

Salafi jihadi armed groups and conflict (de-)escalation

The case of Ansar Dine in Mali

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Case Study Report

Abstract

As violent conflict erupted in Mali in 2012, the Salafi jihadi Armed Group (SJAG) Ansar Dine quickly emerged as one of its main protagonists, and its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly retained a prominent role within the umbrella entity *Jamā‘at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn* (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, JNIM) formed in March 2017. This case study report analyses three strategic shifts undergone by Ansar Dine (and then JNIM), and underscores a non-linear evolution towards conflict escalation, both in terms of the geographic spread and level of violence. The study explores the organisational and ideological patterns contributing to this behavioural shift, as well as the role of external factors such as inter-party power dynamics and international intervention in constraining, incentivising or provoking Ansar Dine’s strategic shifts. The study concludes by exploring possible future scenarios for conflict de-escalation. On the one hand, incapacitation of the group seems a remote possibility given that both Malian and international forces have failed to defeat SJAGs since 2013. On the other hand, a scenario of strategic adaptation leading the SGAJ to seek dialogue and negotiation is deemed as unlikely in the short term, but is also described as the only effective pathway towards a peaceful transformation of the conflict. Produced in the context of the research project “Salafi-Jihadi Armed Groups – (De-)escalation Trajectories and Dialogue Options”, this report should be read in complement to a second study examining past experiences of, and prospects for, dialogue and negotiation with SJAGs in Mali (Bouhleb 2019).

About this report

This report was written in the context of the research project “Salafi-Jihadi Armed Groups – (De-)escalation Trajectories and Dialogue Options” conducted by the Berghof Foundation from November 2017 to August 2019. Case study research was carried out on Salafi-jihadi armed groups (SJAGs) in Mali, Somalia and Syria. This report presents findings on the conflict (de-)escalation trajectory of the SJAG Ansar Dine in Mali, while a second study on the Mali case examines past experiences of, and prospects for, dialogue and negotiation with SJAGs (Bouhleb 2019).

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Table of Content

- List of Abbreviations..... 3
- 1. Introduction..... 5
- 2. Conflict setting and key players 6
 - 2.1 Background to the conflict in Mali..... 6
 - 2.2 Key conflict players 7
- 3. Who is Ansar Dine? Trajectory and internal dynamics..... 12
 - 3.1 Organisational dynamics 12
 - 3.2 Ideological dynamics 15
 - 3.3 Behavioural dynamics..... 20
- 4. Key strategic shifts and drivers of change 24
 - 4.1 Strategic shift 1: (De-)escalation around the Ouagadougou negotiations (2012-2013) . 25
 - 4.2 Strategic shift 2: A deceptive cessation of hostilities? (2013-2014) 27
 - 4.3 Strategic shift 3: The creation of JNIM, a major escalatory shift (2017) 29
- 5. Possible future scenarios for de-escalation 31
 - 5.1 Incapacitation 31
 - 5.2 Adaptation 32
- 6. Conclusion..... 34
- 7. References..... 36
- Annex 1: Map of Mali 42
- Annex 2: Portrait of Iyad Ag Ghaly, founder of Ansar Dine and leader of JNIM..... 43

List of Abbreviations

AFISMA	African-led International Support Mission to Mali
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (Coordination of Azawad Movements)
CM-FPR	Coordination des Mouvements et Front Patriotique de Résistance (Coordination of Movements and Patriotic Resistance Front)
CSA	Comité de Suivi de l'Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali (Framework for the application of the agreement)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FLM	Front de Libération de la Macina (Katiba Macina)
GATIA	Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies)
GIA	Groupe Islamique Armé (Armed Islamic Group of Algeria)
GSPC	Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat)
HCUA	Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad (High Council for the Unity of Azawad)
IBK	Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, President of Mali since 2013
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Levant
JNIM/GSIM	Group of Support to Islam and Muslims
MAA	Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad (Arab Movement for Azawad)
MIA	Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad (Islamic Movement for Azawad)
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad)
MUJAO	Mouvement pour l'Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)
NSAG	Non-State Armed Group
SJAG	Salafi jihadi Armed Group

1. Introduction

Mali has been in the international spotlight in recent years due to its long lasting internal crisis, the recent regionalisation of violent extremist threats and the ongoing unsuccessful attempts by France and other international and regional actors to stabilise the country. Salafi-Jihadi Armed Groups (SJAGs) have been more strongly present in the country since 2012. While counter-terrorism and military intervention have failed to eliminate or even contain this threat, soft power options such as dialogue and negotiation have not yet gained sufficient credibility to resolve this long-lasting crisis.

In 2015, the peace accord signed in Algiers between the government of Mali and two coalitions of armed groups – which did not include SJAGs – raised hopes of transforming the conflict and advancing on the path to peaceful coexistence by addressing the Malian population’s social, political, economic and security concerns. However, the securitisation of the region, i.e. the deployment of international and especially French troops in the north of Mali, has not guaranteed long-term stability, and peace does not appear to be on the horizon. While separatist armed groups in northern Mali are slowly being accommodated and integrated into the political architecture through the (chaotic) implementation of the Algiers Agreement, the current obstacle and biggest security challenge for the authorities are the Salafi jihadi movements that are still active within Mali. They have expanded their geographical coverage by activating new cells of fighters in central Mali, and regionalised their operations, with new cells conducting regular attacks in neighbouring countries (mainly Burkina Faso). In this context, a number of Malian politicians, religious leaders and civil society groups have raised the option of engaging with some of the jihadists, especially those perceived to be ‘sons of the nation’. The Conference of National Understanding mandated by the Algiers Agreement and held in 2017 also mentioned the need to engage in dialogue with non-signatory armed groups. The most prominent figure among SJAGs, the Touareg leader Iyad Ag Ghaly¹, is a particular focus of attention, and many experts, practitioners and political figures seem to agree that there can be no sustainable peace without his active or tacit involvement (Collectif de chercheurs 2018; Conférence d’Entente Nationale 2017). This paper therefore focuses on the Salafi jihadi armed group Ansar Dine, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, and its transformation and evolution into the newly formed alliance, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (*Jamā‘at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn*, JNIM), also led by Ag Ghaly.

This study is one of three case study reports produced in the context of a research project conducted by the Berghof Foundation on the dynamics of (de-)escalation of Salafi jihadi armed movements, and on the role and opportunities for dialogue engagement with these actors in order to reduce violence or ultimately to reach a negotiated settlement. Based on the case of Ansar Dine, the report seeks to analyse the historic evolution of the group since its inception and the factors contributing to its strategic shifts, with a particular emphasis on (limited) instances of de-escalation, or missed windows of opportunity for inducing the group to de-escalate violence and opt for a negotiated settlement. After a brief overview of the conflict and its key players (Section 2), the report analyses the organisational, ideological and behavioural dynamics of Ansar Dine (Section 3). This will allow us then to identify and scrutinise key turning points and factors of change that explain strategic shifts within the organisation (Section 4). Finally, possible future options and scenarios for de-escalation and opportunities for future dialogue engagement by Malian and international actors with SJAGs to advance towards peace will be suggested (Section 5) as an alternative or complementary approach to the military strategy.

¹ A portrait of Iyad Ag Ghaly can be found in Annex 2.

In terms of methodology, the study draws on the existing literature and a compilation of quantitative data on attacks and violent events in Mali collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)². This was complemented by eleven semi-structured interviews, including one of a representative of the MNLA, one with a humanitarian NGO, and interviews with experts (9), and by observations gathered by the authors during various workshops and forums on the Mali conflict held in 2018. A second report on Mali was produced in the context of this project, authored by the Mauritania-based scholar Ferdaous Bouhleb, and focuses on the role of, and prospects for, political dialogue with Ansar Dine/JNIM (Bouhleb 2019).

2. Conflict setting and key players

Although this study focuses on the Salafi jihadi armed group Ansar Dine and its evolution in JNIM, it is important to understand the conflict constellation within which it operates, and the other key players with which it interacts, which this section aims to identify and describe.

2.1 Background to the conflict in Mali

In the last decade, Mali has been facing one of its most acute crises since independence. Since the start of the crisis in 2012, “it can be considered that the state of low-intensity war in Mali is quasi-permanent” (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017). While the Touareg³ self-governance claims can be seen as the starting point for the current conflict, many other actors (including Salafi jihadists and international forces) and multiple factors (economic, political and inter-ethnic tensions) fuel the country’s instability.

Historically, several armed rebellions resulted from the lasting conflict between the Touareg community and the central government. The main periods of revolt and unrest occurred in 1963-1964, 1990-1996, 2006-2009 and 2012 (Haysom 2014; Maiangwa 2014). In January 2012, the Touareg separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) joined forces with the Islamist armed group Ansar Dine. Bolstered by the return of Touareg soldiers with heavy weaponry from Qaddafi’s Islamic Legion, they occupied a large part of northern Mali. Their first attack, on 17 January 2012, targeted a Malian army garrison in the town of Aguelhok in the Kidal region. The reported execution of about 100 Malian soldiers was a profound shock to many Malians.

A few months later, in March 2012, junior army officers led by Amadou Sanogo (embarrassed by their defeat and frustrated by the way Amadou Toumani Touré’s government had been handling the secessionist conflict in northern Mali) staged a coup and seized political control in Bamako. Throughout most of 2012, Mali was in a state of deep crisis. The post-coup transitional government had to deal not only with the secessionist conflict in the north – where, on 6 April, MNLA and Ansar Dine declared the independent state of Azawad – but also with internal displacement, the growing influence of Salafi jihadi groups and other manifestations of violence due, for instance, to inter-ethnic tensions. Moreover, the structural causes of the northern Mali crisis remained unresolved: “the long-term neglect of the north by

² “ACLED collects the dates, actors, types of violence, locations, and fatalities of all reported political violence and protest events” (ACLED Data 2019).

³ The Touareg have a long history of struggle and rebellion within the wider Sahel region. The origins of the group’s tensions and claims against the central Malian government date back to the end of the 19th century. The French colonisation and decolonisation processes played an important role in fostering the social, political and economic grievances of this marginalised group. The Touareg community never felt a connection to the state and never considered Bamako as a legitimate centre of power. Ever since the French established a presence in the country, sedentary and western lifestyles have been promoted, which were not adapted to the lifestyle of nomadic pastoralist people (Kisangani 2012). Nowadays in Mali, the Touareg community represents less than 10% of the total population but constitutes the majority in the sparsely populated northern regions of the country (UCDP 2019).

the government in Bamako, [disputes over] the role of Islam in Malian politics and society and the government's failure to make good on promises of greater decentralisation and funding for development. ... Socio-economic conditions in the north, particularly endemic poverty, a pervasive sense of marginalization and a lack of livelihood opportunities for young men, have fed into the region's recurrent conflicts" (Haysom 2014). Finally, the state's non-implementation of the 2006 Algiers Agreement; the failure of an institutional dialogue between conflicting parties in the north and the Malian state; several strategic errors by the state and in particular with its Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in northern Mali; the desire to remilitarise the northern regions; and very high tensions between the state and the dominant Ifoghas tribe in Kidal are other factors that contributed to the latest crisis (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhlel, June 2019, Email).

The situation degenerated after the coup due to the growing threat of Salafi jihadi actors taking a more important and active role within the conflict. After an initial period when Touareg armed groups and SJAGs paid no attention to each other, and despite attempts at dialogue, hostilities commenced between the MNLA and SJAGs for control over the northern region of Mali, especially in Gao, based on their respective aspirations. While the MNLA was demanding independence for the Azawad region, Islamist armed groups prioritised religious claims against the secularity of the Malian state, which has been effective since French colonisation. The conflict between the two groups also resulted from the strong external pressure put on the MNLA by the French authorities and Touareg diaspora⁴, which led the MNLA to the strategic choice of rejecting the alliance with AQIM. At this point, the Malian authorities called on the French authorities for help and the military Operation Serval, followed and extended by Operation Barkhane, was deployed in northern Mali to push back the Salafi jihadists.

Each of the three past Touareg rebellions was followed by a piecemeal peace agreement which failed to address the deep-rooted causes of discontent. To resolve this last Touareg rebellion, regional and international actors also mediated several negotiation rounds. A ceasefire accord was signed in Ouagadougou in 2013, followed by a peace agreement in Algiers in 2015. The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (Algiers Agreement, or Bamako Agreement) was signed in two stages, on 15 May and 20 June 2015, between the Mali government and two coalitions of (primarily Touareg and Arab) armed groups: self-determination groups represented by the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), and a diverse range of pro-government groups seeking to resolve existing political and socio-economic grievances within the unitary state of Mali, represented by the Platform of Armed Groups (Nyirabikali 2015). Although the Algiers Agreement was supposed to lead Mali to a new era of peace and stability, its implementation faces multiple challenges and is advancing at a very slow pace, while clashes between signatory groups continue, and new armed groups have appeared in northern and central Mali, leading to deteriorating security conditions (Tobie 2017). In addition, the Salafi jihadi armed groups, which were excluded from the peace negotiations, continue to be a threat within Mali and neighbouring countries.

2.2 Key conflict players

In order to explain the role of Ansar Dine within the context of the conflict in Mali, this sub-section offers a brief summary of the key players involved. This summary is not exhaustive, and works cited in this section can be consulted for more details of the history and development of the conflict.

⁴ The MNLA is composed of a plurality of positions: a minority is secular, often senior figures living abroad, and a local majority strongly attached to Islam as the main regulatory mechanism (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhlel, June 2019, Berlin)

≡ Separatist movements

In late 2013, the two Touareg rebel movements MNLA and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), and their Arab allies from the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA), formed an alliance called the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA). They have been active in northern Mali, with the aim of gaining independence for the Azawad region, since the first rebellions in 1963 under various appellations, but have also been competing against other armed groups based in northern Mali which either support the status quo or pursue other political objectives such as the imposition of Sharia law in Mali.

Touareg separatist groups have close historical links with neighbouring Libya⁵. For many observers, Libya is the ‘catalyst of the crisis’ in Mali (Solomon 2015). As the Qaddafi regime began to crumble in early 2011, well-armed and battle-hardened Touaregs returned to Mali, which was already facing a volatile situation. Indeed, all ingredients for the conflict were already present, and the Libya crisis allowed weapons and manpower to come to Mali. The MNLA was created with the objective of freeing the people of Azawad from the illegal occupation of their territory by Mali. It was prepared to declare a state in northern Mali and to launch military operations against the Malian armed forces if the territory was not granted self-rule. On 6 April 2012, it unilaterally declared the independence of Azawad. As a party to the Algiers peace accord, the CMA and its members are due to undergo a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration process, but as a result of the continued violence and the slow pace of implementation of the agreement’s provisions, the MNLA and its allies are still armed and control parts of northern Mali (mainly the Touareg heartland of Kidal) while a few leaders have left the CMA to enter Malian government and politics (Zahar & Boutellis 2019).

≡ Salafi jihadi movements

The MNLA stopped occupying territory in May 2012, leaving three other organisations in control of the north of Mali and its major urban centres (Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu). Until the French intervention, the only NSAGs controlling territory were SJAGs. These groups have more or less close ties to al-Qaeda and are categorised in this paper as Salafi jihadi groups with respect to their primary goals and ideology. Indeed, “in contrast with non-Salafi Islamist groups fighting against foreign occupation or domestic autocratic regimes, the objective of Salafi-Jihadi groups is first and foremost the application of Islamic Law where they are located” (Drevon 2016). The first is al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), an organisation directly descending from the former Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and then the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). It was created in 1998 during the Algerian civil war. Following the events of 9/11, the GSPC leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud – also known as Abdelmalek Droukdel – became attracted by al-Qaeda’s ideology, notoriety and international connections. He officially pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2006 and renamed his organisation AQIM. The group’s presence in northern Mali goes back to the early 2000s. At this time, the GSPC, under pressure from the Algerian army, increasingly escaped to neighbouring countries. There, its members engaged in illegal activities such as smuggling, trafficking and abduction, and recruited volunteers to fight in Iraq against the US invasion (de Castelli 2014; Mémier 2017). In the Sahel region, they have mainly been using hostage-taking to finance their activities.

The second group is the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which pursues a radical form of Islam and operates a brutal Sharia regime in the territories under its control. MUJAO split from AQIM in October 2011, allegedly due to a disagreement over the distribution of kidnapping revenue and the dominant position of Algerians in the leadership (Boutellis 2015). Its stated aim is to spread jihad

⁵ In the late 1970s, large numbers of young Touaregs fled to Libya due to severe droughts and many of them received high-level military training there. In the 1980s, due to economic conditions, most of them went back to Mali, but hard-line fighters returned to Libya and became high-level officers when the National Pact was signed in Mali in 1992.

across a larger area of West Africa. Unlike AQIM, the majority of MUJAO's members are Malians, active in the Gao region. The group merged with another entity led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, another well-known Salafi jihadi figure in the region, to create al-Mourabitoun in August 2013.

The third Salafi jihadi movement active since the start of the latest Mali conflict is Ansar Dine, formed in 2011 by a key Touareg leader and central figure in Mali, Iyad Ag Ghaly. It is mainly distinguished from the other two by its composition and territorial claims, since its members are exclusively Malian and, at least in its first years of existence, did not pursue a transnational Islamist agenda. The war spread to other countries via local revolts that led to actions (mainly against foreigners) especially in Burkina Faso. However, Ansar Dine's objectives remain quite localised.

Over the years, the Salafi jihadi scene was enlarged by the emergence of new groups. In particular, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) or Katiba Macina, led by Amadou Kouffa⁶, has been very active in central Mali since 2015. Mentored by Ag Ghaly, Kouffa had already been involved with Salafi jihadists in Mali before founding Katiba Macina, especially by leading the joint attack by AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO in Konna in 2013 (Zenn 2015).

In March 2017, the main jihadi groups announced that they had formed an alliance which they called the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM or JNIM for the Arabic name - *Jamā'at nuṣrat al-islām wal-muslimīn*), led by Iyad Ag Ghaly. This entity is composed of Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun and the West African branch of AQIM.⁷ JNIM bills itself as the official branch of al-Qaeda in Mali. As such, it consolidates the group's presence in the Sahel and puts Sahel players, especially Ansar Dine, firmly on the global jihadist map.

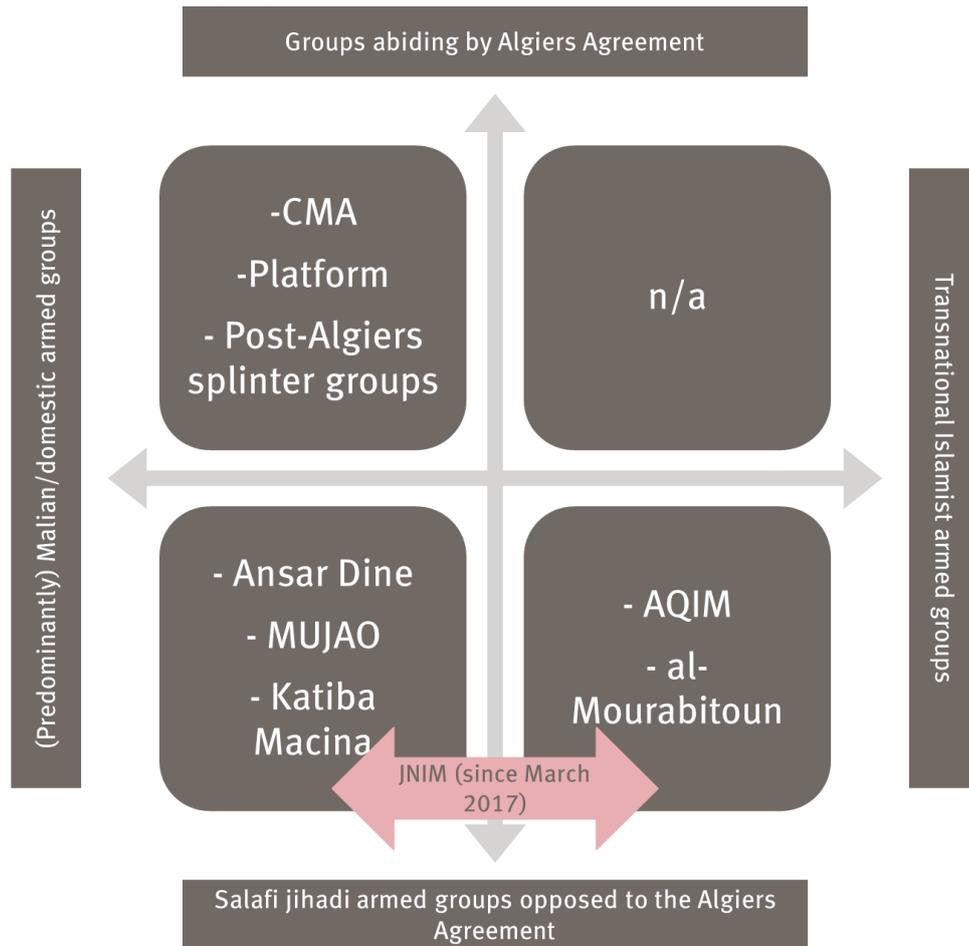
≡ The Malian government and pro-state militias

Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) has been the President of Mali since September 2013. His party is named the Rally for Mali. In 2018, IBK was re-elected President of Mali (not without contestation about several illegalities reported by opposition parties and candidates) with 67% of the vote, and his party won the largest number of seats in the parliamentary elections. Besides the Malian army, other armed actors have been involved on the side of the government during the conflict, including self-defence militias and other pro-government armed groups, which are defending Mali's territorial sovereignty. During the Algiers peace process, these groups joined forces under the Platform of Armed Groups, a coalition comprising the Touareg Imrad Self-Defence Group and its Allies (GATIA), formed in 2014, a loyalist branch of the MAA, and the Coordination of Movements and Patriotic Resistance Front (CM-FPR). Although they also pursue their own particular interests and were treated as a third force during the Algiers process, these groups have close links to the Malian government, and have been fighting alongside the Malian national army against perceived enemies of the state from Salafi jihadi groups. Their alliance with the Malian government is nonetheless mainly strategic, and their loyalty to the state was based on their opposition to rebellions and now, to a larger extent, their opposition to SJAGs, and especially to Ansar Dine, in Azawad. Figure 1 shows how armed groups in Mali relate to the Algiers Agreement and where they stand on the spectrum between domestic and transnational armed groups.

⁶ In November 2018, French forces announced that they had killed Amadou Kouffa in an airstrike near Mopti. AQIM denied the killing, which by then had been confirmed by several other organisations (Lebovich 2018). In February 2019, *Az Zallaqa* (media branch of JNIM) published a video featuring Kouffa denying his own death (Fourt 2019; Nasr 2019).

⁷ In 2015, AQIM was allegedly regionally divided between Algeria (under Droukdel), Libya (under Mokhtar Belmokhtar, former leader of al-Mourabitoun) and West Africa (under Djamel Okacha) (Counter Extremism Project 2018).

Figure 1: Matrix of key armed groups in Mali



Recently, the centre of the country has seen the rise of self-defence militias of Dozo hunters and of Dogon⁸ against Fulani herders. Members of the Fulani community have been portrayed as terrorists due to the ethnic identity of Amadou Kouffa, leader of the Katiba Macina, who has repeatedly called for Fulani mobilisation in jihad (Lounnas 2018; Le Roux 2019). Both sides have been committing atrocities since 2016, but 2018 saw the violence spread to the whole central region, with an intensification of massacres.⁹ A report by the Association Malienne des Droits de l'Homme in November 2018 showed that civilians were the main target of armed actors (SJAGs, militias, armed forces) in the region, and that all these actors were responsible for grave human rights abuses and had violated humanitarian law (AMDH & FIDH 2018). Dogon hunters acted as pathfinders for the Malian armed forces and thus received logistical and financial support from the state (International Crisis Group 2019). The targeting of their most renowned hunters by SJAGs prompted the creation of militias. The decision of the government to dissolve the Dan Nan Ambassagou militia after the massacre of Ogossagou (Le Cam 2019) seems to be changing that relationship, signalling on the one hand the end of a period of tolerance on both sides but also some collaboration on the other hand. In the central region, the Algiers Agreement carries no weight as it was only concerned with the conflict dynamics in northern Mali, and local peace agreements between militias and government are short-lived (Diallo 2018). The blockage is also institutional, since the framework for the application of the agreement (CSA) has closed the door to a possible opening to other belligerents (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhlel, June 2019, Email).

⁸ While Dozo and Dogon militias have the same enemies, their repertoires of action differ strongly, and they operate under separate command structures.

⁹ The Fédération Internationale des ligues des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH) and the Association Malienne des Droits de l'Homme (AMDH) point out the importance of resource scarcity in the the central Delta region's slide into conflict (AMDH & FIDH 2018).

≡ External actors and external intervention

France has assumed the leadership in counter-terrorism efforts in Mali, but the plan to strengthen the Malian government's capacity for combating terrorism on its own has clearly failed. After AQIM and its two allies took over power in northern Mali in summer 2012, France first opted to support a regional conflict resolution approach led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), including a mediation attempt and a military intervention to retake the north. This first initiative failed to produce results and pacify the region. Instead, the alliance of AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO captured the city of Konna in central Mali. In response, France decided to fundamentally alter its strategy regarding the Mali crisis. On 11 January 2013, French President François Hollande responded to a call from Mali's Interim President Traoré and deployed French special forces to Mali in Operation Serval. The initial goal of the intervention was to stop the advance of the three SJAGs towards the Malian capital, Bamako. However, very quickly, France went beyond a pure emergency operation and de facto embarked on an intervention to retake the north, a task that was originally supposed to be undertaken by the Malian army with support from African troops. The French intervention, launched at the request of the Malian authorities, was warmly welcomed at the international level (UN Security Council 2013). Indeed, France, supported by Malian as well as other African troops (mainly from Chad), succeeded relatively quickly in stopping the jihadists from extending their influence further south, driving them out of the main cities in the north and destroying their logistical capacities (Koepf 2013).

Today, Mali is considered a "security bottleneck" (International Crisis Group 2017), due to the increasing presence of counterterrorism forces from various foreign countries and multinational organisations. Indeed, besides the French intervention, an ECOWAS-organised force was deployed under the name AFISMA, later succeeded by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA was established by Security Council Resolution 2100 on 25 April 2013 and mandated to ensure security in Mali. Moreover, Mali and neighbouring countries have formed a joint counterinsurgency force, called the G5 Sahel, involving Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger. This force is no longer lacking funding, but is still affected by logistical inefficiency (non-delivery of resources, lack of clarity in budget governance and spending priorities) and a degree of fatigue (ibid.). The Malian army also received technical training support from the European Union, and finally, external US-military forces are also present in Mali to support other players.

In this complex conflict setting, Ansar Dine is a particularly interesting actor as it has ties to the Touareg secessionist roots of the conflict but has emerged from being mainly nationalist into the spectrum of internationalist Salafi jihadi armed groups. With its leader Ag Ghaly now leading the JNIM alliance, it has played a central role in the conflict dynamics. Indeed, while looking more deeply into Ansar Dine's development in the next section, it is interesting to see how the movement related to and fits into this complex conflict setting.

3. Who is Ansar Dine? Trajectory and internal dynamics

Unlike other Salafi jihadi groups (such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria), which have been extensively analysed by experts, Ansar Dine is, paradoxically, a little-known and under-studied armed movement despite the prominence of the Malian conflict on the international agenda. Within the wide spectrum of SJAGs in the Sahel, it stood out in its early years in particular due to its characteristics as a purely domestic insurgency movement, its relatively self-limited and pragmatic use of selective violence, and the atypical personal trajectory of its historical leader. Examining the internal features and modus operandi of such a movement may help to shed light on the great diversity of actors (self)-labelled as SJAGs. In this section, we will analyse the organisational, ideological and behavioural characteristics of Ansar Dine within the Malian context.

Since the founding of Ansar Dine in Kidal in 2011, its most prominent member, Iyad Ag Ghaly, has been leading the group. At the organisational level, Ansar Dine started as a small entity that rapidly became one of the most powerful and influential Salafi jihadi armed groups. Today, it is one of the groups in the all-encompassing JNIM and is even seen as the most powerful group within the alliance, mainly due to the key role and personality of Ag Ghaly (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris; Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). His political capital, knowledge of Mali and popular support mean that he is unchallenged in his zone of operation. In terms of ideology, the group's declared goals and narrative have been constantly evolving along a spectrum from Touareg nationalism to radical Islamism (Solomon 2015). Finally, its propensity to use violence has progressively increased with time, combined with shifting tactics, modes of communication and approaches to Sharia application, in reaction to external interventions.

3.1 Organisational dynamics

≡ Origins, internal organisation and funding

The historical legitimacy and strong leadership of Ansar Dine are embodied by Iyad Ag Ghaly, supported by his family from the Ifoghas tribe (dominant Touareg aristocracy from the highlands of northern Mali). Ansar Dine was built up around this central figure and a group of veteran rebels from the same tribe. They included two important figures who were close to Iyad Ag Ghaly. The first was Ahmada Ag Bibi (who left the group in early 2013), representative for Abeibara and a man of experience, conservative and traditional. The second was Algabass Ag Intalla (who left Ansar Dine in January 2013), a Touareg notable, son of the Amenokal (traditional Touareg leader) of the Touareg Ifoghas, former representative for Kidal and current leader of the HCUA (Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014). Finally, Cheikh Ag Aoussa (part of Ansar Dine from the start until January 2013) also played a central role in the organisation, as military leader and main contact person with other SJAGs. Due to Iyad Ag Ghaly's popularity among all Touaregs and among the newly arrived fighters from Libya in the years 2011-2012, coupled with his impressive knowledge of the area, Ansar Dine grew rapidly and was able to win important battles and seize control of major cities such as Kidal in 2012. When Iyad Ag Ghaly entered Kidal, AQIM and MUJAO occupied Timbuktu and Gao, respectively. The exact numbers of Ansar Dine's members are not known and vary over time. However, the tribal affiliation of Ansar Dine's founders as well as their history of revolting against Mali's government helped the newly emergent movement to recruit many elements from the Ifoghas tribes but also from the MNLA, AQIM and MUJAO. Ag Ghaly's personal military, social and moral authority and legitimacy is another factor that helped the movement to grow and gain wide support among the local population

(Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris). Another factor facilitating Ansar Dine's military gains and supremacy over the MNLA has been the financial and military support received from AQIM, which had a stronger financial structure due to its longer presence in the region. As an example, the UN revealed that Ansar Dine's leader received 400,000 euros from the leader of the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade of AQIM (Solomon 2015). With the formation of JNIM, the group's financial affiliation to al-Qaeda has become explicit.

It seems that Ag-Ghaly has been the central figure within the organisation from the beginning (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2018, Berlin). According to an expert: "*other leaders exist and are present within the movement but Ansar Dine, it is him, it is Ag Ghaly*" and the influence of other members seems limited: "*others are respected by Iyad Ag Ghaly but they do not have his charisma, his experience, his military abilities and general knowledge*" (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris).

Finally, the joint occupation of Timbuktu by Ansar Dine and AQIM during 2012-2013 provides some indications of Ansar Dine's organisational approach to effective governance. Indeed, Ansar Dine and AQIM put in place a very strict hierarchy: Ag Ghaly was the leader, and he was supported by a presidency of three high-ranking members of AQIM and Ansar Dine. The two organisations also created a media commission, a moral police (Hesbah), an Islamic police and an Islamic Tribunal and Security Battalion (Bureau du Procureur de la Cour Pénale Internationale 2018).

≡ Local support and legitimacy

Ansar Dine, especially through its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, has consistently presented itself as a locally-grounded armed group. Indeed, at the start of the conflict (2012), most members of Ansar Dine belonged to the Touareg community, and more specifically to the Ifoghas tribe. Most experts agree that the group has developed an ideal of the Sharia embedded within Saharan traditions of Islam. However, Ag Ghaly has always made clear that his objective was not solely local: "It was decided to call the movement 'Ansar al-Din' because its primary goal is to establish Islamic law (Sharia), restore respect for the religion, and create an Islamic society in accordance with the vision of jihadist Salafist ideology" (Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014).

Mainly composed of Touareg fighters, Ansar Dine derives a great deal of legitimacy from the local anchoring of its action and strategy. Indeed, Ag Ghaly relies on local narratives and history of protest to mobilise fighters: "Many Malian Touaregs, particularly in the Kidal region, inherit a protest culture from a very early age, built around glorious narratives or, on the contrary, tales of crimes and oppressions endured, which are passed down from generation to generation" (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017). This has been acknowledged by its allies as well, with Djamel Okacha, leader of the West African branch of AQIM and emir of Timbuktu in 2012, stating in 2016: "it[Ansar Dine]'s a local Muslim organization which chose the path of the jihad in the name of God [...] in spite of some minor differences we converge on many issues [...] it is known that the Azawad people have suffered from injustice, oppression and marginalization" (Al-Akhbar 2016, *in*: Lounnas 2018). This local anchoring can also be found in other SJAGs in the region (Katiba Macina and MUJAO), which mainly rely on local Malian fighters while defending a global ideology (Lebovich 2013) (see Figure 1).

During the brief period when Ansar Dine controlled territories, it was highly supported by the local population, not only because of ethnic ties but also because of its effective delivery of public services which the state failed to provide. The perceived arbitrary nature of the state, as manifested through its security forces and the corruption of its judicial system, was contrasted with the effectiveness of Ansar Dine, under whose rule corruption and local banditry were drastically reduced (Aly Diallo 2017). Local support can, however, be nuanced in the region: the local population expressed resistance through demonstrations or

political threats, especially in Gao and Kidal, whose territories were administered by MUJAO and Ansar Dine, respectively (Solomon 2015; Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, May 2019, Telephone).

≡ **Evolving and ambivalent links with other NSAGs**

Ansar Dine's relationship with other armed actors in northern Mali has shifted since its inception, most prominently displayed by its relationship with the MNLA. The two organisations' ideological visions became incompatible, with MNLA wanting to establish an independent Azawad state and Ansar Dine aiming for a united Malian state governed by Sharia law (Stanford University 2016), and they had an ambivalent relationship throughout 2012. When MNLA besieged a Malian military base on the outskirts of Tessalit in February 2012, Ansar Dine and AQIM blocked a Malian supply convey sent in an attempt to rescue the besieged soldiers. A meeting took place between Ansar Dine (Iyad Ag Ghaly) and MNLA (Bilal Ag Sharif), and an agreement was signed, according to which Ansar Dine and al-Qaeda fighters withdrew from MNLA's position, while MNLA was given three days to storm and seize the base. If the MNLA failed to do so, it would withdraw from its position, paving the way for Ansar Dine fighters to do it. The MNLA failed and later Ansar Dine, supported by AQIM, stormed and seized the base. After that, Ansar Dine installed a local council to administer the city of Tessalit in its name. Late in May 2012, Ansar Dine and the MNLA signed a merger treaty to establish an Islamic state in Azawad. However, political leaders of MNLA, particularly those living abroad, rejected the agreement and considered it to conflict with the MNLA's secular principles. Following a disagreement on the formulation of the press statement intended to officially announce the agreement, the MNLA went on unilaterally to declare a Transitional Council to govern Azawad (Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014).

Meanwhile, Ansar Dine developed closer ties to AQIM. According to Andrew Lebovich (2013), the two groups became tightly linked, to the point that "given the close and documented relationship and interaction between AQIM and Ansar Dine, it is difficult to disassociate the two movements, even though there were clear divisions along ideological and ethnic/tribal lines within Ansar Dine". There were no members of AQIM or foreigners within Ansar Dine (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhleb, June 2019, Email). Looking at AQIM's strategy, the links between this group and Ansar Dine become clearer. AQIM's leader Droukdel aimed to set up an emirate led by AQIM, but to conceal the nature of his project, he was, on paper, working for the establishment of a state led by local movements. According to several analysts, these groups are thus merely a showcase, a presentable local façade (Siegel 2013; Zenn 2015; Joscelyn 2017). Consistent with this view, Droukdel indicated that he wished to entrust the direction of the future government to the head of Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghaly: "We propose to put some of the Mujahideen of al-Qaeda at the disposal of the emir of Ansar Dine to participate in the administration of the liberated areas" (Guidère 2014). The emir of AQIM also wrote a confidential letter to Ag Ghaly and Ansar Dine's allies, instructing Ansar Dine to act as a domestic movement, so that it would not attract international attention (Champeaux 2013; Roggio 2013). In April and May 2012, it became clear that the MNLA had been pushed out of all the main towns in the north and became marginalised within the conflict (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhleb, June 2019, Email). The main conflict line thus pitted the Malian army and its military allies (ECOWAS and France) against the Salafi jihadi forces, while the MNLA struggled to remain a relevant stakeholder and tried to play the card of an anti-terrorist alliance to gain international legitimacy.

In early 2015, a new group, the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) or Katiba Macina, started to attract international attention because of its attacks in central and southern Mali. Its leader, Amadou Kouffa, an extremist preacher from the central Malian town of Niakunfe, is said to be a mentee of Ag Ghaly. This group was regarded as an affiliate to Ansar Dine until the formation of JNIM in March 2017. Kouffa, like Iyad Ag Ghaly, is seen as a key player in the conflict and one of the actors that need to be engaged with for a durable settlement (see Section 5).

≡ Alliance within JNIM

In March 2017, when the main Salafi jihadi armed groups announced they had formed an alliance under the banner of *Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin* (Group of Support to Islam and Muslims – JNIM), it became clear that Ansar Dine had taken a significant step forward. On the video released to announce their alliance, Iyad Ag Ghaly was sitting in the centre of the group, surrounded by the other top Salafi jihadi movement leaders. The new organisation is hence headed by Ag Ghaly, with Djamel Okacha (AQIM) taking second place, and Kouffa (along with the Katiba Macina) playing an important role given the large size of his troops (Joscelyn 2017; Counter Extremism Project 2018). The JNIM also includes al-Mourabitoun, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar¹⁰. All these groups still exist as individual entities, but act together under the banner of JNIM, as explained by the ICRC: “the three groups’ desire to maintain distinct identities is suggested by their 2017 alliance as opposed to a merger.” (ICRC 2018, 50).

Moreover, JNIM has positioned itself as a branch of al-Qaeda, with Ag Ghaly pledging allegiance to AQIM’s Emir Droukdel, to al-Qaeda, and to the Taliban (Joscelyn 2017; Lounnas 2018), clearly rejecting the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (Lounnas 2018). The collaboration between those organisations became official with this alliance and, despite the central role of AQIM and Katiba Macina, Ag Ghaly, as leader of Ansar Dine, seems to remain the main figure of Salafi jihadism in the region. It required him to change his political identity, at least publicly, and to move away from the local anchoring of Ansar Dine. The JNIM was thus an organisational as well as a personal mutation. Observers and researchers on Ansar Dine and Mali have been pointing out the diminishing role of Ag Ghaly in JNIM’s more recent propaganda videos, contrasted by the rise of Kouffa and Okacha (Bensimon 2018; Guichaoua 2018). In successive propaganda videos over the past year, Iyad Ag Ghaly indeed went from being the only leader present in the video in July 2018 (Lyammouri 2018), to having little airtime in late September 2018 (Thurston 2018b), to only acting in endorsement of Fulani recruitment by Amadou Kouffa in November 2018 (Tobie 2018). However, this observation must be treated with caution as Ag Ghaly seems to remain a key figure of support and plays a central role within the organisation, as he is still present, and acts as legitimising endorsement for the other leaders.

3.2 Ideological dynamics

Ansar Dine resembles the different Touareg-led separatist movements in terms of ethnic composition. However, the group’s outlook and goals are different. Iyad Ag Ghaly was a leading figure of the Touareg uprising in the 1990s and in 2006. Since the 1990s, his ideology and political objectives have been evolving, from nationalism/separatism towards Islamism. During the late 1990s, he joined the missionary group al-Tabligh¹¹ wal Da’wa, visited its centres in Pakistan, preached in mosques in Mauritania and Mali (Abu Al-Ma’ali 2014), and developed close ties to Algeria. After 2008-2009, Ag Ghaly developed close ties to al-Qaeda and al-Mourabitoun (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris). From an ideological point of view, Ansar Dine – which, “*before being Ansar Dine is about Ag Ghaly*” – is therefore closer to the other Salafi jihadi groups present in the area than to separatist groups, and focuses primarily on religious claims and especially the application of Sharia law in Mali (ibid.).

¹⁰ Rumours about his death have been circulating, but have not yet been confirmed by any actor in Mali.

¹¹ *Tabligh* is a revivalist preaching movement founded in the 1920s. In Arabic *tabligh* means “transmission” and the movement practices a proselytising form of preaching (Guidère 2017).

≡ Origins

When the Touareg fighters returned from Libya and the MNLA was formed, Ag Ghaly attempted to gain a leading role over this group. However, he was rebuffed potentially because of his links to AQIM. Another hypothesis is that the MNLA, composed of mainly young separatist fighters, refused his leadership because of his history of compromise with the state (McGregor 2012). This might have led Ag Ghaly to create Ansar Dine and to follow his own pathway arguing for the imposition of Sharia throughout Mali. In March 2012, Ansar Dine released its first official video, featuring Ansar Dine fighters praying and Ag Ghaly establishing the organisation's goals (Thurston & Lebovich 2013). The first communiqué from Ansar Dine conveyed three messages (Abu Al-Ma'ali 2014):

- ≡ “We in Ansar Dine Group seek to implement Islamic Sharia in our land ... therefore, our fight to raise the word of God is a jihad for the sake of Allah.”
- ≡ “We believe that all Muslims are our brothers whether they are Arab or Ajam,¹² white or black.” This was a message of reassurance to Azawad's residents, especially the non-Touareg.
- ≡ “We declare to all our refusal of injustice and aggression [...] when we commit a mistake or injustice, we are ready to be judged according to Sharia [...] and committed - God willing - to repaying the injustices to its people.” This message was meant to invoke the deep sense of injustice endured by Azawad people towards the state and elites of Mali.

≡ Between nationalism and Islamism

Hussein Solomon (2015) classifies Ansar Dine “between Touareg nationalism and Islamism”. Ansar Dine draws on the marginalisation of northern Mali and of the Touareg population to mobilise fighters and gain support. It calls for the end of poverty in a historically marginalised and poorer region of Mali, and it also took over the role of the state by “engag[ing] in charity work, building clinics and schools and providing food parcels, which stood in stark contrast to an uncaring and rapacious state” (ibid., 72). This seems very much in line with the idea of an autonomous or independent state in the north of Mali, and, according to Solomon, had a “particular resonance” with the Touaregs in the north (ibid.). This could also explain the alliance between the MNLA and Ansar Dine in the early days of the conflict. The nationalism of Ag Ghaly prior to the formation of Ansar Dine and the stated national goals of the group, as well as the local origin of most of the group's fighters, also seem to be interpreted as a sign of the nationalism of Ansar Dine (The Observers 2012; Dowd & Raleigh 2013). One expert goes even further by stating that Ag Ghaly has a very strong attachment to Azawad and at times could have agreed to abandon his Salafi jihadist agenda for a leadership position in a somewhat autonomous and Islamic Azawad (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris). Moreover, the regional spread of attacks through the JNIM “*does not mean that his objective is not first the north of Mali*” (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). However, what seems clear now is that there needs to be a certain form of Islamism in his political objective. Both Islamism and nationalism now go hand in hand for Ansar Dine (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris).

As Andrew Lebovich points out, “religious ideology competes and sometimes overlaps with tribal and ethnic identity, tension and insecurity” (Lebovich 2013). Interestingly, the state-like actions of Ansar Dine have mainly been possible thanks to the state's lack of credibility, which has also allowed the rise of Islamism. Indeed, as Solomon explains, the links between moderate Muslim Sufi leaders and the state have led to a loss of credibility for these leaders: “At a time when the state was increasingly viewed as predatory by ordinary Malians, these co-opted marabouts lost all credibility among long-suffering citizens.

¹² Historical term widely used during the Islamic empire to describe Persians, later to describe non-Arabs.

Islamists, with their own brand of liberation theology, had greater resonance on the streets of Bamako, and especially Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal where poverty was at its worst.” (Solomon 2015, 70). These localised grievances were a key driver of the conflict, but are hardly reflected in Ansar Dine’s ideology. Indeed, Ag Ghaly told Reuters in June 2016: “We are not asking for much: just the application of Shari’a law in the northern and southern regions [of Mali]. We are Malians and we are against the division of Mali.” (Diarra 2012, *in*: Flood 2012, 3).

Ansar Dine’s ideology thus seems to have several layers, and the organization can play on different repertoires depending on its audience or its short-term goals. This does not mean that ideology does not play a role in the group’s strategy, as it is in fact one of the first resources for mobilization (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017), but it means that it is quite flexible and adaptable to the local context. As an expert pointed out: “*It is an ideology in action, always evolving. We cannot speak of doctrine but rather of practices. Doctrines are not always very fixed. One cannot derive practices from doctrines. There is a mismatch between behaviours and doctrine*” (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2018, Berlin). Scholars have also identified the multiple factors of recruitment, whereby the Islamist appeal was only one among various sources of mobilisation. “Militancy is often a minority phenomenon. Jihadist militancy is not mutually exclusive to other endogenous factors, whether they are economic, social, tribal, or intensely personal” (Lebovich 2013). Mathieu Pellerin, while arguing that it is difficult to distinguish clear motivation among Ansar Dine’s members, tried to identify major trends. Thus, in the early stages of the conflict, Ansar Dine was seen as the best entity to protect the people from foreign Salafi jihadi domination. Its members did not feel represented by more extreme groups and decided to follow Ag Ghaly. In addition, familial and social reasons such as the struggle for equality between clans and further communitarian claims have been a reason for people to join. Finally, he argues that the other main reasons were not religiously motivated but rather based on grievances against the army’s exactions, economic reasons, corruption, and lack of opportunities (Pellerin 2017). Here, jihad appears as a mere alibi for most of Ansar Dine’s members.

≡ **“Cultural repertoire”: Saharan figures of success through political violence**

According to two experts on the region (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017), “the figure of the rebel or the former rebel remains highly valued in some segments of these nomadic societies” and taking up arms may be seen as a means of “renegotiating their social status through resistance movements” (Debos 2013 *in*: Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017). The rebel figure is often associated with justice (fairness of judgement, protection of communities, financial redistribution, etc.) and evokes the trajectory of “social bandit” (Hobsbawm 1959). Rebels across northern Mali, including Ag Ghaly, built their popular legitimacy by replacing the state where it was not providing services and goods. The rise of the grey economy also acted as a push factor towards more social legitimacy for this rebel figure, as it enabled the provision of services, and many rebel leaders in the region have been accused by the Malian state of drug trafficking (Jeune Afrique 2015). This cultural repertoire has not disappeared with the rise of Islamic and Islamist narratives in the region. On the contrary, “the revitalisation of Islam in the Sahel is also transforming the image and perception of the rebel. The pious rebel has become a respected figure, and this figure, as paradoxical as it may seem, may even be combined with that of the rebel drug trafficker. This social value, far from being only symbolic, is mainly because these influential actors provide funds, protection, or even services (medical care, mining, etc.) within a political economy of the rebellion” (Guichaoua & Pellerin 2017).

≡ An ambivalent attitude towards global jihad

The exact influence of Islamic scholars and judges and the role of theological debates (for example to identify the enemy, to define alliances or to decide the degree of cooperation with foreign forces) are difficult to assess. Apart from Ag Ghaly and his own personal motivations, it is difficult to find more justification for Ansar Dine's agenda, which relies on separatist/nationalist, cultural and religious repertoires to build its ideology, but mainly emphasises religious claims as its primary goals. Ansar Dine has nonetheless held various stances on global violent *jihad* over time, sometimes signalling contradictions within the organisation. This was especially the case in its founding phase, when, for example in November 2012, Ansar Dine issued "statements on its willingness to engage with national government, and rejecting 'all forms of extremism and terrorism'" (Dowd & Raleigh 2013, 502–3), while still conducting attacks against the Malian state.

≡ Application of Sharia law

An important dimension of Ansar Dine's behaviour relates to the provision of justice, law and order in territories under its control. In order to place the group's governance practices in a broader context, several researchers have tried to compare how AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine behaved in the cities they controlled, i.e. Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, respectively, prior to the French military intervention in January 2013. According to an ICRC study (comparing MUJAO in Gao and Ansar Dine in Kidal (based on research by Guichaoua and Bouhlel): "In both cases [Kidal and Gao], norm formation was based on Islamic scriptural sources and "inferred" sources that constitute the basis of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*)." (ICRC 2018, 50). However, "significant differences emerged in how Ansar Dine (Kidal) and MUJAO (Gao) drew upon or undermined the existing legal system. In Kidal, Ansar Dine relied on the existing Islamic legal system to interpret rules around local governance. ... The group's relative restraint, when compared with MUJAO's, was strongly attributed to its community links and the moderating voice of local *qadis*" (ibid). This differing social embeddedness of the two groups might explain, for instance, why Ansar Dine banned forced marriage, mistreatment of detainees and the taking of foreign hostages, while MUJAO's governance policy pursued both (ibid., 48). Mathieu Guidère conducted a field study in Timbuktu and showed how leaders from Ansar Dine, AQIM and Belmokhtar (MUJAO) were discussing how to govern the cities they controlled and the potential region they would control. Other official documents found in Timbuktu show that Droukdel condemns the destruction of mausoleums and that no more mistakes should be made, to "avoid the population turning against us" (Champeaux 2013). This could be interpreted as the *carrot* part of AQIM's strategy, i.e. the need to localise jihad action to make it more accepted.

The main point of cooperation at the time seems to be between AQIM and Ansar Dine, especially in Timbuktu, which they controlled together, and which can be analysed as a laboratory for Salafi jihadi politics (Thurston 2019). The *stick* part of the strategy comes with the application of a "strict Salafist interpretation of shari'a¹³ law ... to the entire north of the country", albeit with some local variations (Solomon 2015, 75). This ambivalent application of Sharia law is perfectly illustrated by the interview Ag Ghaly gave in 2017, when he insisted on the balance between "establishing what we could of the shari'a" and "providing obligatory necessities to the people, such as security, livelihood, electricity, water, medicine, and other things to the extent possible" (Thurston 2019).

Despite these varied interpretations of Sharia, and even if in 2012 Timbuktu was controlled by AQIM rather than Ansar Dine, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has issued indictments against both Ansar Dine and AQIM for the violations of fundamental rights, war crimes, and

¹³ While this report uses the spelling Sharia, some authors prefer the spelling shari'a. Direct citations of those authors keep the original spelling.

crimes against humanity they jointly committed in Timbuktu, including the severing of hands, public punishment and flogging. The Prosecutors especially insist on the sexist nature of the crimes committed. Women were the first and main target of the Islamic police and the Tribunal, and were victims of constant harassment, physical and psychological violence, forced marriage, sexual violence and rape (Bureau du Procureur de la Cour Pénale Internationale 2018). There thus seems to be a difference between what Ag Ghaly publicly stated on the outside, what was done in Kidal, and what he condoned and supported in Timbuktu. An accurate account of the application of Sharia in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal in 2012 would require further research.

≡ **A homogeneous ideology under the JNIM?**

In March 2017, Ansar Dine allied with the Group of Support to Muslims and Islam (JNIM), along with AQIM, al-Mourabitoun (successor to MUJAO) and Katiba Macina. JNIM has not clearly defined an organisational ideology, but “appears to remain under the aegis of al-Qaeda” (Counter-Extremism Project n.d.). Indeed, Ag Ghaly pledged allegiance to both al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the video on the formation of JNIM (ibid.). Ansar Dine has to be understood within this ideological constellation. According to one expert, Ag Ghaly’s religious/political objective is the creation of an Islamic Emirate of Azawad, an autonomous region within the Malian state that is subject to Sharia law, based on the model of the Muslim regions of the Nigerian confederation in northern Nigeria (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris).

Table 1: Ideology of SJAGs in Mali (based on interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris)

Group	Political Objective	Inspiration
MUJAO	Islamic State	Pan-Islamism (close to ISIS ideology)
AQIM, al-Mourabitoun	Islamic Emirate	Taliban
Katiba Macina	Islamic Republic	Existing states such as Mauritania, Sudan or Pakistan
Ansar Dine ¹⁴	Islamic Emirate of Azawad	Autonomous regions such as the Muslim northern regions of the Nigerian confederation

In addition, a quick analysis of propaganda videos produced by JNIM since its formation shows that the theme of battle is much more present than that of ideology (Altuna Galán 2018). However, videos relying on ideology oscillate between international calls to jihad and references to local grievances. This is especially true of the videos released in late 2018. In September 2018, the propaganda video portrayed a global message, “heavily branded as an al-Qaeda effort” (Thurston 2018a). By contrast, in November 2018, the video shows Kouffa, supported by Iyad Ag Ghaly, calling all Fulanis to engage in jihad and, relying on local and injustice narratives (Tobie 2018). In their analysis of various JNIM videos, researchers hint that the new organisation’s ideology seems to be reproducing the ambivalences of Ansar Dine (Altuna Galán 2018; Thurston 2018c; Tobie 2018). If the groups within JNIM do have different ideologies, as shown in Table 1, their ideological complementarity seems to justify their alliance. However, it appears that each group has established itself in a different territory and therefore has different strategies and behaviours.

¹⁴ As has been pointed out earlier, this categorisation needs to be understood as part of a wider constellation of SJAGs. Moreover, after the formation of the JNIM in 2017, categorising Ansar Dine and distinguishing it from other groups in the same alliance becomes more difficult. It is hard to attribute a particular political objective to one group, the same way that it is hard to attribute a particular behaviour to one group.

3.3 Behavioural dynamics

Ansar Dine's strategy, targets and overall behaviour have also been shifting constantly since the start of the conflict, and especially since the formation of JNIM. Analysing Ansar Dine's path since the formation of JNIM is quite difficult, as we do not often know which organisation from JNIM is responsible for attacks, which renders direct comparisons between the actions of Ansar Dine until 2017 and of JNIM since 2017 more complex. Altogether however, the alliance of several organisations into JNIM has had an escalatory effect on the behavioural patterns of SJAGs, as it led to an increasing number of attacks in neighbouring countries (especially in Burkina Faso, but also in Niger) as well as in Mali itself (from 44 attacks in 2016, to 93 attacks in 2017 and 176 attacks in 2018). JNIM and its affiliated organisations no longer control cities, but have redirected their strategy from governance to insurgency, with targeted assassinations of civilians accused of complicity with national and international counter-terrorism forces, and attacks on military forces. Despite negotiation attempts in the early stages of the conflict, the group has increasingly used violence to achieve its goals.

≡ Negotiation attempts

In parallel to Ansar Dine's short-lived experience in administrating cities in northern Mali, the group also engaged in (aborted) dialogue attempts with international actors in the pursuit of a negotiated solution. In late 2012, Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré initiated ceasefire talks on behalf of ECOWAS and hosted representatives from Ansar Dine, the MNLA and Mali's transitional government, to try and resolve the crisis. Ansar Dine had apparently stated its willingness to open peace talks – and by implication to loosen its ties with al-Qaeda – and sent a delegation led by Alghabass Ag Intallah. On paper, the three parties' goals seemed contradictory. The MNLA was fighting for an independent state and Ansar Dine for the establishment of Sharia law in northern Mali, while the Malian government wanted to take back control of the northern regions (International Crisis Group 2013). The negotiation represented a window of opportunity for engagement and conflict resolution. However, it did not lead to stability in northern Mali or to the de-escalation of Ansar Dine.

Alongside the pre-discussions and negotiation rounds in Burkina Faso, Algeria – which has had a historical role of mediation in the Sahel region – also conducted discreet talks with Ansar Dine and especially with its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly. The stated objective was to separate the movement from its more extremist allies in the region (especially AQIM and MUJAO).

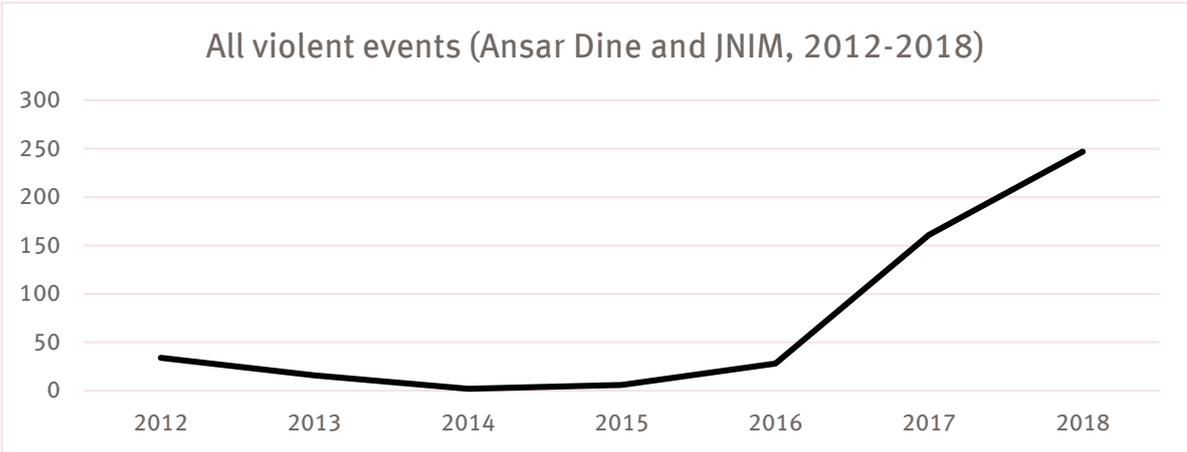
At the beginning of 2013, Ag Ghaly decided to break off the discussion and opt for a more violent agenda with his Salafi jihadi allies (see Section 4). The Algerians were taken by surprise by his decision to launch a military offensive on the south and considered this move to be unforgivable “treason” (International Crisis Group 2013). According to one expert, Ansar Dine withdrew from the Ouagadougou negotiations because international actors closed the door on the idea of a dialogue around the issue of Islam (Bouhleb 2019).

≡ Shift in the frequency and targets of attacks

An analysis of the number of violent events (remote violence, battles and violence against civilians) involving Ansar Dine and JNIM since 2012 shows a steep rise in the group's activity from 2016 onwards, and especially since 2017 and the formation of JNIM (see Figure 2 below). While the organisation had conducted 34 attacks in 2012 and 16 in 2013, it went dormant after the French intervention and Operation Serval in 2013, which evicted the Salafi jihadi groups from the main towns (Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal) and pushed them back into the desert. However, after a period of respite and re-organisation, Ansar Dine

refocused on targeting Western civilians or military peacekeepers who had arrived in the region. In an audio statement in November 2015, translated by SITE Intelligence Group, Ansar Dine’s leader Ag Ghaly says the group is “combating a new horn from the horns of global disbelief, after the American horn was smashed on the firm rock of jihad. This horn is a result of the French Crusader campaign that brought all its knights and horses, and its slaves and its insane ones against the Sharia of Islam in this land.” He then went on to explain that his fighters were fighting to “push away the aggression of the French Crusader assailant” (Maryland Coordination and Analysis Center 2015).

Figure 2: All violent events attributed to Ansar Dine and JNIM, 2012-2018 (Source: ACLED Data 2019)



With regard to the targets of violence, the data gathered by ACLED, illustrated in Figure 3, seems to indicate that around the time of the international intervention in 2013, Ansar Dine shifted its primary targets from civilians to the military (and police) forces of Mali, France and MINUSMA, as well as to other armed groups. This trend continued after the formation of JNIM, since violence against the national and international security forces increased in 2016 and 2017, with the lethality of attacks increasing as well (Secretary-General of the United Nations 2018). In fact, MINUSMA has become the deadliest UN peacekeeping mission so far. Primary targets have thus been state forces, but also all parties to the 2015 peace agreement, including signatory armed groups (23 attacks in 2017 and 2018). The attack on the Operational Coordination Mechanism in Gao on 18 January 2017, which killed more than 64 and injured about 115 members of the first joint patrol (mixed troops from the Malian army, Coordination and Platform) was clearly a direct attack on the peace agreement itself. JNIM has also been launching attacks against G5 Sahel forces, but less so than against other targets (10 attacks in 2017 and 2018) (ACLED Data 2019).

Figure 3: Violent events attributed to Ansar Dine, 2012-2016 (Source: ACLED Data 2019)¹⁵

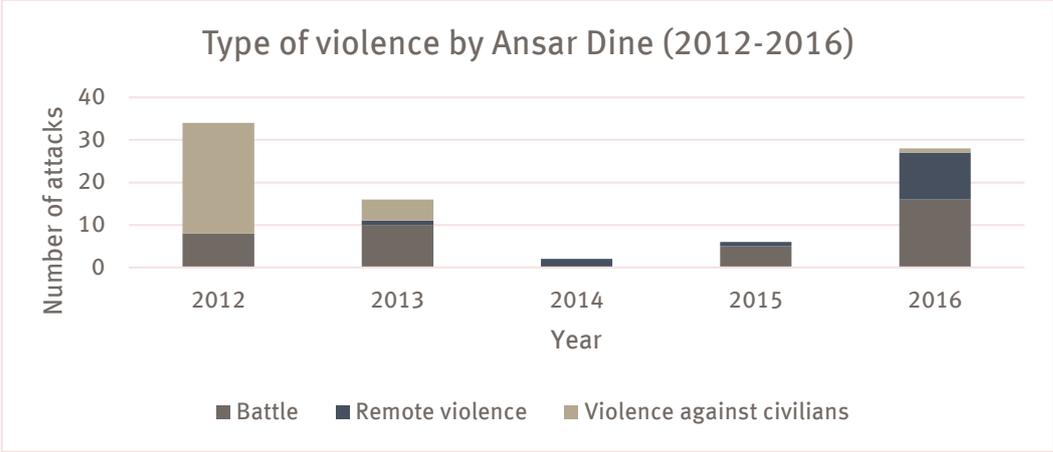
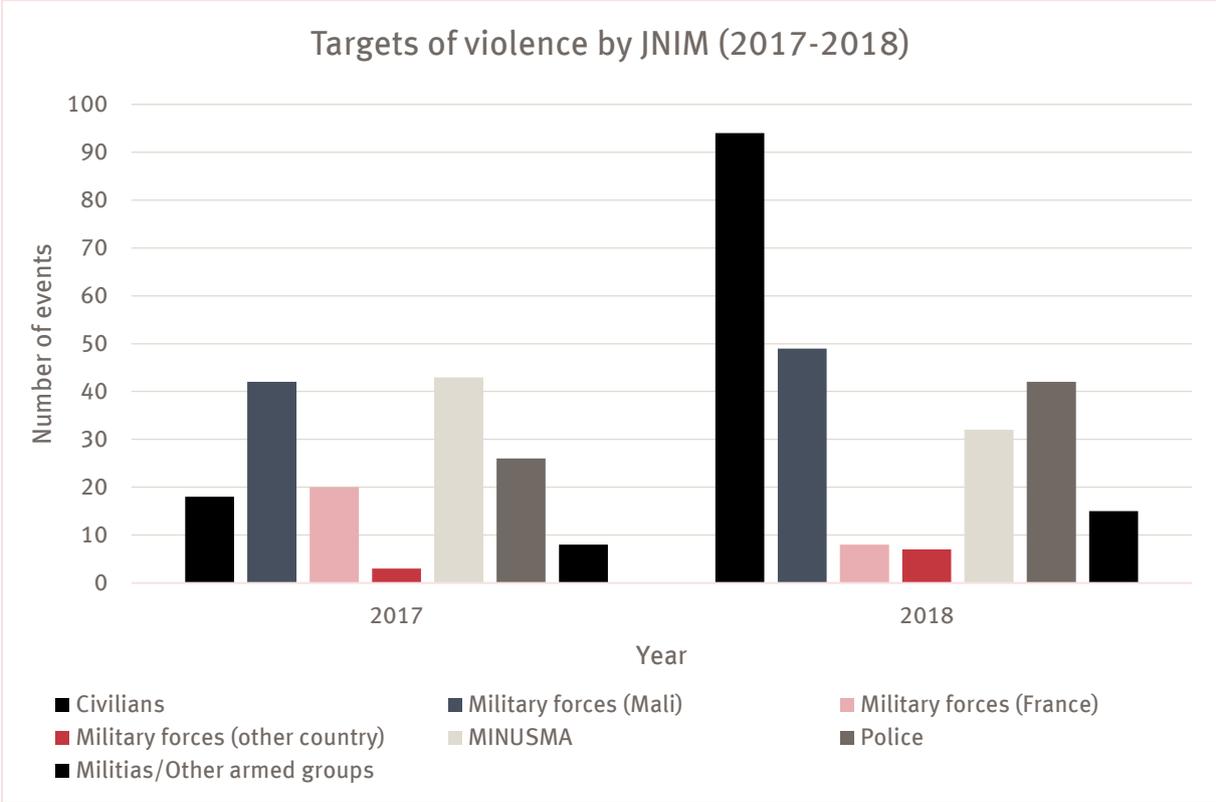


Figure 4: Targets of violent events attributed to JNIM, 2017-2018 (Source: ACLED Data 2019)



According to Figure 4, the attacks committed by JNIM in 2017 seem to show that the group initially followed the trend previously set by AQIM and Ansar Dine, by targeting primarily military forces instead of civilians. This argument is confirmed by the fact that in 2017, Iyad Ag Ghaly asked Kouffa to stop the targeted killings and focus on the military forces (Interview with Ferdaous Bouhleh, June 2019, Email). However, in 2018, attacks against civilians started rising, in number and scale. These figures still have to be treated with caution as it is sometimes difficult to know who orchestrated these attacks. The different movements within the alliance seem to have different targets and objectives. Attacks are negotiated

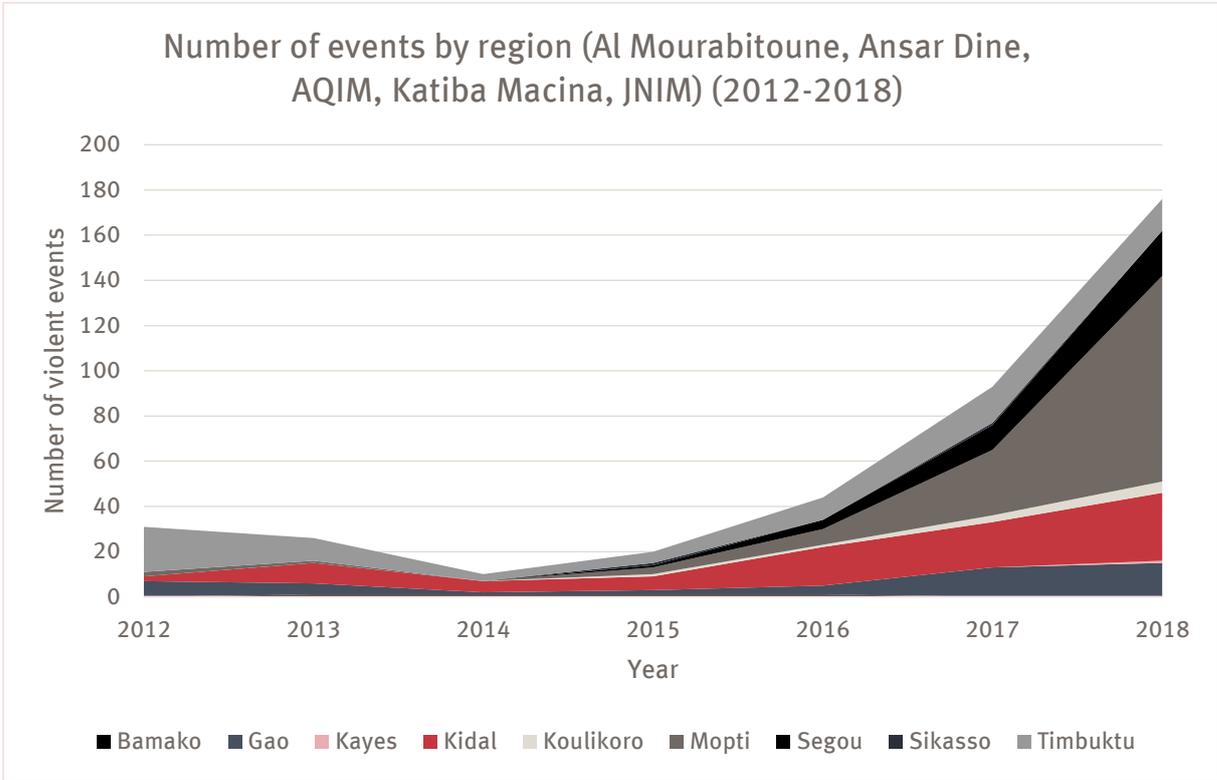
¹⁵ ACLED defines battle as „a violent interaction between two politically organized armed groups at a particular time and location“. According to the ACLED Codebook: “Remote violence refers to events in which the tool for engaging in conflict did not require the physical presence of the perpetrator. These include bombings, IED attacks, drone activity, mortar and missile attacks, etc. Remote violence can be waged on both armed agents (e.g. an active rebel group; a military garrison) or on civilians (e.g. a roadside bombing).“. Finally, violence against civilians is defined „deliberate violent acts perpetrated by an organized political group such as a rebel, militia or government force against unarmed non-combatants.“ (Raleigh & Dowd 2015)

between the leaders. Ag Ghaly’s priority seems clear: “it is the army and security services”. Also, according to an expert on SJAGs, “if there have been more civilians [attacked by JNIM], that does not mean that Ansar Dine has changed its behaviour and is trying to attack civilians” (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris).

≡ **Geographic expansion**

With the growing operational capacities of Katiba Macina and its leader Amadou Kouffa, the number of attacks in Central Mali increased considerably since 2016, and especially since the formation of JNIM. Indeed, as shown in Figure 5, most attacks took place in the region of Mopti in 2017 and 2018, while the regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal (in northern Mali) were proportionally less targeted than during the early years of the conflict.

Figure 5: Number of attacks by JNIM (and its organisations before 2017) in Mali by administrative region (Source: ACLED Data 2019)



Katiba Macina has thus induced an overall strategic shift within JNIM in Mali. Relying on a reported 4,000 fighters (Counter Extremism Project 2018), Katiba Macina has become a key element of the implementation of attacks, as the main associate of JNIM in 2018 (ACLED Data 2019; Le Roux 2019). The groups thus seem to be expressing their individual identities more clearly. This shows JNIM’s increasing reliance on Katiba Macina, both in its geographical focus and in its attack strategy.

The year 2018 also saw the expansion of JNIM attacks to Burkina Faso, primarily targeting the police (56.9% of attacks in 2018). This represents a major change of strategy for the group, but especially for Ansar Dine, which since its formation had been focusing, both strategically and ideologically, on Mali. Indeed, while 79% of all violent events attributed to JNIM took place in Mali (473 attacks), the proportion of attacks in Burkina Faso has risen from about 3.1% (5 out of 160) in 2017, to 20.6% (51 out of 247) in 2018, and 56% (37 out of 66) in the first two months of 2019. According to a Malian expert, at the

beginning of 2019, this move to Burkina Faso seemed to have no links with the move to central Mali as it involved Ansaroul Islam¹⁶ rather than Malian groups such as Ansar Dine or Katiba Macina, and could be explained by “*arms transfers and the mobility of troops*”, among other things (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). Today however, the situation has become much more blurry.

≡ From silent to active communication

Various interviewees highlighted Ansar Dine’s progressive shift towards more targeted and active communication. An expert noted, for example, the sources becoming more and more “*arabised and mediatised*”, reaching more people through the use of Arabic and through a media agency (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris). Another expert said that: “*In the first years, Ansar Dine communicated very little but recently, since the creation of JNIM, they have a new media agency and they produce much more video material that we can decrypt and analyse. This communication serves to justify the violence and to claim responsibility for the actions*” (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2018, Berlin). The creation of a special media branch *az-Zallāqa* (Altuna Galán 2018) has led JNIM to release 21 videos between March 2017 and February 2019 (MENASTREAM 2019).

An analysis of the behavioural patterns of Ansar Dine shows a general trend towards conflict escalation since 2011. Now part of a larger Salafi jihadi alliance, Ansar Dine is still an interesting entity to be analysed from its inception onwards. Indeed, as Ansar Dine still appears to be one of the most influential entities within JNIM, the next section will focus on the strategic shifts of its behaviour since its creation.

4. Key strategic shifts and drivers of change

As shown in the previous section, the evolution of Ansar Dine did not follow a linear pathway. But when tracing the organisational, ideological and behavioural dimensions of its trajectory, a few key turning points can be identified. In particular, this section will describe three strategic shifts, which we define in this project as major moments of behavioural change in either an escalatory or a de-escalatory direction. The original purpose of the research project was to examine whether behavioural change is influenced and conditioned by ideological and organisational change – for example, whether SJAGs have to de-radicalise their worldview in order to moderate their behaviour. As (reliable) information on Ansar Dine’s internal dynamics was difficult to find, such assessments could not always be made. The term ‘strategic’ reflects the fact that these shifts proceed from a conscious decision by the leadership (which may be forced from outside, prompting leaders to adapt and react to changes in their external environment). The conceptualisation of our strategic shifts draws mainly on the work by Soifer (2012), who defines permissive and productive conditions for critical junctures. He considers permissive conditions for critical junctures to be “those factors or conditions that change the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospects for divergence” (Soifer 2012, 1574). These permissive conditions create a window of opportunity, which only becomes a critical juncture if productive conditions are present. These are defined “as the aspects of a critical juncture that shape the initial outcomes that diverge across cases.” (ibid., 1575). Permissive and productive conditions thus are individually necessary but insufficient, and must come together in a loosening of constraints and heightened agency for change to occur, a concept applied here to the strategic shifts of behavioural

¹⁶ Ansaroul Islam is a SJAG, part of JNIM, whose Burkinabe leader Boureima Dicko (now deceased) was a close ally of Kouffa. The group thus has roots in, and a strong connection with, the conflict in Mali, despite operating mainly in Burkina Faso (Nsaibia & Weiss 2018).

change. We will consider both internal (intra-group, i.e. organisation and/or ideology) and external (group-society, group-state, group-international) factors for those conditions. A 2015 study on armed groups' transformation into nonviolent social movements offers a helpful model to disentangle intra-group, societal, relational (inter-actor) and contextual factors of change (Dudouet, 2015; see Table 2 below).

According to our research, at least three strategic shifts can be identified regarding Ansar Dine's pathway.

Table 2: Mechanisms of change inducing transitions away from armed struggle (Dudouet 2015)

Levels of analysis	Mechanisms of change
Intra-group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Shifts in the identity, belief systems and strategic choices of the leadership ≡ Horizontal dynamics and power shifts ≡ Vertical dynamics across the hierarchy (top-down/bottom-up)
Group-society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Pressure from (existing) allies within a broader movement ≡ Coalition-building with other socio-political forces ≡ Mirroring a strategy that has been proved effective by other groups ≡ 'Reversed outbidding' to emphasise one's distinction with competitors
Group-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Persistence or increase in power asymmetry in favour of the state ≡ Level and nature of state repression to dissent ≡ Selective state inducement and political opportunities
Group-international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Loss of foreign support and search for new allies ≡ Emulation of successful regional/international models ≡ Cross-border transmission of techniques and skills

4.1 Strategic shift 1: (De-)escalation around the Ouagadougou negotiations (2012-2013)

When the ceasefire negotiations in Ouagadougou between Ansar Dine, MNLA and the Malian government stalled, Ag Ghaly, in co-ordination with AQIM, decided to launch military operations in central Mali. This ambiguous move can be described as a key turning point, which brought about two opposing trends. First, Ansar Dine entered into a de-escalatory pathway by engaging in negotiations with the government and the MNLA. However, instead of pursuing this path of de-escalation, Ag Ghaly chose further escalation and a return to violence. The Ansar Dine leadership split over this decision, with members leaving to establish a splinter group that would continue the path of de-escalation through negotiations. Paradoxically, then, Ag Ghaly's choice of escalation also led to de-escalation and a weakening of Ansar Dine.

Ansar Dine's move, first towards dialogue and then away from it, is largely explained by permissive conditions at both group-state and group-international level, with 'opportunity structures' for dialogue emerging from the international environment. The open position of Blaise Compaoré, the President of Burkina Faso, played a key role here. He had always been very influential in neighbouring countries and had established contacts with all armed groups within the region (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). In addition, Algeria exerted pressure on Ansar Dine to distance itself from AQIM and MUJAO. Indeed, in parallel to the negotiations in Burkina Faso, Algeria, which has a history of mediating in the Sahel region, engaged in talks with Ansar Dine and especially with its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly. The clear objective was to separate Ansar Dine from its more extremist allies in the belief that negotiating with the more "local" actors, specifically, the MNLA and Ansar Dine, was possible as opposed to the more "global jihadist" groups (Andrew Lebovich 2013a). Furthermore, the decision to

engage in dialogue was taken after the attempt to create the independent Islamic state of Azawad failed, as explained previously.

The internal productive condition to enter negotiations is best explained by the internal power-dynamics and Ag Ghaly's prior experiences with negotiations. Ag Ghaly may also have been influenced by a 'moderate' second tier of leaders such as chief negotiator Alghabass Ag Intallah.

On 1 January 2013, as mentioned by a source close to the Burkinabe mediator, a delegation from Ansar Dine reportedly handed over a political platform to the Burkinabe president, in charge of the mediation process in Ouagadougou. In this 17-page document, Ansar Dine called for autonomy for northern Mali and the application of Sharia law in this region. This would require Mali to choose between secularism and territorial integrity. The platform states: "We must grant Azawad a large degree of autonomy in the context of a reformed state of Mali that stands out unambiguously from secularism" (RFI 2013). For a lasting exit from the crisis, according to Ansar Dine, "Mali must absolutely make an unequivocal choice between preserving its integrity and living its secularism. Saving both at once is out of the question" (ibid.). But above all, Ansar Dine demanded that the "Islamic character of the State of Mali be proclaimed solemnly in the Constitution" (ibid.)¹⁷.

Only two days later, however, on 3 January 2013, Iyad Ag Ghaly informed the media agency Sahara Media that he had withdrawn the offer of cessation of hostilities made in Algiers on 21 December 2012¹⁸. In the statement issued by Sahara Media (AFP 2013), Iyad Ag Ghaly accuses the Malian government of "despising this offer to which it has never responded positively", while this proposal for cessation of hostilities was "torn up" by intermediaries at the end of "tough negotiations". However, he says that he is available for "the opening of new negotiations even if [Ansar Dine] has never detected any such desire in the other party" (referring to the Malian government). On 7 January, several convoys of heavily armed pick-ups advanced to Boré, 25 km from the Malian positions. The Malian army fired "warning shots" in the night of 7-8 January and then progressed between Konna and Douentza. The Salafi jihadists stepped back.

On 10 January, emissaries of Ansar Dine decided to meet the Malian government and the MNLA, in Ouagadougou, for further discussions despite Ag Ghaly's announcements. On the same day, Ag Ghaly personally led the attack on Konna village, in the central Mopti region, blatantly displaying the internal incoherence resulting from Ag Ghaly's decision. The attack on Konna was the first time in nine months that Ansar Dine had fought against the Malian army. Intense fighting took place and the Malian army had to retreat towards Sevare. In a statement, Ansar Dine presented the following justifications for its decision to advance in the south (Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014):

- ≡ Aggression against innocents and unarmed members of "our people" by the malevolent racist regime;
- ≡ Failure of Ansar Dine's initiative to find a peaceful solution through negotiation;
- ≡ Readiness of France and its allies to intervene militarily against so-called terrorists;
- ≡ Confirmed information about an imminent attack by the Malian army in the north while Ansar Dine was exploring negotiation options and consolidating its administrative apparatus in areas under its control.

Even if it is hard to identify information explaining this escalation, it seems that the negotiations failed to address Ag Ghaly's concerns and that AQIM managed to bring him closer to their violent strategy. Before this, Ag Ghaly always showed his attachment to his Touareg identity. This also shows the potential missed

¹⁷ This specific statement was made within a context of increasing instability in central Mali. Indeed, dozens of jihadists from Ansar Dine and AQIM had been gathering in Bambara-Maoudé, located between Timbuktu and Douentza, at that time controlled by the jihadists (RFI 2013). The intention behind these activities is unclear. According to some sources, it was a question of putting pressure on the negotiations in Ouagadougou whereas for others, the jihadists intended to advance towards the south of Mali (ibid.).

¹⁸ On this date, Ansar Dine and the MNLA said they were ready to end hostilities in Mali and to negotiate with the authorities after the UN Security Council mandated the deployment of an international force against the jihadists occupying the north of the country.

opportunities of the Ouagadougou process. Indeed, according to Mathieu Guidère: *“his attachment to Azawad is real. If he had been offered a position as Azawad's leader in an Islamic Emirate, for instance, why not? He will have difficulty in making allegiance to an Islamic State because of his attachment to his Touareg identity. If it had been offered the status of an autonomous Islamic Azawad, then it might have been possible”* (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris).

Another major consequence of Ansar Dine's advance into central Mali was the greatest defection that Ansar Dine ever witnessed. Indeed, the Deputy Emir, Cheikh Ag Aoussa, and chief negotiator Alghabass Ag Intallah, along with the prominent commander Ahmed Ag Bibi, defected from the group with dozens of Ifoghas fighters and declared their rejection of the current movement's behaviour. This again highlights Ag Ghaly's grip on power as Ansar Dine's sole leader and decision-maker. Whenever leaders or combatants do not agree with him, they have to defect. No space exists for alternatives to Ag Ghaly within Ansar Dine. In January 2013, the defectors therefore formed the Islamic Movement of Azawad (MIA), affirming in a statement that they wanted to move towards a peaceful solution. Later, on 19 May, the group joined the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA).

4.2 Strategic shift 2: A deceptive cessation of hostilities? (2013-2014)

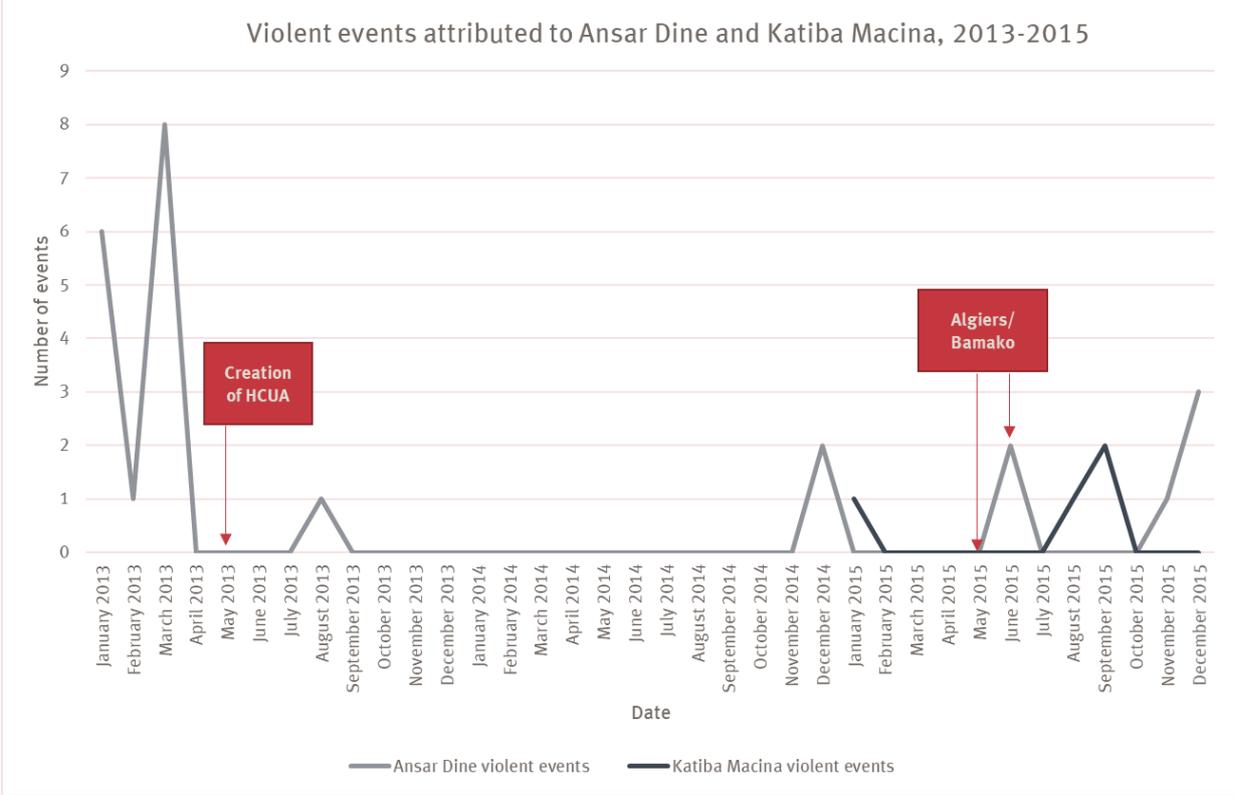
Between October 2013 and October 2014, Ansar Dine conducted no attacks. Most analysts attribute this “dormant” phase to Ansar Dine rebuilding its forces after Operation Serval took back the cities of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu and pushed the Salafi jihadi group into hiding (Stanford University 2016). The French intervention and loss of territorial control represent the permissive condition, as they created the window of opportunity for this strategic shift. This phase of behavioural change thus seems to have been forced by outside elements, rather than being a decision by the group and Iyad Ag Ghaly. Indeed, the group's forces were greatly weakened after the French operation and the formation of “spin-off” groups MIA and then HCUA (Maïga 2016). We can thus consider that external factors at group-state level and especially the intensification of state repression (supported by other states) formed this permissive condition. The weakening of the group is quite clear from the number of attacks, which decreased considerably around the time of the split (April-May 2013) and did not pick up until December 2014, more than a year and a half later (Figure 6). This would not in itself represent a strategic shift. However, we argue that the behavioural change was not simply forced upon Ansar Dine but represented a conscious, strategic choice by the group, and by Ag Ghaly to go into hiding.

Internal organisational structures served as the main productive condition for this strategic shift. With Operation Serval and the start of preliminary peace talks, several members of Ansar Dine left, especially members of the Touareg Ifoghas tribe, who were concerned about being marginalised from peace talks (Maïga 2016). The departure of Alghabass Ag Intallah constituted a shift for Ansar Dine, as he was the political face of the movement (Touchard et al. 2012). In addition to losing fighters in the battle against French forces, Ansar Dine thus also lost senior figures and made the decision to stay hidden while reorganising.

Two main clues point in the direction of a conscious choice. First, testimonies from Malians living in villages still controlled by Ansar Dine in 2013-2014 show that Ansar Dine was publicly stating its will to *lie low* (Follorou 2014). Second, Ansar Dine did not communicate during that entire period, except for one video on 29 July 2014. In this video, Iyad Ag Ghaly states that Ansar Dine is still active and targeting MINUSMA and French forces (Grossman 2014), despite Ansar Dine being responsible for no attacks since October 2013. The permissive condition disappeared in September-October 2014, after Ansar Dine had

rebuilt its forces. A change in the productive conditions (with forces being rebuilt) brought the permissive condition to an end (as Ansar Dine had the strength to fight back against state repression) (Soifer 2012).

Figure 6: Violent events attributed to Ansar Dine and Katiba Macina per month, 2013-2015 (Source: ACLED Data 2019)



This represents a critical juncture because the group’s organisation, ideology and behaviour were permanently changed. Losing territory and members, Ansar Dine needed to adapt if it wanted to survive. Conducting no attacks, Ansar Dine seems to have reorganised itself, adapted its ideology and made the strategic decision to behave differently.

Organisationally, the group re-centred even more around Ag Ghaly, who was the only legitimate leader left. This legitimacy was reinforced with the formation of Katiba Macina in January 2015, and the repeated statements by its leader, Amadou Kouffa, that Ag Ghaly was the only legitimate person to talk to (Bouhleb 2019).

Ideologically, the loss of the most pragmatic part of the group, as well as Touareg leaders’ ongoing negotiations with the Malian government, meant that Ag Ghaly no longer had to please that part of his constituency as much as he had done in Ansar Dine’s early days. The progress towards a stricter and more radical ideology can be seen through an evolution in the discourse of the group and of its leader towards denouncing the Algiers Agreement and threatening former allies (RFI 2015).

Finally, this year-long behavioural change also had an impact on the organisation’s future strategy. Publicly denouncing the peace agreement and its stakeholders (Touareg movements, Malian government, national and foreign military forces), Ansar Dine increasingly targeted these actors in 2015, moving away from attacks on civilians. The increase in attacks in late 2014 and in 2015 also coincides with the negotiation and signing of the Algiers/Bamako Agreement (Figure 6). Additionally, the group stopped governing whole cities, and instead focused on smaller *katibas*¹⁹. Starting in 2015, Ansar Dine developed

¹⁹ A *katiba* is a unit or group of fighters. The word is usually used in the North African and Sahelian regions.

a more insurgent than governance-oriented behaviour and started conducting large-scale attacks, such as the attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, in very close cooperation with AQIM (Boutellis & Zahar 2017). This eventually led to official cooperation between the two groups, allied with Katiba Macina and al-Mourabitoun through JNIM.

4.3 Strategic shift 3: The creation of JNIM, a major escalatory shift (2017)

The formation of JNIM in March 2017, meaning the formal alliance of the main Salafi jihadi groups within one common organisation, led by Ansar Dine's historical leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, coincided with Ansar Dine's last significant strategic shift. For the first time, Ansar Dine extended its agenda to other territories outside Mali and adopted common strategies with other groups, leading to the adoption of a transnational agenda (Tobie 2017) (see Figure 1).

The formation of JNIM, which allowed SJAGs acting within Mali to merge forces, was, for some researchers, a response to the establishment of G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) (e.g. Lounnas 2018). Some also argue that the formation of JNIM is a direct response to the rise of ISIS in the region and should be interpreted as a statement by al-Qaeda-affiliated groups of their difference from ISIS, and thus as a kind of reversed outbidding (Maiga & Assanvo 2017; Mémier 2017). Finally, the death of Cheikh Ag Aoussa (HCUA), a former ally of Ag Ghaly, and in charge of preparing political dialogue, has been pointed out as a trigger for Ag Ghaly to fully turn towards international jihad, as he did not see any other way out (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, May 2019, Telephone). Hypotheses about the formation of the alliance will not be discussed here, however, as we consider the formation of JNIM (and the changes in the organisation's horizontal and vertical dynamics) as the permissive condition²⁰ for the strategic shift and not as the strategic shift itself.

The alliance was an organisational shift that enabled a strategic shift in behaviour by increasing the group's capacity for conducting attacks. Ansar Dine, now a part of JNIM, modified its targets, its areas of action, and experienced a surge in the number and frequency of attacks. The productive conditions for this critical juncture seem to be external and two-fold. On the one hand, at the group-society level, both pressure from allies and coalition-building played a role in changing Ansar Dine and pushing it to use the combined forces for greater impact. On the other hand, at the group-international level of analysis, the formation of HTS in Syria²¹ (Göldner-Ebenthal & Elsayed 2019), which was applauded by the alliance, may have played an emulating role (Joscelyn 2017).

The ideological consequences of the third strategic shift appear so far to be minimal. Indeed, JNIM still embodies the tension between local and global ideology that characterised Ansar Dine, as shown in the alliance's communication (Tobie 2017). The main ideological change seems to be the shift from an organisation that challenges the state to one that rejects the Weberian state model, a feature which Maher (2016) uses to classify SJAGs. The group is now rejecting (through violence) the state and the international system, whereas it simply challenged them before (through both violence and activism). This shift had started unfolding in 2014-2015, when Ag Ghaly lost his main Touareg Malian allies. The formation of JNIM made the shift official and slowly turned Ansar Dine's ideology and strategy into a regional one. However, this shift is nuanced, with Ag Ghaly speaking of "[his] people of Mali and Azawad" in a July 2018 video denouncing the Malian presidential election (Lyammouri 2018). While its military successes extend beyond Malian territory, many experts agree that its political objectives remain local (Interview with Yvan

²⁰ It is assumed that the formation of JNIM was the result of another critical juncture, for which permissive and productive conditions are not clearly established yet.

²¹ Hayat Tahrir al Sham, a powerful alliance of Syrian salafi-jihadi armed groups formed in January 2017.

Guichaoua, January 2018, Berlin; Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris; Interview with Ferdaous Bouhlel, June 2019, Email). The ideology is not local, but it is intended to be applied at the local level (Lebovich 2013; Solomon 2015).

The formation of JNIM, however, led to a clear behavioural and organisational evolution. Within two years, JNIM shifted its Malian focus from Kidal and Timbuktu to Mopti and started operating in Burkina Faso, while Katiba Macina rose in importance. Indeed, Mopti represented 16% of attacks (7 attacks) by SJAGs in Mali in 2016, 31% (29 attacks) in 2017 and 52% (91 attacks) in 2018 (ACLED Data 2019). This behavioural shift took place gradually, at the same time as changes within the organisation: in 2018, external communication by the group showed a focus on the Fulani community (to which Kouffa belongs and which he is trying to mobilise for jihad) and more appearances and airtime for Kouffa himself. The second behavioural shift JNIM experienced was a rise of attacks in Burkina Faso in 2018 and a shift from Mali to Burkina Faso. Simultaneously, some data and testimonies (Nsaibia & Weiss 2018; ACLED Data 2019) point to JNIM getting closer to the Burkina Faso-based SJAG Ansaroul Islam. The group was the secondary actor in one JNIM-led attack in 2018, but had already been linked to three JNIM attacks in January and February 2019 (ACLED Data 2019). This could be the beginning of a new organisational shift for JNIM, especially with the death of Djamel Okacha in February 2019, meaning that AQIM lost its leader in the West African region. This is particularly important because of the weight of AQIM in JNIM. Indeed, AQIM is a key part of JNIM, with the group pledging allegiance to AQIM, Djamel Okacha ranking second in seniority within the organisation, and the group reported to be the largest part of the alliance (Lebovich 2018). The importance of AQIM is, however, subject to interpretation, as it is largely seen in comparison with the seemingly decreasing importance of Ansar Dine and Ag Ghaly, on which disagreements between experts persist (Thurston 2018a).

Finally, the strongest behavioural change caused by the formation of JNIM has been the return to the targeting of civilians for SJAGs (including Ansar Dine) in Mali. Altogether, 30% of attacks (139 out of 473) attributed to JNIM until February 2019 targeted civilians, making them the main target. Moreover, targeting of civilians has been increasing since the group's formation, from 11.25% (18 out of 160 attacks) in 2017, to 38.06% (94 out of 247 attacks) in 2018, to 40.91% of attacks (27 out of 66) in the first two months of 2019 (ACLED Data 2019).

Now that past strategic shifts have been identified, and still focusing on escalatory and de-escalatory pathways, the following section will explore which future de-escalatory trends can be expected. Past trends can indeed give us clues as to how the organisation might evolve and react to external developments.

5. Possible future scenarios for de-escalation

Relying and building on the work of Emy Matesan (2016), we have identified two possible scenarios for de-escalation: incapacitation of the group and adaptation. Emy Matesan develops ideal-typical scenarios of de-escalation based on a “tripartite conceptualization of engagement in violence” (Matesan 2016), i.e. the three dimensions we have explored in this paper: ideology, organisation and behaviour. All three dimensions play a distinct role in engagement in violence and must be considered separately if we are to understand the overall evolution of the group, as we saw in the previous section. Here, we will focus on possible de-escalation pathways, but it is also possible that Ansar Dine and JNIM will escalate further into violence in the future. Indeed, another scenario is that the conflict continues with “*increased violence, more recruitment and few dialogue options*” (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris).

In her research, Emy Matesan identified three pathways of de-escalation for Salafi jihadi armed groups. First, a group follows a path of *incapacitation* when it “loses its military capacity to undertake armed action, but does not ever arrive at a point where it delegitimizes violence as a tactic” (Matesan 2016). A group can also de-escalate through *adaptation*, by deciding to prioritise non-violent over violent action, as a “principled and strategic adaptation to the social and political environment” (ibid.). Finally, de-escalation can also take place through disillusionment, i.e. a path “of comprehensive de-escalation on all three dimensions, which is initiated and driven by the leadership of the organization, who are disillusioned with their cause and revisit their views on the appropriateness of armed action” (ibid.). We will consider the first two scenarios, as full disillusionment of the group, meaning a complete shift in all three dimensions, seems highly unlikely in the short- to middle-term given its past escalation pathway.

5.1 Incapacitation

A scenario of incapacitation would mean that Ansar Dine/JNIM can no longer rely on violence, because that option has been taken away from them. This might occur through successful repression and/or capturing/killing of the leader(s). Indeed, Malian and French armed forces, with the help of G5 Sahel, have been targeting JNIM leaders since the founding of the group and have so far reported the deaths of several mid-level leaders, as well as the death of regional AQIM leader Djamel Okacha at the end of February 2019. The strategy pursued by the French army and its allies could be described as “*mowing the lawn*” or “*cutting the grass*”: knowing that it lacks sufficient military capacity to destroy SJAGs in Mali, the French army attempts to kill as many fighters as possible through missile strikes and thus achieve a few months of relative peace (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2019, Berlin).

Matesan (2016) also points out that popular backlash can lead to the group’s incapacitation. Regarding Ansar Dine as a sub-component of JNIM, popular backlash does not seem to be a probable scenario. Indeed, Iyad Ag Ghaly can rely on old, complex links with local leaders in its heartland in northern Mali (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). With regards to JNIM as an overall entity, popular backlash is a more probable scenario. As it continues to increase the number, frequency and scale of its attacks, especially against civilian targets, it is likely that JNIM will lose popular support but also fighters. However, this argument seems more relevant for JNIM in general than for Ansar Dine, which has never really been in favour of attacking civilians. Its primary target remains the (international) military forces (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris; Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris). Backlash from the population can also be embodied by counter-terrorist and self-defence militias, which have been growing, especially in central Mali. The use of such militias by the Malian state and its French ally, however, could also have the opposite

effect. Indeed, the constant targeting of Fulani people and the use of methods of ethnic cleansing are fuelling Fulani grievances. This tactic has reached a new scale with the massacre in the village of Ogossagou on 23 March 2019, where a Dogo militia killed at least 157 people, all Fulani (Le Cam 2019). There is thus a possibility for these grievances to be exploited by JNIM, as it has been calling on Fulani to engage in jihad. However, an expert on Mali's central region has doubts about that option, highlighting that people in the centre are *"not really in favour of more SJAG presence and will not accept that"* and arguing that in central Mali, people are not too preoccupied by religion (Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris).

Additionally, the French army is increasingly seen as an occupying force (Bensimon 2019; Guichaoua 2019), and the human rights and humanitarian law violations committed by members of the Malian and other G5 Sahel armed forces mean that the armies are neither liked nor trusted (AMDH & FIDH 2018). These military counter-terrorism efforts have not improved the situation on the ground; if anything, they have increased popular disquiet and negatively impacted public opinion of the international forces in Mali. Moreover, the strategy of killing JNIM members is simply leading to more recruits. By conducting targeted strikes, France certainly eliminates jihadist fighters but it also eliminates people with a more ambiguous profile, such as JNIM supporters without a military function, whose deaths may meet with local disapproval and disrupt attempts at political dialogue. Eliminated leaders are often replaced by younger jihadists prone to increase violent actions to assert their new leadership. According to most regional experts, France's strategy of boycotting any form of dialogue is denying the realities on the ground. "Communication channels, direct or not, are already established in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. These dialogues are arduous and mistrustful, but they can progress" (Collectif de chercheurs 2018).

Full incapacitation therefore does not seem entirely possible, but there are ways of weakening the group, especially following the death of Okacha. As Andrew Lebovich suggested after the announcement (later denied) of the death of Amadou Kouffa, the death of a jihadist leader can generate momentum for the Malian (and the French) government to change their approach to conflict resolution (Lebovich 2018). Indeed, if the temporary weakening of the group is an opportunity for the state to return to the region where the group is active, it needs to do so with a more important focus on questions of justice and service delivery, so it is no longer seen as a predatory force (ibid.). On the other hand, this could present a window of opportunity, either for more moderate leaders from AQIM to rise within JNIM, or for more radical leaders to take over, which could lead to the split of the alliance. The current momentum could thus be seized, but dialogue with SJAGs should not only be linked to the incapacitation of the groups and repression of their followers. Indeed, as we have seen, both the Malian and French governments should be careful with their strategy of incapacitation, as it might strengthen the popular perception of them as predatory forces. Repression, moreover, cannot lead to sustainable conflict transformation, as it does not solve any root causes of the conflict.

5.2 Adaptation

At the time of writing, a scenario of adaptation through negotiation with Ansar Dine and Katiba Macina (both of which are still considered to be local actors with local grievances) was described as the preferred option by most experts and actors (Conférence d'Entente Nationale 2017; Collectif de chercheurs 2018; International Crisis Group 2019; Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris; Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris), but was also perceived as less likely than a scenario of incapacitation. This is mainly because it would require a change of approach and strategy by both the Malian government (and its allies, especially France) and JNIM member organisations (especially Ansar Dine and Katiba Macina). However, as suggested above, the death of Djamel Okacha, which has

been confirmed by JNIM, could generate momentum for a new approach to the conflict, opening spaces for dialogue engagement.

The dilemma of engaging with this Salafi jihadi movement in Mali was expressed during the Conference of National Understanding, held in Bamako from 27 March to 2 April 2017. Participants proposed an action plan to gather the various stakeholders and start a national dialogue process to achieve agreement on a wide range of topics (Sy et al. 2018). The legitimacy of such a process, its implementation and the lack of representation during the entire conference were strongly criticised by civil society and opposing groups. Salafi jihadi movements did not take part in the conference. Interestingly, there were various calls at the conference for engagement and dialogue with some Salafi jihadists. The outcome document stresses the need “to promote a culture of peace and dialogue with all the sons of the nation including Malian Islamists once their concerns, understood, do not undermine the national unity and the foundations of the Republic”. The recommendations go even further, saying that to resolve the current crisis, it is necessary to “negotiate with religious extremists in the north, including Iyad Ag Ghaly (and Amadou Kouffa) while preserving the secular nature of the state” (Conférence d’Entente Nationale 2017). French authorities strongly rejected this, with the Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault stating: “How could one negotiate with the terrorists? It is a fight without ambiguity” (Reuters 2017, *in*: Thurston 2018b, 14). According to Thurston (*ibid.*), this strong position voiced by its French ally led the Malian government to change its position and oppose negotiations.

Matesan (2016) insists on the need to open up exit options from violence. The Malian and the French governments have sought to incentivise individual disengagements from SJAGs, for instance by using the HCUA as a ‘shell’ for JNIM defectors, to reintegrate them as counter-terrorism fighters (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2019, Berlin). This is a first step towards exiting Salafi jihadi violence, but it does not lead former JNIM members to fully renounce violence. As part of the peace agreement, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes have been designed for former Touareg fighters from separatist movements. There is thus some willingness on the part of the Malian state to reintegrate former rebels, which could be built upon by extending such programmes to disengaged jihadi fighters.

Adaptation, on the other hand, should also include a strategic shift by the group itself, towards a readiness to engage in dialogue or negotiation. Such a change in strategy seems unlikely given the scale and frequency of the attacks attributed to JNIM in the past few months. However, this tactical escalation does not seem to have been accompanied by increased membership, territorial control, political power and local support for JNIM and its member organisations. There has been no progress on the implementation of Sharia in the region, which is the organisation’s main stated goal. JNIM members and leaders might also decide to step away from violence and try a different approach without delegitimising the use of violence. The self-interest of Ag Ghaly (The Observers 2012), the cohesive structure of the group and the legitimacy of its leaders might play a positive role in this scenario. This scenario, however, would probably lead to a split within JNIM, since AQIM has no national political goal and few direct links to the local population, and thus little interest in national opportunities for dialogue. Expert insights on dialogue with SJAGs also point to the fact that allegiance to al-Qaeda is very hard to break. Any attempt to cut ties would be interpreted as a tactical move rather than an actual decision (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2019, Berlin). While there are no clear guidelines on how to disengage from al-Qaeda while engaging in dialogue, we could envisage disengagement from the group by al-Qaeda, i.e. a split between AQIM and the other groups within JNIM, as a potential way out. Experts also agree that JNIM is still an alliance and not a merger, meaning that Ansar Dine still has its own agenda. In addition, “*each group has set up in a different territory and therefore has different strategies*” which could potentially lead to adaptation strategies for some of the groups within the JNIM. Ag Ghaly seems to have always been “*a man of dialogue*” and a scenario where “*Mali and the civil society propose empowerment in northern Mali with an autonomous region, with international supervision if necessary*” might be possible. Another scenario,

albeit no more likely to happen, after adaptation of JNIM would be “*for the G5 Sahel force to continue and concede the reality that there is today an Islamic renaissance so we could accept an Islamic Republic in Mali*” (Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris). Although it is not the most likely, it is still a relevant scenario to keep in mind.

6. Conclusion

Ansar Dine is a relatively young Salafi jihadi organisation in comparison to other SJAGs studied for this project (al-Shabaab in Somalia and Ahrar Al-Sham in Syria) and similar groups present in the Sahel region or elsewhere. Interestingly, it seems that at the beginning, the group was less extreme than it now appears to be. The leader Iyad Ag Ghaly became more ideologically extreme, but also moved closer to more extreme SJAGs in the region and opted for more ruthless use of violence. If at the initial stage, “*many experts argued in favour of engagement with him, most now agree that it is too late*” (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2019, Berlin). Throughout our case study, we first analysed the growing presence of SJAGs within the conflict constellation, as well as the strong role played by (international and especially French) armed intervention, and the rising tensions in the centre of the country. Digging deeper into Ansar Dine as a group, we noticed that all organisational, ideological and behavioural evolutions relied on the group’s leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly. The centrality of his figure is especially clear with regard to Ansar Dine’s strategic shifts. Ag Ghaly seems to be the one to make the decisions (so far towards escalation), driven by external events (French armed intervention), organisational change (split after Ouagadougou talks) or shifting alliances (alignment with AQIM and later formation of JNIM). The ideological level also seems to play a role, with a strong correlation to organisational evolutions.

The Conference of National Understanding recommended engagement with Ag Ghaly and Kouffa, on the basis of their Malian identity and the perceived utility of dialogue to end the conflict, and in private conversations, parties claim to want dialogue (Bouhlel 2019). At the same time, the military strategy does not really offer better prospects for Mali, which is slipping ever deeper into violence and more complexities. Indeed, enforced de-escalation (such as that which took place in 2014) has not led to lasting de-escalation but rather to underground activity until the group had rebuilt. However, a political solution is not openly and directly called for by parties to the conflict, and is sometimes rejected outright, for example by President IBK.

JNIM’s strategy of playing on existing tensions seems to be successful. Indeed, acting in places where strong political and historical rifts already exist, it serves to “*reopen or widen existing wounds*” (Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, May 2019, Telephone). The overreaction by security forces also plays a strong role in the widening of those wounds, and new conflicts are erupting, especially in central Mali. On 23 March 2019, a Dogon militia killed 160 men, women and children in the village of Ogossagou in central Mali. This was the deadliest attack in the country in six years. While the French army has been intervening against the jihadists in the north since 2012, this massacre once again shows the harsh complex reality of Mali, but also the political and military impasse in which the country finds itself. These victims were Fulani. They thus belonged to a community that is a key target for recruitment by jihadists, in particular the group under Amadou Kouffa within JNIM. To face down some individuals of the Fulani community that did join the Katiba Macina, Dogon farmers have organised themselves into militias and today constitute another threat to the country’s stability.

What this latest crisis reveals is once again the problem of the absence of the Malian state in certain regions of the country, but also that the purely military response to the jihadist threat no longer makes it possible to respond to these numerous and diverse challenges. The complexities of the Salafi jihadi threat, the inter-community clashes and, more widely, the political/humanitarian crisis in the country make it

very challenging for experts to rethink prevailing peacebuilding approaches as a whole, which unfortunately seems necessary. This case study report showed that sometimes, in specific contexts and at specific times, the option of engaging in dialogue with 'local SJAGs' ought to be considered as part of political conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. The case of Ansar Dine has not offered much space for peaceful conflict transformation so far, other than a few missed opportunities for political engagement (Bouhleb 2019). However, the deep analysis of its organisation, ideology and behaviour shows that strategic turning points exist and decisions are often taken by politically motivated individuals or groups who are keen to 'rationalise' their struggle and tactical choices, and might be receptive to third-party engagement towards conflict de-escalation.

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List of interviews:

Interview with Dougoukoulo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, April 2019, Paris.

Interview with Said Ben Bella, MNLA representative in Mauritania, March 2018, Nouakchott.

Interview with Ferdaous Bouhlel, June 2019, Email.

Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2018, Berlin.

Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, January 2019, Berlin.

Interview with Yvan Guichaoua, May 2019, Telephone.

Interview with Mathieu Guidère, April 2019, Paris.

Annex 2: Portrait of Iyad Ag Ghaly, founder of Ansar Dine and leader of JNIM

Iyad Ag Ghaly is a Touareg leader from Northern Mali. He is currently the most wanted fighter by the French authorities but is also one of the most respected figures in the region. His personality is ambivalent and ambiguous. These two characteristics may also explain why many stakeholders see him as one of the key players in the conflict but also in its resolution.

Militarily trained in Libya, Iyad Ag Ghaly was sent by Qaddafi to fight in South Lebanon (1982-1984) against Israel. Between 1988 and 1989, he fought on the side of the Libyan army against Chad. Jean-Paul Mari, a French journalist, describes him as follows: “He survived an F-16 bombing attack, escaped death many times, knows everything about the desert, knows how to fight and defeat” (Mari 2013). At the end of the 1980s, he left foreign battles to come back to Mali. In 1990, he had a prominent role in the Touareg rebellion against the Malian central authorities, took control over the city of Menaka and signed the accord of Tamanrasset, which promised more autonomy to the Touareg territory. A similar process occurred in 2006 but both initiatives never formalised into real implementation of Touareg autonomy. However, Ag Ghaly worked with the Malian army and participated in repressive action against splinter groups that rejected the peace agreement. This action invoked severe tribal and ethnical conflicts in the region. Mali allegedly offered Ag Ghaly the rank of General in the Malian army and the post of Governor of Kidal (Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014). Later, during the early 2000s he also played an important broker role in negotiating and mediating the release of foreign hostages in the whole region. For instance, in 2002, he mediated the release of 32 abducted tourists in Djanet, Algeria. By 2007, there were rumours that Ag Ghaly, the nominal leader of the Alliance for Democracy and Change (the political wing/party of the rebellion), had ties to AQIM. He requested to leave Mali and the government sent him as consular official to the Malian Embassy in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh accused him of cultivating contacts with extremist groups, and in 2008, he came back to Mali (Lloyd-George 2012). The influence of Saudi Arabian contacts and his involvement with al-Tabligh wal Da'wa (a missionary organisation from India which has been active in Western Africa, and especially in Mali, to promote the return to primary Sunni Islam) since the 1990s (Østebø 2013) is said to have induced a personal transformation into a religious and pious person, especially after 2008 (Thurston & Lebovich 2013). When the MNLA launched its rebellion against the Malian authorities after the Libyan revolution, Ag Ghaly created the rival Ansar Dine after being denied the leadership of the MNLA (Thurston & Lebovich 2013; Abu Al-Ma 'ali 2014; Maïga 2016). His engagement on a path of conservative and Salafi Islam in the 2000s is inexplicable for many Touaregs (Bencherif 2018), but seems to result from a combination of strategic power rivalry, and normative turn to religious pietism.