

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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FRANCE: WHAT LIES IN STORE FOR RETURNING MILITANTS?

Alexander Sehmer

French authorities have detained one of the county's most high-profile Islamists who, after reportedly growing disillusioned with Islamic State (IS), left Syria, turning himself over to Turkish authorities.

Kevin Guiavarch was placed on the United Nations' sanctions list of individuals connected to IS and al-Qaeda in September 2014 and was the subject of an Interpol red notice. The 23-year-old moved to Syria in 2012, initially joining what was then the al-Nusra Front (now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) before turning to IS. The French allege he recruited foreign fighters for the group online and believe that he was directly involved with the group's financing ([France 24](#), November 1, 2016).

Guiavarch has variously claimed to be reformed or to have grown fearful of dying in Syria ([Aranews](#), January 23). After contacting the French authorities, he turned himself over to the Turkish police in June last year, along with his four wives and six children, three of which were born in Syria ([Le Monde](#), November 20, 2016). While his

family was moved back home shortly after, Guiavarch spent nearly seven months in jail in Turkey before being extradited to France, where he now faces terrorism charges ([RFI](#), January 21).

A former church choirboy raised by a single mother, Guiavarch is one of a number of fairly colorful French alleged jihadist recruiters. His peers include militants like Omar Diaby, a Senegalese immigrant living in Nice, who after moving to Syria faked his own death in order to undergo surgery — afterward, he contacted the French media to announce he was still alive ([France 24](#), June 1, 2016).

Of the foreign fighters who travel from Europe to Syria, a high proportion comes from France. By the close of 2015, the French government estimated a total of about 1,800 fighters had traveled to Syria from France, compared to about 760 from the United Kingdom.

Since then, the trend has started to reduce. As well as security measures, heightened since the Paris attacks of 2015, the French government has employed various deradicalization strategies, including the use of short interactive films available online that show individuals battling with the temptations of radicalization ([RFI](#), No-

vember, 18, 2016). Such “soft” techniques should not be too easily dismissed, particularly in Europe, where the data suggests those tempted to join IS are often tech-savvy young people with no real experience in the hardships of violent jihad.

Now in French custody, Guiavarch is doubtless being debriefed by the authorities and should be able to provide some useful insight into IS’ structure and finances. The return of foreign fighters is often couched in terms of the potential security threat they pose to their home state; but assuming Guiavarch’s reasons for returning are as he claims, he could perhaps prove a useful tool for deradicalization efforts as well.

LIBYA: HAFTAR’S STAR ON THE RISE

Alexander Sehmer

Libyan fighters loyal to General Khalifa Haftar have recaptured the Ganfouda district of Benghazi, in Libya’s east, finally securing an Islamist stronghold that had resisted the general’s forces for nearly two years ([Libya Herald](#), 25 January). The move is a victory for Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA), but also strengthens concerns about the general’s wider ambitions.

Some believe he has set his sights on Tripoli, and those fears are not without foundation. Already backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, the anti-Islamist general has seen increasing support from Russia. Earlier in the month, Haftar toured a Russian aircraft carrier off the Libyan coast and spoke to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu by video link ([Libya Observer](#), January 11).

It was reported last year that the general had approached Moscow via Libya’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Abdel al-Badri, requesting military support ([Moscow Times](#), September 28, 2016). Some say Russia has since agreed to use Algeria to skirt a United Nations arms embargo on Libya ([Middle East Eye](#), January 25). Algeria, however, has maintained a longstanding policy of non-interference (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 1, 2016). And both Russia and Haftar have denied any contravention of UN sanctions ([New Arab](#), January 19).

Western diplomats, officially at least, are less enamored of Haftar, who opposes Libya’s UN-backed government of national accord (GNA) in Tripoli. According to certain indications, however, this view is changing. Some think the new U.S. administration will want to back Haftar, although others suspect it will grow less interested in the Libyan conflict.

Europe, on the other hand, can ill afford to disengage. With migrants continuing to travel through Libya, events there are of particular concern to Europe and have left many contemplating whether there might not be a benefit to having a strongman in place, with Haftar the obvious choice.

Weary of this, the GNA has tried to play up its own successes in Libya and offered the prospect of reopening the oil sector to foreign investment ([Libyan Express](#),

January 25). At a conference held in London this week, Ahmed Maetig, the deputy chairman of Libya's Presidency Council, asserted that an area of the country spanning from Libya's western border to Sirte — which government-allied forces recently liberated from Islamic State (IS) — is now "secure, with no obstacles or clashes whatsoever" ([Libya Herald](#), January 26).

The implication is that such a claim cannot be made about the east, where Haftar's anti-Islamist campaign continues. The LNA took a back seat during the liberation of Sirte, and has come under criticism from the GNA-allied forces, which say he has allowed IS militants to flee Benghazi and regroup in Bani Walid ([Libya Observer](#), January 7).

Haftar still has work to do then; but his star, at least for now, is on the rise.

Western Balkans Struggles With Returning Militants and Religious Identity

Ebi Spahiu

Coalition bombing campaigns against Islamic State (IS) strongholds in both Syria and Iraq have degraded the group's military capabilities and reduced its territory. However, as these losses continue, the group is expected to increase its engagement with former combatants who have returned to their home countries. The countries in the Western Balkans are no exception in this regard.

More than 1,000 citizens from the Western Balkans joined the group, mainly from majority-Muslim populations, such as Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as minority Muslim communities residing in Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Macedonia (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 24, 2016). As the conflicts in the Middle East have shifted, the numbers of foreign fighters joining IS from the Balkans is believed to have decreased since 2015 ([Balkan Insight](#), August 11, 2016). Some attribute this decline to government policies aimed at countering violent extremism, while others consider it a result of stronger security measures (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 24, 2016).

Recent events in Albania and Kosovo, however, have poured cold water on just how effective either of these strategies has really been.

Lavdrim Muhaxheri

In November 2016, security forces in Albania and Kosovo thwarted an attempted large-scale attack targeting the Israeli national soccer team during a World Cup qualifying match in Shkodër, northern Albania's second largest city ([Gazeta Express](#), November 9, 2016). Information about the attack reportedly came from online conversations between Lavdrim Muhaxheri, a Kosovar-Albanian militant, and a number of his followers, intercepted by Israeli intelligence.

Muhaxheri, an important IS leader for many ethnic Albanians who have joined the group but remain based in Albania and Kosovo, first appeared on the jihadist scene

in 2014, when he posted pictures of himself on social media beheading a man and called on Albanian Muslims to join IS. Several (apparently false) reports surfaced of his death on the battlefield in Syria, but later images of him in different IS propaganda videos have raised questions about his exact whereabouts and his role within IS ranks (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), August 31, 2014).

Over the past year, several local media reports have alluded to his return to the region, including a recent report from *L'esspresso*, an Italian news agency, which suggested Muhaxheri had returned to his hometown, Kaçanik, along with 400 former IS fighters from Syria and Iraq ([L'esspresso](#), December 26, 2016). All of these reports have been repeatedly denied by Kosovar authorities and by local experts, who say there is no credible evidence to support them ([Gazeta Express](#), January 4).

Adrian Shtuni, a senior foreign policy and security analyst with a regional focus on the Western Balkans, currently based in Washington, DC, commented: "The fact that they [the media reports] mention only an unspecified source means the news is little more than speculation, similar to ones we've seen before published in other media outlets. In my estimate, the return of Muhaxheri to Kosovo, while not impossible, is unlikely at this time." [1]

Failed Attack

The intercepted conversations, supposedly with Muhaxheri, related to the smuggling of explosive material into the Loro Boriçi stadium in Shkodër, where the soccer teams were scheduled to play ([Gazeta Tema](#), November 10, 2016). Counter-terrorism police operations arrested four key alleged organizers in northern Albania, including an Albanian former military officer who had served in Iraq, a self-proclaimed imam from Dibër, a barber from Shkodër and a doctor from the Highlands of northern Albania ([Gazeta Tema](#), November 10, 2016; [Panorama](#), November 11, 2016).

In addition, over 170 individuals from at least five regions across the country were detained and questioned in connection to the attempted attack. Media reports suggested more than 30 of those detained were returning former combatants from the war in Syria, while others were supporters of IS known to Albanian intelligence authorities. Kosovo's authorities similarly arrested seven

individuals allegedly linked to the attack ([Panorama](#), November 13, 2016). The soccer match, meanwhile, was rescheduled to take place in Elbasan, a town an hour away from Albania's capital.

Although government officials in Albania and Kosovo were quick to capitalize on the successful prevention of what appears to have been intended as a major attack, the operation also demonstrated the security agencies' weaknesses. As events in Shkodër gained traction in the local media, heightened security measures were put in place. In addition to the over 1,000 Albanian police already on site, Israeli Special Forces were deployed to Elbasan ([Balkan Web](#), November 13, 2016). The move was controversial, with Albanian commentators asking why their country, a NATO member state and a contender to join the European Union, had handed almost full control of its domestic security measures to Israeli Special Forces ([Shekulli](#), November 11, 2016).

Security Risks

The incident also highlighted the risk posed by returning former IS fighters to national and regional security, as well as the underpinning networks that exist between cells in both Albania and Kosovo. According to a recent study by the U.S. Institute of Peace, "an estimated 140 Kosovan nationals were still in the conflict theater as of May 2016." The report also notes that as many as 117 people have returned from the frontlines. [2]

Although police and security operations have proved effective at arresting key operatives and recruiters of ethnic Albanians, counter-terrorism measures have proven less effective at combating the ideological messaging of the group (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 24, 2016).

The hundreds of ethnic Albanians who continue to fight alongside IS frequently display their support on social media and on Albanian-speaking groups on encrypted Telegram channels, such as *Minarja e Bardhe* (The White Minaret). The group was previously banned from Facebook, but its content and that of other online publications remain widely accessible. In addition to social media, personal interactions, family and other kinship ties remain strong drivers of radicalization.

Developing Religious Identity

While interreligious harmony has been an integral component of Albanian society, the increasing influence of Salafist and Wahhabist ideologies has led to a shift in views and attitudes, causing rifts between community leaders. A recent study conducted by the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development, based in Pristina, looked into how religion affects identity among Kosovar Albanians. According to their findings, there has been a visible shift in identity away from ethnicity and toward religious observance. A significant percentage of respondents defined themselves as “Muslims first and then Albanian,” something the author of the study describes as a shift from the “so-called language nation, to a religious ethnic society.” [3] These dynamics are similarly highlighted in other analyses, whereby new religious influences are believed to have “planted the seeds of a new group identity shaped in the mold of political Islam that gradually came into fruition with the galvanizing effect of the armed conflict in Syria and Iraq.” [4]

This has had some troubling manifestations in everyday life. As 2016 drew to a close, numerous Islamist preachers and social media sites called on Albanian Muslims throughout Kosovo and Macedonia to refuse to celebrate Christmas and New Year’s Eve, defining them as “pagan” celebrations that go against Islamic teachings. [5] Hundreds of pamphlets were similarly seen in the streets of major cities delivering the same message.

This sets a worrying precedent for Albanian Muslims as Albania has historically upheld peaceful interreligious relations between Christians and Muslims as a building block of national identity.

NOTES

[1] Author interview with Adrian Shtuni (January 7).

[2] “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” by Adrian Shtuni, U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report (December 19, 2016). Available [here](#).

[3] “What happened to Kosovo Albanians: The impact of religion on the ethnic identity in the state-building period,” by Lulzim Peci, Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (June 2016), available [here](#).

[4] “Dynamics of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Kosovo,” by Adrian Shtuni, U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report (December 19, 2016). Available [here](#).

[5] Minarja e Bardhë, available [here](#); E vërteta e qartë, available [here](#).

Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami: A Pakistani Partner for Islamic State

Farhan Zahid

Among the terrorist attacks that shook Pakistan last year, three jointly claimed incidents made clear that a branch of the Pakistani terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) has formed an alliance with Islamic State (IS), one that is proving worryingly beneficial to both organizations.

While there has been no pledge of allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, LeJ al-Alami, a faction of the broader LeJ network, claimed joint responsibility with IS for three mass-casualty attacks, all in Baluchistan province — two in Quetta district and one in Khuzdar district ([Geo TV](#), October 6, 2016). On August 9, a suicide attack in Quetta killed 70 civilians, most of them lawyers, at a legal protest, while an attack on a police college in October saw 60 cadets killed ([al-Jazeera](#), October 25, 2016). In November, a suicide attack on a Sufi shrine in the Khuzdar district of Baluchistan province killed 52 people and injured more than 100 others ([Express Tribune](#), November 13, 2016).

The new partnership has given IS a greater platform in Pakistan and potentially reinvigorated the ailing LeJ, which has been significantly degraded over the years by Pakistani counter-terrorism efforts.

The Evolution of LeJ al-Alami

LeJ is at heart a Sunni-Deobandi supremacist group, intending to transform Pakistan into a Sunni caliphate. This goal is similar to that of international jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS), albeit on a less ambitious and more regional scale. LeJ developed strong bonds with al-Qaeda in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, when scores of LeJ militants received instruction at al-Qaeda-run training camps in the country.

LeJ was established as a centralized group that spun out of its mother organization Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), following the assassination of founder Haq Nawaz Jhangvi in 1991. The leaders of SSP — Maik Ishaq, Riaz

Basra and Akram Lahori — founded and ran LeJ, then based in Pakistan's Punjab province. They carried out attacks against the Shia community, assassinating prominent Shias and orchestrating suicide attacks on Shia processions.

As a result of its links to al-Qaeda, after the start of United States' so-called War on Terror, LeJ faced a crackdown by the Pakistani state, which fragmented and decentralized the organization. This resulted in the establishment of a number of cells and factions, including LeJ al-Alami.

Under New Management

The leader of LeJ al-Alami is Yousaf Mansoor Khurasani (a.k.a. Syed Safdar Shah). Thought to be a resident of Karachi, little is known about Khurasani, although police sources say he was at one point briefly in their custody.

Khurasani previously worked with LeJ's different factions in Karachi and appears to be a frequent visitor to neighboring Afghanistan, where he has developed links with leaders of other jihadist organizations. He played a pivotal role in organizing and coordinating a meeting of eight different TTP factions in Ghazni, Afghanistan, in November 2016 ([Geo TV](#), November 15, 2016).

Khurasani appears to represent a younger generation of LeJ leaders who have gained prominence as many of the LeJ old guard have either been arrested or killed in encounters with police. The long-standing LeJ chief, Malik Ishaq, was killed in July 2015, along with his two sons and 11 other high-profile leaders, during a firefight with police when gunmen allegedly tried to free him from arrest ([Dawn](#), July 29, 2015). Another high-profile LeJ leader, Usman Kurd, was also shot dead in a police "encounter" in February 2015, while two other LeJ leaders, Asif Choto and Naeem Bokhari, were arrested and most of the members of their cells killed ([News International](#), February 17, 2015).

'Working Relationship'

Although LeJ adheres to the Deobandi school of thought, rather than IS' Salafi sect, their shared sectarian hatreds are a binding force. IS' hardline anti-Shia and anti-Sufi stance makes it a natural fit for LeJ al-Alami. The group's alliance with IS, however, is informal. It has never pledged allegiance to IS, and LeJ al-Alami is not

considered one of the 43 Islamist terrorist organizations that form part of IS' broader global network of more than 30 *wilayat* (provinces)([TSG IntelBrief](#), May 27, 2015; [IntelCenter](#), December 2015).

According to Azaz Syed, an Islamabad-based security analyst, LeJ al-Alami wants to maintain a "working relationship" with IS, assisting in its sectarian and anti-government operations in Pakistan, but not in recruiting for IS. [1]

This arrangement, a kind of joint venture, is of benefit to IS as its operations in Iraq and Syria come under pressure. LeJ is one of the best-established terrorist organizations in Pakistan, maintaining a strong and widespread network of Deobandi madrasas across the country. Access to that network will be useful to IS if, as it appears, the group has plans to broaden its own network in the country.

The relationship is practical for both sides. IS is in a better position to back the group financially than al-Qaeda and, according to a senior officer with the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) of the Sindh police who spoke on condition of anonymity, members of IS' Khurasan chapter in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province have joined LeJ al-Alami's ranks, alongside militants from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). [2]

According to the CTD officer, although LeJ members had a deeper attachment to al-Qaeda than IS, the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 lowered the group's morale and pushed many of its members to join IS. The officer also noted that the militants arrested for the 2015 Safoora Goth massacre — extremists gunned down 45 members of the Ismaili community on the outskirts of Karachi — had progressed through membership of different militant organizations, moving initially from LeJ to al-Qaeda and eventually to IS.

Fears for the Future

The jointly claimed attacks suggest IS does not yet have the capability to perpetrate the act of terrorism and relies on LeJ al-Alami's network on the ground.

Meanwhile, the influence of IS on LeJ al-Alami is clear from the group's violent tactics. All the attacks claimed by LeJ al-Alami have involved mass civilian casualties.

That suggests the younger generation of LeJ militants may be intent on unleashing a new wave of Islamist violence on Pakistan in association with IS. The partnership with IS may yet reinvigorate the broader LeJ network across Pakistan under a younger, more adaptable and more ruthless leadership.

Farhan Zahid writes on counter-terrorism, al-Qaeda, Pakistani al-Qaeda-linked groups, Islamic State, jihadi ideologues and the Afghan Taliban.

NOTES

[1] Author interview with Azaz Syed, an Islamabad-based senior security analyst and journalist (January 2, 2017).

[2] Author interview with a Karachi-based senior police officer from the Counter Terrorism Department of Sindh police (December 3, 2016).

Anarchy in Azawad: A Guide to Non-State Armed Groups in Northern Mali

Andrew McGregor

Achieving peace in northern Mali (known locally as Azawad) is complicated by the proliferation of armed groups in the region, each varying in purpose, ideology and ethnic composition. Personal and clan rivalries make cooperation exceedingly difficult even when political agendas match. MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) peacekeepers and UN diplomats deplore this state of affairs, which prevents the establishment of a successful platform for negotiations, never mind implementing the 2015 Algiers Accords meant to bring peace to the region. [1] As in Darfur, many of the factional “splits” are intended to place the leaders of self-proclaimed armed movements in the queue for post-reconciliation appointments to government posts.

As a way of facilitating talks with a variety of rebel movements and loosely pro-government militias, most of the armed groups in northern Mali agreed in 2014 to join one of two coalitions – either the rebel/separatist Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA), or the pro-government Plateforme coalition. Other armed groups devoted to jihad, such as-Qaeda, al-Murabitun and Ansar al-Din, were deliberately excluded from the peace process and are not part of either coalition.

The June 20, 2015, Algiers Accord between the Malian government and the armed groups in the north was pushed through by an international community tired of the endless wrangling between northern Mali’s armed political movements. As a consequence, it is widely regarded in the north as an imposed agreement that does not address the often subtle and deep-rooted grievances that fuel the ongoing conflict. MINUSMA’s deployment, expensive in terms of both money and lives, is seen by the rebels as providing quiet support for Bamako’s efforts to retake the north through proxies such as GATIA, while ignoring the concerns of rebel groups.

Nonetheless, most of the armed groups in northern Mali can be brought together under one of five types: Pro-government militias (the Plateforme); pro-independence

or pro-federalism groups (the CMA); dissident CMA groups that have left the coalition; Salafi-Jihadist groups; and ethnically-oriented groups. Many of these groups break down further into brigades, or *katibas*.

Below is Jamestown’s guide to the non-state armed groups operating in northern Mali:

1) The Plateforme Coalition

Generally pro-government and/or favoring national unity, the coalition was formed in June 2014.

Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance – Plateforme (CMFPR I)

The Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements was established on July 21, 2012. It is a collection of self-defense movements from the Songhai and Fulani/Peul communities in the Gao and Mopti regions. [2] The CMFPR split into pro- and anti-government factions after leader Harouna Toureh rallied to the government and was dumped in January 2014 as spokesman by the main faction, which remained in the opposition CMA coalition as CMFPR II ([22 Septembre](#) [Bamako], January 30, 2014).

A Bamako-based lawyer, Toureh is currently defending former 2012 coup leader “General” Amadou Sanogo ([Journal du Mali](#), December 2, 2016).

Groupe d’autodéfense des touareg Imghads et alliés (GATIA)

The Imghad and Allied Touareg Self Defense Movement was established on August 14, 2014. The movement is composed mostly of vassal Imghad Tuareg locked in a struggle with the “noble” Kel Ifoghas Tuareg of Kidal. Many of its members are veterans of the Malian and Libyan armies.

Although not a signatory to the Algiers Accord, GATIA is nonetheless the most powerful group in the Plateforme coalition despite internal and international criticism that it is nothing more than an ethnic militia.

GATIA has been involved in constant clashes with CMA forces since its creation and continues to put military pressure on the rebel coalition. Though Fahad Ag Almahmoud is secretary general, the movement’s real leader appears to be Brigadier General al-Hajj Ag

Gamou, an example of the close ties this group has with the Malian Army.

Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad-Bamako (MAA-B)

The Arab Movement of Azawad-Bamako is a pro-Bamako faction of the MAA. Led by Professor Ahmed Sidi Ould Mohamed, it is largely based in the Gao region with a military base at Inafarak, close to the Algerian border.

The MAA is dominated by members of the Lamhar clan, an Arab group whose recent prosperity and large new homes in Gao are attributed to their prominent role in moving drug shipments through the country's north. Some are former members of the jihadist MUJAO group. The split in the MAA is interpreted by some as being directly related to a struggle for control of drug-trafficking routes through northern Mali.

Mouvement pour la défense de la patrie (MDP)

The Movement for National Defense is a Fulani militia led by Hama Founé Diallo, a veteran of Charles Taylor's forces in the Liberian Civil War and briefly a member of the rebel Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) in 2012.

The MDP joined the peace process in June 2016 by allying itself with the Plateforme coalition ([Le Républicain](#) [Bamako], June 27, 2016; [Aujourd'hui-Mali](#) [Bamako], July 2, 2016). Diallo says he wants to teach the Fulani to use arms to defend themselves, while steering them away from the attraction of jihad ([Jeune Afrique](#), July 18, 2016). Other military leaders include Abdoulaye Houssei, Allaye Diallo, Oumar Diallo and Mamadou Traoré.

Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad (MSA)

The Movement for the Salvation of Azawad was founded by Moussa Ag Acharatoumane, the chief of the Daoussak Tuareg around Ménaka and former spokesman for MNLA, along with Colonel Assalat Ag Habi, a Chamanamas Tuareg, also based near Ménaka. The two established the group after a September 2016 split in the MNLA, and it joined the Plateforme on September 17, 2016, after being informed that the new movement could not remain inside the CMA ([Journal du Mali](#), September 22, 2016; [RFI](#), September 11, 2016; [Le Canard déchaîné](#) [Bamako], September 21, 2016).

Most members belong to the Daoussak or Chamanamas Tuareg ([Le Repère](#) [Bamako], January 3).

Centered on the *Ménaka* district of Gao region, MSA joined in a pact with the CJA, the CPA and the CMFPR II in October 2016, effectively creating an alternative CMA ([L'indicateur du Renouveau](#) [Bamako], October 24, 2016).

2) Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA)

The Coordination of Azawad Movements coalition was launched on June 9, 2014, but has lost several member groups since.

Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad (HCUA)

The High Council for the Unity of Azawad was formed in May 2013 from a merger of the Haut Conseil de l'Azawad (HCA) and the Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad (MIA). The HCUA is led by Algabass Ag Intallah, who also acts as the head of the CMA.

Another prominent member is Mohamed Ag Intallah, brother of Algabass and chieftain of the Ifoghas Tuareg of Kidal. Deputy Commander Shaykh Ag Aoussa was killed by a bomb in Kidal shortly after a meeting at a MINUSMA compound on October 9, 2016 ([Journal du Mali](#), October 14, 2016).

The movement absorbed many former members of Ansar al-Din. The HCUA is suspected of remaining close to Ansar al-Din, despite rivalry between Iyad Ag Ghali and the Ag Intallah brothers over the leadership of the Ifoghas Tuareg. Last year, Mohamed Ag Intallah, who may be trying to play both sides on issues like national unity or separatism, suggested engaging in "discussions with the Malian jihadists," saying that, "in return they will help Mali get rid of jihadists from elsewhere" ([Mali-Actu.net](#), March 13, 2016).

Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad – Dissident (MAA-D)

The Arab Movement of Azawad is a breakaway group led by Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidati. This faction of the MAA consists mainly of Bérabiche Arabs from the Timbuktu region, many of them former soldiers in the Malian army who deserted in 2012. The group rallied to the CMA in June 2014.

Other MAA-D leaders include suspected narco-traffickers Dina Ould Aya (or Daya) and Mohamed Ould Aweynat. The military chief of the dissenting MAA is Colonel Hussein Ould al-Moctar "Goulam," a defector from the Malian army.

Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)

The Azawad National Liberation Movement was established in October 2010 as a secular, separatist movement. It played a major role in the 2012 rebellion until it was sidelined by the more powerful Islamist faction led by Ansar al-Din.

Bilal Ag Chérif acts as the group's secretary-general, while the military commander is Colonel Mohamed Ag Najim, an Idran Tuareg and former officer in the Qaddafi-era Libyan army. Sub-sections of the Kel Adagh Tuareg (especially the Idran and Taghat Mellit) are well represented in the movement.

The MNLA has suffered the most in an ongoing "assassination war" between CMA groups and armed Islamist groups. Despite the strong presence of Libyan and Malian Army veterans in its ranks, the MNLA has performed poorly on the battlefield.

3) CMA Dissident Groups

In the last year, a number of CMA groups have left the coalition, mostly because the alliance is perceived as promoting further violence rather than reconciliation. Some have referred to this alignment of dissident groups as "CMA-2."

Coalition pour le peuple de l'Azawad (CPA)

The Coalition for the People of Azawad is led by Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh, the former head of external relations for the MNLA.

Established in March 2014 by 11 founding groups after a split in the MNLA, the group is relatively weak due to organizational rivalry between Ag Mohamed Assaleh and secretary-general Shaykh Mohamed Ousmane Ag Mohamedoun.

The CPA seeks federalism rather than independence. The movement is largely Tuareg, but claims membership from the Arab, Songhaï and Peul/Fulani communities.

Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance II (CMFPR-II)

The Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Fronts and Movements II is a rebel-aligned faction of the CMFPR led by Ibrahim Abba Kantao, who heads the Ganda Iso movement.

The group rallied to the CMA in June 2014 so as not to be left out of negotiations, with Kantao coming out against the partition of Mali (MaliJet.com, July 15, 2014). In December 2014, Kantao took the unusual step of allying his movement to the Tuareg-dominated MNLA, vowing to "ally ourselves with the devil if it is necessary for the peace and salvation of our communities" ([22 Septembre](#), December 29, 2014). The move shocked many CMFPR II members who view the Tuareg clans as rivals for resources and political authority.

A split occurred in the movement when clan disputes led to the formation of CMFPR III by Mahamane Alasane Maïga, but the circle was completed when Maïga led his movement back into CMFPR I in May 2015 ([L'Indicateur du Renouveau](#) [Bamako], May 20, 2015).

4) Salafi-Jihadist Groups

Alliance nationale pour la sauvegarde de l'identité peule et la restauration de la justice (ANSIPRJ)

The National Alliance to Safeguard Peul Identity and Restore Justice was formed in June 2016. ANSPIRJ is led by Oumar al-Janah, who describes the group as a self-defense militia that aggressively defends the rights of Fulani/Peul herding communities in Mali, but is neither jihadist nor separatist in its ideology.

ANSPIRJ deputy leader Sidi Bakaye Cissé claims that Mali's military treats all Fulani as jihadists: "We are far from being extremists, let alone puppets in the hands of armed movements" ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 7, 2016). In reality, al-Janah's movement is closely aligned with Ansar al-Din and claimed participation in a coordinated attack with that group on a Malian military base at Nampala on July 19, 2016, that killed 17 soldiers and

left the base in flames ([Mali Actu/AFP](#), July 19, 2016; [Jeune Afrique/AFP](#), July 19, 2016).

ANSPIRJ's Fulani military Amir, Mahmoud Barry (a.k.a. Abu Yehiya), was arrested near Nampala on July 27 ([AFP](#), July 27, 2016).

Ansar al-Din

Ansar al-Din is led by long-time rebel and jihadist Iyad Ag Ghali, a leading member of the Ifoghas Tuareg of Kidal and veteran of Muammar Qaddafi's Islamic Legion. Ag Ghali is a noted military leader and sworn enemy of GATIA leader Brigadier al-Hajj Ag Gamou.

Ansar al-Din, with a mix of Tuareg, Arab and Fulani members, carries out regular attacks on French military installations or bases of the MINUSMA peacekeepers in northern Mali. The French believe Ag Ghali is "an enemy of peace" and remains Operation Barkhane's number two target after Mokhtar Belmokhtar ([RFI](#), February 20, 2016; [MaliActu.net](#), March 13, 2016).

Ansar al-Din's weapons specialist, Haroun Sa'id (a.k.a. Abu Jamal), an ex-officer of the Malian Army, was killed in a French air raid in April 2014.

Ansar al-Din Sud (a.k.a. Katiba Khalid Ibn Walid)

Ansar al-Din Sud is a sub-group of Ansar al-Din and was formerly led by Souleymane Keïta. The group emerged in June 2015 with operations near the border with Côte d'Ivoire (Sikasso region) followed by further operations in central Mali. Keïta was arrested in March 2016 by the Malian Secret Service.

Front de libération du Macina (FLM)

The Macina Liberation Front (a.k.a. Katiba Macina or Ansar al-Din Macina) is a largely Fulani jihadist movement led by Salafi preacher Hamadoun Koufa. Based in the Mopti region (central Mali), the group takes its name from a 19th century Fulani Islamic state. The Islamists have succeeded in recruiting young Fulanis by playing up the traditional Fulani leadership's inability to defend its people from Tuareg attacks or cattle-rustling.

The movement allied itself with Ansar al-Din in May 2016, but split again earlier this year in the midst of diverging agendas and racial tensions ([MaliActu.net](#), Jan-

uary 7; [MaliActu.net](#), January 20). The FLM claimed responsibility for the July 19, 2016 attack on the Malian military barracks in Nampala that claimed the lives of 17 soldiers and wounded over 30 more (@Rimaah_01, on Twitter, July 19, 2016).

Islamic State – Sahara/Sahel:

The Islamic State (IS) has made steady inroads in northern Mali over the last two years and may benefit from the arrival of IS fighters and commanders fleeing defeat in Libya.

Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former al-Murabitun commander, publicly pledged allegiance to IS, together with his commanders, in May 2015. However, IS only recognized the transfer of allegiance in October 2016. His defection to IS was publicly denounced by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (who said al-Sahrawi did not have any authority) and deplored by AQIM's Saharan emir Yahya Abu al-Houmam (a.k.a. Djamel Okacha), who suggested ties with al-Sahrawi had not been irrevocably broken but nonetheless rejected the legitimacy of IS' "so-called Caliphate" ([al-Akhbar](#) [Nouakchott], January 10, 2016).

Al-Sahrawi's fighters now form IS' Saharan battalion. Recent reports suggest that Hamadoun Koufa of the FLM has been discussing collaboration in the creation of a new Fulani caliphate in the Sahel in what is seen as a betrayal of his sponsor, Ansar al-Din's Iyad Ag Ghali ([MaliActu.net](#), January 6, 2017; [January 7](#), 2017).

The leader of the Fulani contingent of IS-Sahara is Nampala Ilassou Djibo.

Mauritanian Hamada Ould Muhammad al-Kheirou (a.k.a. Abu Qum Qum), the former leader of MUJAO, also pledged allegiance to IS in 2015 (*El-Khabar* [Algiers] via BBC Monitoring, November 13, 2015).

Mouvement pour l'unité et jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO)

The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa includes certain elements that appear to still be operating in Niger after the group's hold on northern Mali was shattered in 2013 by France's Operation Serval. Most of the movement joined al-Murabitun in that year, while other members drifted into various ethnic-based militias.

MUJAO's military commander, Bérabiche Arab Omar Ould Hamaha, was killed by French Special Forces in March 2014. Commander Ahmed al-Tilemsi (a.k.a. Abd al-Rahman Ould Amar), a Lamhar Arab and known drug trafficker, was killed by French Special Forces in the Gao region of northern Mali on December 11, 2014.

Al-Murabitun

Al-Murabitun is an AQIM breakaway group that was formed in 2013 through a merger of MUJAO and the Katiba al-Mulathameen ("Veiled Brigade") of Mokhtar Belmokhtar. [3]

The group claimed responsibility for the January 17 car-bomb attack in Gao that killed 77 members of the Malian Army and CMA groups, which it said was carried out by a Fulani recruit, Abd al-Hadi al-Fulani ([al-Akhbar](#) [Nouakchott], January 18). Fulani and Songhaï may now be found alongside the dominant Arab and Tuareg elements in the group.

Al-Murabitun's foreign recruits are mostly from Algeria, Niger and Tunisia ([RFI](#), May 14, 2014).

The group rejoined AQIM in December 2015.

Al-Qa'ida fi bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami (AQIM)

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb appears to have been reenergized by the re-absorption of the Mokhtar Belmokhtar-led al-Murabitun splinter group in December 2015. It has since carried out several attacks intended to reaffirm its presence in the Sahel region at a time when the movement's role as the region's preeminent Islamist militant group is being challenged by IS.

The emir of the Saharan branch of AQIM is Algerian Yahya Abu al-Houmam (a.k.a. Djamel Okacha), a jihadist active since 1998. The group operates primarily in the Timbuktu region.

The unification with al-Murabitun was confirmed by AQIM leader Abu Musab Abd al-Wadud (a.k.a. Abd al-Malik Droukdel) on December 3, 2015, who announced the Murabitun members would now fight under the banner of the Katiba Murabitun of AQIM ([AP](#), December 7, 2015; *al-Khabar* [Algiers], December 8 via BBC Monitoring). AQIM has four sub-commands of varying strength:

Katiba al-Ansar: Formerly led by Hamada Ag Hama (a.k.a. Abd al-Krim al-Targui), an Ifoghas Tuareg and relative of Ansar al-Din leader Iyad ag Ghali, the brigade operated in Tessalit, in northeast Mali. Ag Hama was killed in a French operation in 2015. [4]

Katiba al-Furqan: Based in the Timbuktu region, the brigade has been led by Mauritanian/Libyan Abd al-Rahman Talha al-Libi since September 2013. Al-Libi replaced Mauritanian Mohamed Lemine Ould al-Hassan (a.k.a. Abdallah al-Chinguitti), who was killed by French forces in early 2013 ([Jeune Afrique](#), September 27, 2013). Al-Libi accuses France of "seeking to create a tribal conflict after the failure of its intervention in northern Mali" (aBamako.com via BBC Monitoring, December 2, 2015).

Katiba Tarik Ibn Zaïd: The unit's Algerian leader, Abd al-Hamid Abu Zaïd (a.k.a. Mohamed Ghdiri), was killed by French (or Chadian) forces in February 2013. In September that year, the command was transferred to Algerian Saïd Abu Moughati. [5]

Katiba Yusuf ibn Tachfin: Formed in November 2012, this mostly Tuareg group is named for the Berber leader of the North African-Andalusian Almoravid Empire (c. 1061–1106) and is led by Abd al-Krim al-Kidali (a.k.a. Sidan Ag Hitta), formerly of Katiba al-Ansar. Ag Hitta, a former *sergeant-chef* and deserter from the Malian National Guard, reportedly defected from AQIM and sought refuge from the MNLA during the battles of February 2013 ([Le Figaro](#), March 3, 2013). He has since resumed jihadist activities but is regarded by many as little more than a bandit chief. The unit operates mostly in the mountainous Adrar Tigharghar region of Kidal.

5) Ethnically Oriented Groups

Congrès pour la Justice dans l'Azawad (CJA)

The Congress for Justice in Azawad is made up primarily of Tuareg, but has been weakened by leadership rivalries. It released its acting secretary general, Hama Ag Mahmoud, in December 2016. The group's chairman is Azarack Ag Inaborchad. [6]

CJA allied with the MSA, the CPA and the CMFPR II in October 2016 ([L'indicateur du Renouveau](#) [Bamako], October 24, 2016). The group has the support of Kel

Antessar Tuareg leader Abd al-Majid Ag Mohamed Ahmad (a.k.a. Nasser), who is alleged to have supported the ouster of Ag Mahmoud ([L'indicateur du Renouveau](#) [Bamako], January 18).

Now based in Mauritania, Ag Mahmoud retains the support of many CJA members who are unhappy with the change in leadership. The CJA operates mainly in the Kel Antessar regions of Timbuktu and Taoudeni.

Forces de libération du Nord du Mali (FLN)

The Liberation Forces of Northern Mali was created in 2012 from elements of the Ganda Koy and Ganda Iso (Fulani/Peul and Songhai militias). CMFPR II leader Ibrahim Abba Kantao is an official with the group, which opposes the return of the Malian Army to northern Mali ([L'Indicateur du renouveau](#) [Bamako], April 21, 2015).

Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad (MPSA)

The Popular Movement for the Salvation of Azawad is an Arab movement that is the result of a split in the MAA, with the dissidents who formed the MPSA claiming they wanted to remove themselves from the influence of AQIM ([Anadolu Agency](#), August 31, 2014).

The group seeks self-determination for the north rather than independence, but it does not appear to be particularly influential.

Mouvement pour la Justice et la Liberté (MJL)

The Movement for Justice and Freedom was formed in September 2016. It is made up of Arab former members of the MAA in the Timbuktu region who announced they would no longer endorse the "unjustified war adventures" of the CMA coalition in which the MAA was a main component.

The movement's chairman is Sidi Mohamed Ould Mohamed, who has moved the MJL closer to the Plateforme by seeking implementation of the Algiers Accords.

The MJL is centered on the Ber district of Timbuktu region ([Le Repère](#) [Bamako], January 3).

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NOTES

[1] MINUSMA, the UN's mission in Mali, is regarded by the CMA as being in league with the Plateforme forces, though other sources accuse it of intervening against GATIA, the strongest unit in the Plateforme coalition ([Le Malien](#), August 1, 2016).

[2] The militias that banded together in 2012 under the CMFPR umbrella include: Ganda Iso (Sons of the Land), Ganda Koy (Lords of the Land), Alliance des communautés de la région de Tombouctou (ACRT), Front de libération des régions Nord du Mali (FLN), Cercle de réflexion et d'action (CRA) and the Force armée contre l'occupation (FACO). See also: Ibrahim Maïga, "Armed Groups in Mali: Beyond the Labels," West Africa Report 17, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, (June 2016). Available [here](#).

[3] The Brigade also operated under the name Katiba al-Muaqun Biddam – "Those Who Signed in Blood Brigade."

[4] Ministère de la Défense, "Sahel: deux importants chefs terroristes mis hors de combat" (May 20, 2015). Available [here](#).

[5] Alain Rodier, "Note d'actualité N°365: Al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamique à la Croisée des Chemins?" Centre Français de Recherche sur le Renseignement, Paris, (August 17, 2014). Available [here](#).

[6] Communiqué du Congrès pour la Justice dans l'Azawad, Communiqué 005/CJA-BE/14-2017, (January 16). Available [here](#).