

ESCALATION OF TERRORIST ATTACKS IN MALI DEMONSTRATES GROWING EXPANSION OF ANSAR DINE

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The recent escalation of terrorist attacks carried out by Ansar Dine including the deadliest attack targeting military forces in Nampala and the first kidnapping of 5 Malian soldiers, show that the Mali-based terrorist group is significantly reinforcing its positions and gaining further legitimacy in the country.

Ansar Dine, a Salafist group close to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) whose name in Arabic “Harakat Ansar al-Dine” means “Defenders of the faith” was created in October 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a respected Tuareg from the Ifoghas ethnic group.

In 1988 Ag Ghaly founded the Popular Movement of Liberation of Azawad (MPLA) and on June 28, 1990 MPLA carried out attacks in Tidermen and Menaka that left 18 dead including 4 Malian army soldiers. The attack marked the beginning of Tuareg rebellion in the country. For nearly 2 decades Ag Ghaly was the senior leader of Touareg rebel movement in the country.

He also acted as an intermediary when the Malian government negotiated with AQIM for the release of hostages. In 2007, he attacked AQIM forces defeating them near the Algerian border. In the same year he was appointed by Malian President Amadou Toumani Touré as a diplomat at the country’s consulate in Saudi Arabia, though he was recalled from the country 3 years after for links to radical islamists.

After unsuccessful efforts to take the leadership of the MNLA in 2011 Ag Ghaly founded Ansar Dine. During the Tuareg rebellion in 2012, Ansar Dine and other islamist groups, including AQIM, backed the MNLA and seized control of large parts of northern Mali including the three major cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, a mosaic of tradition clans, including the Songhai, the Tuareg, the Arabs and the Peul. Later, the terrorist group overthrew MNLA and took control of most of northern Mali.

Unlike the MNLA whose goal is an autonomy of northern Mali and direct control of the territory, **Iyad Ad Ghaly opposes the partition of the country and wants to**

create an Islamic state in which Sharia law is applied. In this issue Ansar Dine is thus in contrast with AQIM and its global jihad goal without borders.

Ansar Dine, along with the other jihadist groups, were ousted by the French military operation Serval in January 2013, when the United Nations deployed a 11,000-strong peacekeeping force, though as ESISC previously reported, this withdrawal was largely considered as a tactical move rather than a sign of total defeat of the organization and Iyad Ag Ghaly remained an important figure in northern Mali's political landscape. The terrorist group managed to reorganize itself and since 2015, there has been a regular increase of attacks, with the majority of them occurring in Kidal in the form of bomb attacks and landmines.

On June 27, 2016 after lying low since early 2013, Iyad Ag Ghaly released a 11-minute-long video, using Arabic and Tuareg language and reiterating threats against France and the Multidimensional Integrated Mission Stabilization of the United Nations Mali (MINUSMA), which he qualified as being occupation forces. He also expressed solidarity with all the "brothers" around the world and urged all the Muslims to rise up against France, declaring that Ansar Dine was "ready to unite with our brothers on the ground to face up to the crusaders and infidels who have united to fight Islam in our land."

A couple of days later, the terrorist group claimed responsibility for having launched 10 rockets against military barracks of MINUSMA on June 23, in Aguelhok and for an attack carried out against a Malian army convoy between the cities of Bambara Maoude and Douentza.

On July 4, Ansar Dine carried out a bomb attack against a French army patrol in Abeibara and against 2 MINUSMA tanker trucks 3 days later.

On July 13, a bomb attack carried out against a MINUSMA vehicle in Kidal left 4 soldiers killed.

On July 19, the coordinated attack against a military base in Nampala, central Mali, that left 17 people dead and 35 injured was the deadliest terrorist attack targeting Malian military forces this year. In addition to all these lost lives, military weapons and vehicles were seized during the assault. On the same day, 3 terrorist groups claimed responsibility for the attack. To begin with, Omar Aldjana, head of the National Alliance for Preservation of the Fulani Identity and Restoration of Justice, a recent created group who said its primary goal was the defense of Fulani people against abuses of the Malian government and jihadists, claimed responsibility for the attack, followed by Ansar Dine and Ansardin Katiba Macina, although doubts can emerge concerning the ability of the first group to carry out such attacks.

It is worth mentioning that Ag Ghaly was the mentor of Amadou Koufa, the founder of the Macina Liberation Front before it was rebranded as Ansardine Katiba Macina in 2015. The jihadist group is mostly active in southern Mali and pledged allegiance to Ansar Dine in May this year after having issued his first video threatening France, Cote d'Ivoire and Mauritania and after having carried out its first terrorist attack in Samorougouan in Burkina Faso.

Ansar Dine now disposes about 200 members in the south of the country, which reflects its growing geographical and operational capabilities.

Following the attack against Nampala military base, Ansar Dine issued an iconographic of the assault to promote further its victory. Later, on August 4, it released a 4-minute-long video of 5 Malian soldiers it had kidnapped during the attack.

On August 5, 2 bomb attacks were carried out against 2 MINUSMA vehicles and on August 19, Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for having launched several rockets at the military base of Amchach near Tessalit in Northern Mali, specifying that the attack targeted French forces.

All these attacks carried out in the last months reflect the increasing influence of the terrorist group in the region. Ansar Dine uses its tribal and historical roots to strengthen its legitimacy, its followers being mainly from Ghaly's Ifoghas-Tuareg and northern Malian Berber Arabs. While other jihadist groups active in the region such as AQMI and its affiliate Al-Mourabitoun consist of foreign jihadists, **Ansar Dine is exclusively Tuareg** and the fact that it only carries out attacks on Malian soil and targets security officers increases its popularity in the region.

Fights between the main rebel groups in northern Mali, namely between the pro-Bamako Platform coalition and CMA fighters, in addition to endangering the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation signed in 2015 creates favorable conditions for the comeback of the terrorist groups in the north of the country. To recall, Ansar Dine was strongly against the peace process and accused separatists of “betraying the local population”.

To enhance further its legitimacy, Ansar Dine created his own media arm called “Rimaah” to publish its statements and claim responsibility for the attacks. It also increasingly uses social media, namely Twitter, issuing propaganda videos and statements as other jihadist groups do, including AQIM which remains a primary regional security threat in the country. The iconographic published after the Nampala attacks and the video of kidnapped soldiers demonstrate that the terrorist group actively uses different tools of online propaganda to increase its popularity, visibility and to gain support as a separate entity in the region. Before that, it was mainly Al-Qaeda that published statements and claimed responsibility for attacks.

There is a mounting concern regarding the increasing number and scale of attacks carried out by Ansar Dine in the last couple of months in the region of northern Mali. The actual security context is propitious to the rise of the terrorist group which takes advantage of the tensions between the main rebel groups who seek to control northern Mali, but also of its tribal and historical roots while using the same tools of online propaganda as other prominent terrorist groups such as Islamic State and Al-Qaeda.

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