad Ag Ghaly, a longtime leader of Mali's Tuareg uprising. Other notable members of the group include Djamel Okacha (aka Yahya Abu Al Hamma), the former emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Sahara branch; Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the former emir of al-Murabitoon; and Mohamed Koufa, the former emir of Ansar al-Din.⁷

In his statement announcing the merger, Ghaly emphasized that his group is part of al-Qaeda’s formal network by reiterating his oaths of *bayat* to al-Qaeda leadership. “On this blessed occasion, we renew our pledge of allegiance to our honorable emirs and sheikhs: Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, our beloved wise man Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri, and from him to the Emir of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Haibatullah, may Allah preserve them and grant them victory,” Ghaly said.⁸ Wadud is the emir of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the group responsible for managing all al-Qaeda efforts throughout North and West Africa. Zawahiri is al-Qaeda’s global leader, and Haibatullah Akhundzada is the leader of the Afghan Taliban, to whom Zawahiri pledged *bayat* in June 2016.⁹

STRATEGY, OPERATIONS, AND TACTICS

As of September 2018, JNIM has between 1,000 and 2,000 fighters.¹⁰ The group is predominantly active in Mali, but also conducts operations in Niger and Burkina Faso. Ghaly has publicly stated that JNIM’s primary enemy is “France, who has been the historical enemy of the Muslims in this part of the Muslim world,” while France’s allies in West Africa (including the United States) serve as secondary targets. Under Ghaly’s leadership, the group promotes “combat action against security forces, rather than attacks on the population” likely in alignment with al-Qaeda’s broader global push to brand itself as more moderate than its competitors (especially the Islamic State).¹¹

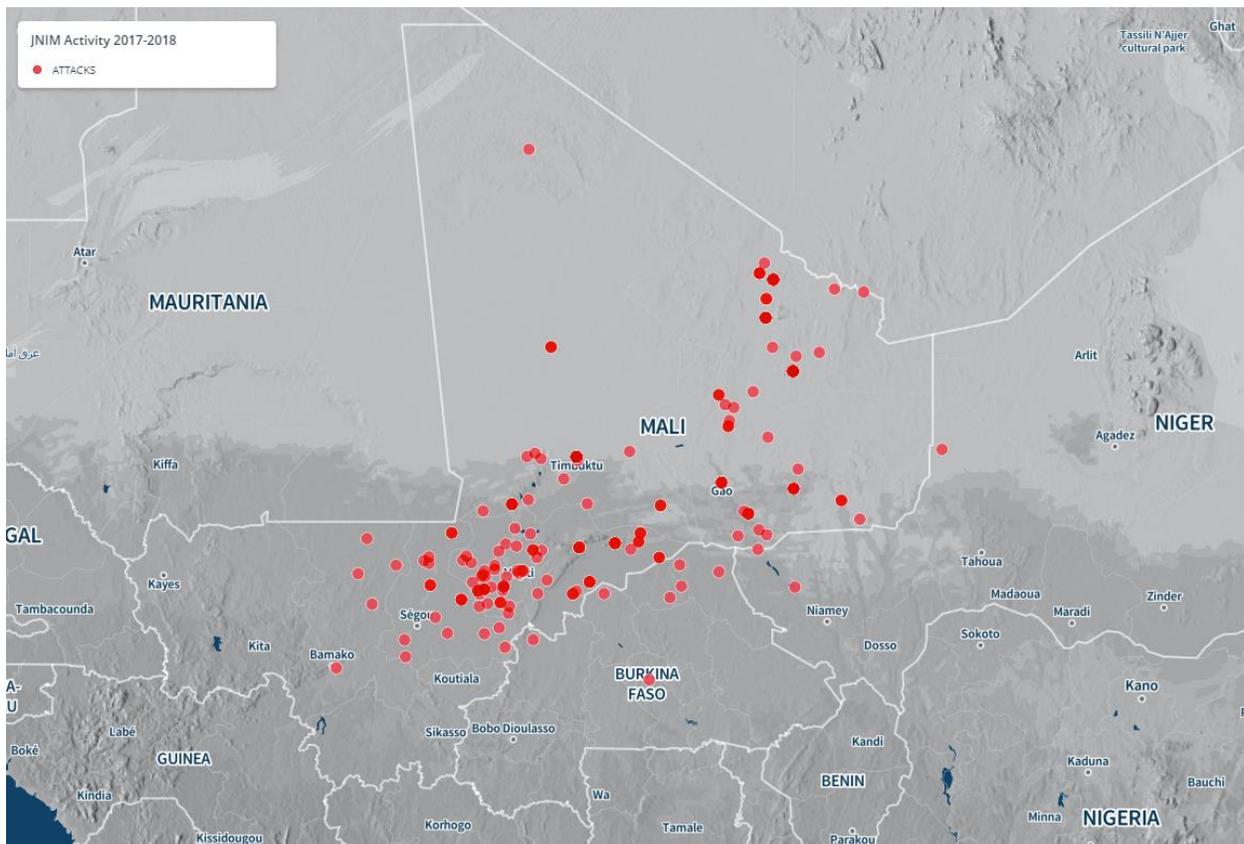


Figure 1: Map of JNIM Activity, March 2017–July 2018¹²

In practice, this strategy has resulted in a series of complex attacks on symbolic targets.¹³ JNIM conducted a major attack on France’s embassy in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso on March 3, 2018. It 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.¹⁴ After each operation, including another in July 2018 against French and UN forces in Aguelhok, Mali, the group releases public statements linking the attack back to its overarching strategy. The statement following the July attack, for example, proclaimed that the operation was a “message” to France that “the war between us will not end until the last soldier from the soldiers of Crusader France evacuate the Muslim land of Mali, and until the Shariah of Allah governs this dear land.”¹⁵

Although JNIM has come under increased pressure by French forces, which routinely carry out special operations raids as a part of Operation Barkhane, it continues to conduct attacks throughout the Sahel.

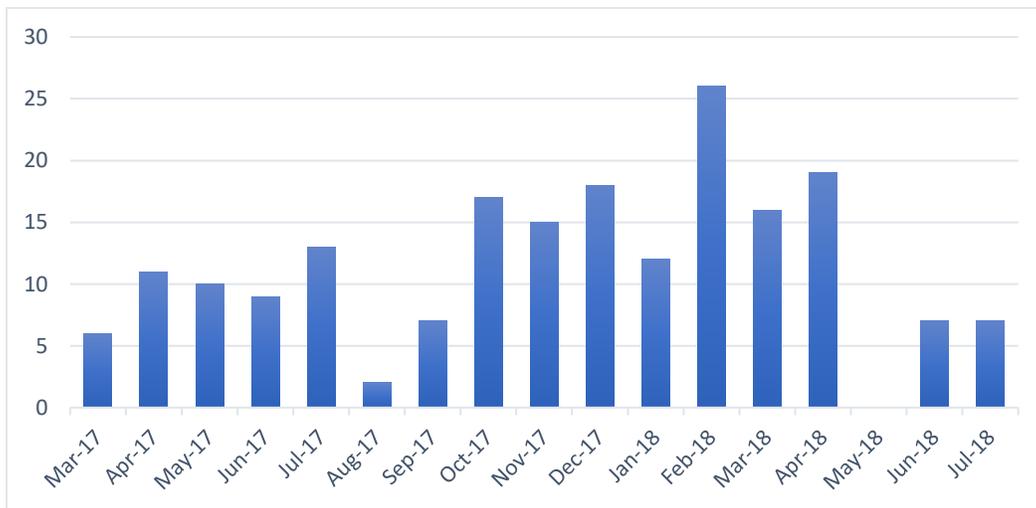


Figure 3: JNIM Attacks per Month¹⁶

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¹ U.S. Department of State. "State Department Terrorist Designation of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)." September 5, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/09/285705.htm>.

² Ibid.

³ SITE Intelligence Group, "AQAP-affiliated Newspaper Interviews Leader of Newly-Formed AQIM Branch in Mali," April 6, 2017, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/aqap-affiliated-newspaper-interviews-leader-of-newly-formed-aqim-branch-in-mali.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ SITE Intelligence Group, "Ansar Dine and AQIM's Sahara and Murabitoon Branches Announce Merger," March 2, 2017, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/ansar-dine-and-aqim-s-sahara-and-murabitoon-branches-announce-merger.html>.

⁶ United Nations Security Council (UNSC). "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," July 27, 2018, <https://undocs.org/S/2018/705>.

⁷ See, for example, Heni Nsaibia, "Jihadists in the Sahel Region Formalize Merger," Jihadology, <https://jihadology.net/?s=jnim>.

⁸ "Ansar Dine and AQIM's Sahara and Murabitoon Branches Announce Merger."

⁹ SITE Intelligence Group, "Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri Pledges to New Afghan Taliban Chief," June 11, 2016, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/al-qaeda-leader-ayman-al-zawahiri-pledges-to-new-afghan-taliban-chief.html>.

¹⁰ Data from the CSIS Transnational Threats Project's 2018 report, *The Evolving Terror Threat* (forthcoming).

¹¹ UNSC, "Twenty-second report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team."

¹² Data used in map is from ACLED, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, <https://www.acleddata.com/data/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See, for example, BBC, "Burkina Faso attack: French embassy targeted in Ouagadougou," March 2, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-43257453>; Reuters, "Militants in U.N. disguise explode car bombs, rockets at Mali bases," April 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security/militants-in-u-n-disguise-explode-car-bombs-rockets-at-mali-bases-idUSKBN1HL1BX>.

¹⁵ SITE Intelligence Group, "Al-Qaeda's Mali Branch Claims Attack on French Forces Before Malian Elections," July 29, 2018, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/jihadist-threat/643-siteintelgroup-07-29-2018-nim-mali-presidentelection/file.html>.

¹⁶ Data used in chart is from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), <https://www.acleddata.com/data/>.