

FRIEND OR FOE

Sahel — a new battlefield between IS and Al-Qaeda?

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Soldiers from Burkina Faso patrol in a village of Gorgadji in sahel area, Burkina Faso March 3, 2019. REUTERS/Luc Gnago

Since early 2020, a largely peaceful relationship between the two jihadist movements in the Sahel – the Al-Qaeda coalition under the Group to Support Islam and Muslims (known under its Arabic acronym JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) – has turned into rather intense and deadly confrontations.

Rather than a ‘new battlefield’ between IS and Al-Qaeda in the Sahel, the tensions are the results of a series of local and regional dynamics that led to a change in the power balance and the end of five years of cordial relationship.

First signs of tensions

The first signs of tensions were evident in the second half of 2019 with small scale clashes that went **largely unreported and unclaimed**. A crisis meeting between JNIM members – including the Burkinabé Jaffar Dicko, head of Ansarul Islam (close to JNIM) – and the ISGS, led by its head Abu Walid Al-Sahrawi, took place in September 2019, according to a report by the Promédiation [<http://promediation.org/>] NGO .

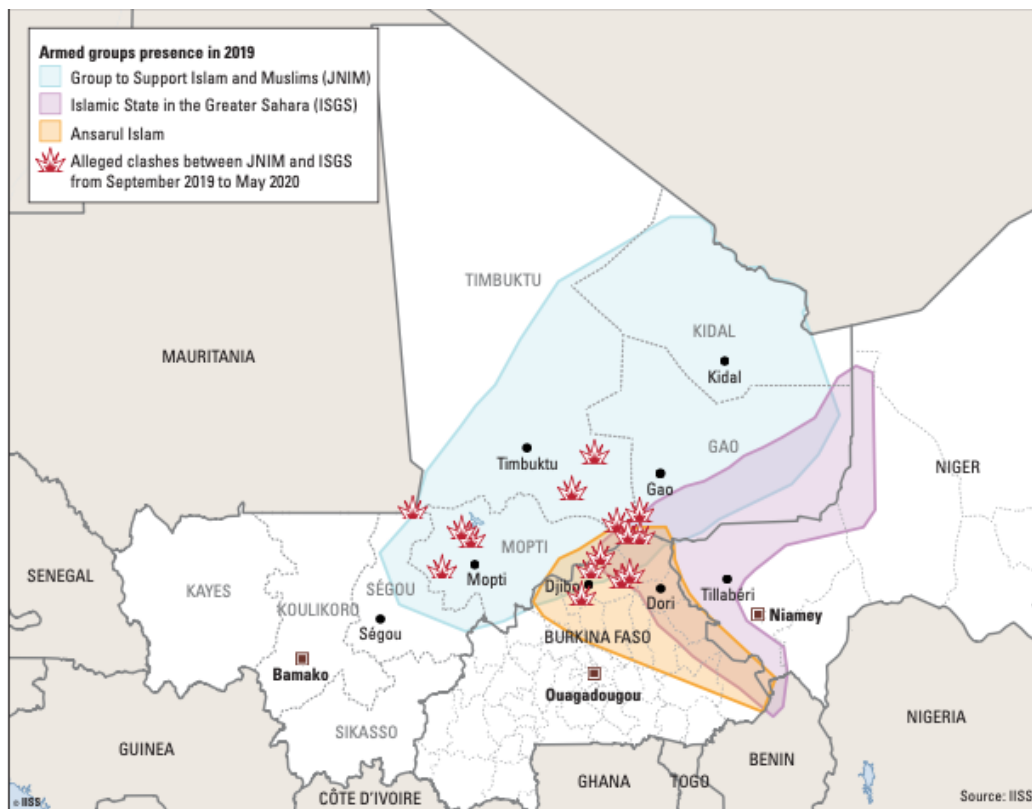
This meeting was **meant to demarcate territorial boundaries and clarify red lines**, but the groups did not come to an agreement, leading to increased tensions.

Where do they clash?

Clashes have **intensified in the first quarter of 2020**. The groups have fought in two different areas:

- The Inland Niger Delta area, around Mopti (Koulbi, Dialloubé, Dogo) (Mali)
- The Gourma area on both sides of the Mali-Burkina Faso border – Ndaki, In-Tillit, and Tin-Tabakat (Mali) and Korfooueyouey, Arayel, Arbinda, Nassoumbou, Pobé (Burkina Faso).

The Inland Niger Delta is, and always has been, **traditionally under the control of JNIM (and especially of one of its members, the Katiba Macina)**, with no ISGS presence nor reach, whereas in the Malian Gourma and the Soum Province of Burkina Faso both groups had, until now, peacefully coexisted.



Current state of play

As of May 2020, JNIM seems to have gotten the upper hand in the confrontations. The ISGS did not manage to expand its reach to the Niger Delta area as most of its attacks were either repelled or failed to result in a lasting presence.

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[<https://www.theafricareport.com/20555/how-the-sahel-has-slipped-into-a-new-post-jihadist-era/>]

Despite some initial ISGS successes in the Malian Gourma, **JNIM has now regained control over almost the entirety of this area.** In northern Burkina Faso, JNIM even managed to increase its reach further as it chased the ISGS from some of their traditional strongholds in the Soum province.

ISGS militants fled from central Mali towards the Mauritanian border (Nampala), or further southeast towards the Burkina Faso/Niger border. According to Promédiation, ISGS is currently sending some reinforcements from Tillabéri (Niger) not so much to fight, but rather to advise militants on a comeback strategy.

Why are they fighting?

Sahel watchers often use the concept of a “**Sahelian exception**” to describe the cordial relationship between ISGS and JNIM in contrast to other regions where IS and Al-Qaeda affiliates are open rivals. Indeed, leaders of both groups have met on multiple occasions to discuss the conditions of this ‘cooperation’ – mainly territorial agreements and red lines not to be crossed – like the meeting in September 2019.

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[<https://www.theafricareport.com/17843/west-africa-shifting-strategies-in-the-sahel/>]

In addition, **both groups have coordinated some of their operations**, for example through intelligence sharing or logistical assistance. The **kidnapping of two French hostages in Benin** [<https://www.france24.com/en/20190510-four-hostages-liberated-american-korean-burkina-french-tourists-kidnapped-benin>] in May 2019 and the **attacks against military positions in Koutougou, Burkina Faso** [<https://fr.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN1VA0LX-OZATP>] (August 2019) as well as Boulkessi and Mondoro (Mali) in October 2019 are particularly good examples of that.

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ISIS started to pay closer attention to the ISGS: their ties and communication expanded from March 2019 onwards, leading to a qualitative change not only in ISGS propaganda but also in its capabilities and strategies.

However, **their relationship has always been driven by practical considerations**, rather than a broader and deeper understanding and alliance. This means that the nature of their relationship could change at any moment, quickly and quite drastically, when the initial circumstances change.

Indeed, when the balance of power tilted in favour of the ISGS, the peaceful relationship did not survive. The resulting defections from the Katiba Macina to ISGS and the expansion of ISGS into Katiba Macina’s territory were unpalatable for the JNIM, thus becoming two main direct reasons behind the recent clashes.

Crisis of legitimacy within al-Qaeda affiliate Katiba Macina

For about a year now, **Katiba Macina militants have been disappointed** with the way their leader, **Amadou Koufa**, has led the fight in central Mali. From the start, the Katiba Macina stood for change in the socio-political order in central Mali.

Group members have denounced the exploitation of the population, the corruption of the authorities, and the inequality between the local elites and the people. Frustratingly for the militants, whereas the group promised to represent the common people, **the liberation from oppression never materialised.**

Even worse, Amadou Koufa began negotiations with the elites to consolidate his power in central Mali and, more recently, said **his group was open to peace talks** [<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-security/mali-militants-say-they-are-open-to-talks-if-foreign-troops-leave-idUSKBN20W2GG>] **with the Malian government under certain conditions.** Militants who had joined the group because of feelings of injustice and marginalisation and who had believed in the ability of the Katiba Macina to fight for those ideals, now feel disappointed and betrayed.

For some of those disgruntled Katiba Macina militants in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso the ISGS represents a strong alternative, i.e. a group that would continue the fight against the government and the local elites. The ISGS has exploited local tensions and communal divides created by Koufa's perceived leadership failure to present itself as the most legitimate actor and gain the trust of the local population.

In recent months the group has indeed insisted in their communication of the fact that the Katiba Macina had betrayed both their supporters by entering into negotiations with the government, and the Fulani in central Mali by **signing local agreements with Dogon militias** [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52614579>] .

This is reinforced by the fact that jihadist groups in the Sahel are highly fluid. **Up to 70% of militants involved in ISGS attacks** [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/22/sahel-faces-surge-in-violence-from-terror-attacks>] are recruited for ad hoc operations. This underlines the fact that **recruitment is often less driven by religious ideology** – though this dimension should not be overlooked – than by feelings of injustice or perceived need for security. In other words, fighters will join the group they think can best protect and represent them in the immediate term.

“Frustrations with Amadou Koufa are also very local”

In January **tensions increased after former Katiba Macina militants left** to form a new group in Nampala, Ségou region, at the border with Mauritania, and pledged allegiance to ISIS' new leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Qurashi.

READ MORE Mali: Jihadi Amadou Koufa's fighters desert, join Islamic State

[<https://www.theafricareport.com/23894/mali-jihadi-amadou-koufas-fighters-desert-join-islamic-state/>]

According to the **Timbuktu Institute** [<https://www.niameyetles2jours.com/la-gestion-publique/securite/2302-5106-centre-du-mali-naissance-dun-nouveau-groupe-terroriste-nomme-jund-al-khilafa>], a former close ally of Koufa, Mamadou Mobbo, led the defection. Mobbo had helped Niafunké-born Koufa establish himself in his native Macina, but discontent with Koufa's handling of local resources, and especially **access to bourgou fields**, allegedly triggered Mobbo's severing of ties. Like everyone else, **jihadi groups need to secure access to these fields**, especially at this time of the year just before the rainy season, for their own food security.

Defections are not new – some militants were for example frustrated not to be able to conduct vendetta attacks against Tuaregs in 2017-2018 and left the Katiba for the ISGS in Ménaka – but so far they had never led to clashes between factions.

In sum JNIM – and particularly the Katiba Macina – has been losing ground in the past months, which is seen as **weak for negotiating with local elites and government**. It has also lost both its supremacy in the region and some of its local support in favour of ISGS which, in turn, has strengthened its position throughout 2019 and 2020.

ISGS is on the rise and looking for new territory

The Sahel has always been dominated by groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, dating back to the 2000s when the Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), an Algerian Salafist group, established itself in northern Mali. In that context, the ISGS has always been deemed incapable of rivalling Al-Qaeda affiliates. As a result, the focus of security analysts and governments alike has, until now, always been on JNIM, and especially Ansar Dine and the Katiba Macina.

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The competition between ISGS and JNIM will only make both groups more resilient as they try to out power each other, and will bring further violence in the areas they already control and eventually the ones they wish to expand to, coastal West African countries being the next in line.



ISGS's rise was not linear and the group faced some intensive counter-terrorism operations in 2017 and 2018 by the French Operation Barkhane in the Ménaka area. But those were only temporary setback for ISGS which soon adapted and reorganised, recruiting in new communities and adopting new tactics, e.g. the **increased use of IEDs** [<https://acleddata.com/2019/06/19/explosive-developments-the-growing-threat-of-ieds-in-western-niger/>]. In addition, **ISIS started to pay closer attention to the ISGS**: their ties and communication expanded from March 2019 onwards, **leading to a qualitative change not only in ISGS** [<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/06/csdp-isis-militants-africa>] propaganda but also in its capabilities and strategies.

The growing threat particularly materialised at the end of 2019 with the Malian Army facing a series of humiliating attacks (Mondoro and Boulkessy, Indelimane, Tabankort) which opened the way to Niger for the ISGS to continue its rampage across the border (Inates, Sanam, Chinagodar). These high-level attacks propelled ISGS to the forefront of the 'fight against terrorism'.

With global attention came international responses, and the targeting of ISGS became a **"matter of priority** [<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/news/news-about-defence-and-security/article/g5-sahel-pau-summit-statement-by-the-heads-of-state-13-jan-2020>]" . This is a **significant shift in a region where France and its allies have been focused** on JNIM and its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, the **number one enemy** [<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/dossiers/iyad-ag-ghaly-lhomme-qui-defie-la-france/>] for the past seven years.

Since early 2020 counter-terrorism operations have thus increased against the ISGS, with **joint operations** [<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/operations/barkhane-l-arme-aerienne-dans-l-operation-monclar>] between Operation Barkhane, Niger and Mali in the Liptako (Mali-Niger border), a region where the ISGS is firmly established. **ISGS knows that it cannot compete militarily** against national armies. It instead opts for keeping a low profile and focusing on other areas where the group does not face counter-terrorism operations.

This is precisely the case of the Gourma

ISGS has, together with JNIM, been active in the Gourma, on both sides of the Mali-Burkina Faso border, for months. In mid-April, **confrontations intensified with the ISGS launching a series of attacks** on five consecutive days against JNIM units in the Malian Gourma and then on the Burkinabe side where the group killed 60 JNIM militants and took 40 prisoners.

ISGS thus decided to shift its focus there, but also expanded further north into the Inland Niger Delta. In Dialloubé, for example, **they have been travelling to villages announcing their arrival for months, and have started to recruit with the offer of money and motorbikes** [<http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200410-mali-centre-pays-les-combats-entre-groupes-arm%C3%A9s-sintensifient>].

It also promised militants that they could keep the spoils of war – a direct challenge to Kouffa’s centralised system in which he would control the allocation of rewards. Similar unverified reports have been gathered from the other side of the border, for example around Djibo, Burkina Faso.

Bottom line: There are many intertwined factors that led to the situation we are witnessing today – with a mix of operational and strategic choices driving the confrontation but also **some local drivers often misunderstood and overlooked**, such as issues around access to land.

These drivers are not going to disappear, and hence **confrontations between the two groups are likely to continue if not increase** in the next few months. This will further blur the lines between the groups, making it harder to map the attacks and conduct an effective response – be it military or political.

More defections could arise, with potential ‘new’ ISGS splinter groups establishing themselves in Mali and Burkina Faso, as we saw in January, fragmenting even more the jihadist landscape.

Furthermore, JNIM will have to step up its game not only militarily against ISGS, **which it has already done** [<http://bamada.net/mali-burkina-le-jnim-reussi-un-gros-coup-contre-leigs-dans-le-gourma-et-pres-de-la-frontiere-mali-burkina>], but also by experimenting with new political strategies to **regain trust and legitimacy among the local population**. This could lead to further communal violence as both groups will be tempted to exploit even further the divisions between Dogon and Fulani to augment their ranks.

The competition between ISGS and JNIM will only make both groups more resilient as they try to out power each other, and will **bring further violence in the areas they already control** and eventually the ones they wish to expand to, coastal West African countries being the next in line.