

Ansar Dine

AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: December 2011

Disbanded: March 2017

First Attack: March 2012: Following the military coup in Mali, Ansar Dine, along with AQIM, MUJAO, and the MNLA launched an offensive and eventually took control of northern Mali (unknown casualties).¹

Last Attack: November 7, 2016: Ansar Dine forces temporarily took control of a national guard post near Gourma in the Timbuktu region. The group claimed to have captured 5 vehicles, burned 6, and captured at least one DShK machine gun (1 killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Ansar Dine, translated as “Defenders of the Faith,” was an Islamic Tuareg group founded in December 2011 by Iyad Ag Ghali. The group aimed to establish Shariah law across Mali and targeted western civilians and peacekeepers. Ansar Dine’s ideology closely mirrored that of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); it was reportedly a domestic front group and affiliate for AQIM, though it was never publicly recognized by AQIM as an official affiliate. Ansar Dine was best known for its takeover of northern Mali with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), AQIM, and the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) after the Malian coup of 2012. Ansar Dine occupied and implemented Shariah law in Timbuktu and its environs from June 2012 until January 2013, when the French military intervened. In early July 2012, Ansar Dine made national headlines when it destroyed seven mausoleums in Timbuktu, which were part of a United Nations World Heritage site. In March 2017, Ansar Dine merged with Al Mourabitoun, local jihad group Macina Liberation Front, and AQIM’s Sahara branch to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). AQIM and AQ Central approved the merger and accepted the new JNIM’s oath of allegiance.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Ansar Dine, translated as “Defenders of the Faith,” was a Salafi-Jihadist group founded in December 2011 by Tuareg militant Iyad Ag Ghali. The group aimed to establish a Shariah state and targeted western civilians, especially peacekeepers. Its ideology closely mirrored that of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).³ Ansar Dine is best known for its involvement in the Malian coup of 2012. In early 2012, rebels led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) launched an uprising to take over northern Mali while the Malian military staged a coup and ousted the Malian president. Ansar Dine, the MNLA, AQIM and the Mouvement pour l’Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO) took advantage of the security breach by working together to invade northern Mali, defeat the Malian security forces, and occupy the region. As the MNLA seized new territory, Ansar Dine would enter the territory to help occupy it, but then take over leadership from the MNLA to accomplish its goal of installing Shariah law.⁴

In April 2012, Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO ended their alliances with the MNLA, because the MNLA’s objective, to establish a secular and independent state in northern Mali, strongly contradicted the groups aims to create a united Malian state governed by Shariah law.⁵ After Ansar Dine’s seizure of Timbuktu from the MNLA at the end of April, Ghali called on local residents to help Ansar Dine establish Shariah law throughout the region.⁶ Ansar Dine purportedly sent 100 fighters to help MUJAO expel the MNLA from Gao and Timbuktu from June 26-27, 2012. By late June 2012, Ansar Dine and its allies controlled Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao and their associated environs in a piece of territory the size of Texas.⁷ Ansar Dine established Shariah law in its territory, banning alcohol, smoking, cemetery visits on Fridays, and soccer; and demanding that all women wear veils.⁸ Youth protests erupted in July 2012 in Goundam, a city in the Timbuktu region, after Ansar Dine whipped a woman holding her child for not having her veil properly positioned.⁹

In November 2012, Ansar Dine stated its willingness to engage in peace talks with regional governments in Bamako, Mali. Additionally, the group gave permission to Malian humanitarian groups to enter northern Mali.¹⁰ In December 2012, Ansar Dine participated in talks with the government of Burkina Faso and the MNLA to cease hostilities, but the talks did not yield a lasting ceasefire.¹¹

The rebel occupation of northern Mali prompted a French military intervention in January 2013, which ousted Ansar Dine and its allies from control.¹² Despite the intervention and subsequent counterterrorism efforts, Ansar Dine continued to operate and attack United Nations and French forces using rockets, mortars and IED attacks.¹³ That month, political chief Alghabass Ag Intalla split from Ansar Dine to form the Islamic Movement for Azawad, a group purportedly composed solely of Malians, dedicated to a peaceful resolution to the crisis.¹⁴ Ansar Dine was mostly dormant and focused on rebuilding its forces during 2014; the group resumed attacks in 2015.¹⁵ In 2016, Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for 84 attacks out of 250 launched by AQ and its affiliates in Western Africa.¹⁶

Following the unrest in Mali, Amadou Kouffa, a mentee of Ghali, formed the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) as an affiliate of Ansar Dine. Its aim was to coordinate its operations in central and southern Mali. FLM gained international attention for its January 2015 violent attacks in central Mali. The media attributed several attacks in 2015 to the FLM that Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for; however, it is unclear which group actually carried out the attacks.¹⁷ On March 2, 2017, Ansar Dine officially merged with FLM, Al Mourabitoun, and the Sahara branch of AQIM to form Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). Through the merger, the groups

emphasized their desire to fulfill Al Qaeda's (AQ) ideological agenda. JNIM pledged allegiance to AQ and has allegedly conducted six attacks in Mali and one in Burkina Faso.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Iyad ag Ghali (December 2011 to March 2017): Ghali, a Tuareg militant from the Kidal region, founded Ansar Dine in December 2011. Prior to his leadership of Ansar Dine, he was a diplomat, a negotiator between AQIM and the Malian government in hostage situations, a rebel chieftain, and leader of the Tuareg rebellion against the Malian government in 1990.¹⁸ Before the 2012 Malian coup, he was rebuffed from a leadership position in the MNLA due to his commitment to establishing Shariah law.¹⁹ After the French intervention in Mali in January 2013, Ghali disappeared, only resurfacing in the media in 2015. With the merger of Ansar Dine into JNIM in 2017, Ghali pledged his allegiance to AQ leader Zawahiri.²⁰

Omar Hould Hamaha (April 2012 to August 2012): Hamaha served as Ansar Dine's spokesperson and a self-described commander in the group. He later served as a spokesperson for MUJAO until his death in a French airstrike in March 2014.²¹

Alghabass Ag Intalla (February 2012 to January 2013): A leader of the Tuareg Ifogha tribe, Intalla joined Ansar Dine as political chief in early 2012. He left Ansar Dine to form the splinter group Islamic Movement for Azawad in 2013.²²

B. NAME CHANGES

There are no recorded name changes for this group.

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2012: 101-1000 (START)²³

D. RESOURCES

Ansar Dine was funded primarily by hostage ransoms, opium trafficking, and money from AQIM. The group allegedly also received funding from the government of Qatar.²⁴

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

Ansar Dine operated out of northern Mali and carried out attacks in the Kidal, Timbuktu, Segou, Sikasso, Koulikoro and Gao regions of the country. Following the Malian coup, Ansar Dine collaborated with its allies to control an area the size of Texas in northern Mali from June 2012 to January 2013; Ansar Dine controlled Timbuktu and its environs. After the French intervention in January 2013, Ansar Dine lost most of its territory to the Malian armed forces.²⁵

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

Ansar Dine was a Salafi-jihadist group that aimed to establish Shariah law across Mali and targeted western civilians, especially peacekeepers in Mali.²⁶ Ansar Dine's ideology closely mirrored that of AQIM, which came to view Ansar Dine as its southern arm in Mali. Unlike the MNLA, Ansar Dine did not seek independence for northern Mali but rather a country unified under Islam.²⁷

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In November 2012, Ansar Dine expressed its willingness to hold peace talks with regional governments in Bamako, Mali. Additionally, the group gave permission to humanitarian agencies to enter northern Mali.²⁸ In December 2012, Ansar Dine participated in talks with the government of Burkina Faso and the MNLA to establish a cessation of hostilities, but the talks did not yield a lasting peace.²⁹

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

Ansar Dine militants employed suicide attacks, explosive-laden vehicles, rockets, mortars, grenades and rifles to weaken its primary targets, which included the French and Malian militaries, the Malian police force, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and after the initial occupation of land in northern Mali, the MNLA.³⁰ The group also possessed anti-aircraft weapons.³¹

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

March 2012: Following the military coup in Mali, Ansar Dine, along with AQIM, MUJAO, and the MNLA, launched an offensive and eventually took control of northern Mali. In its attack of Aguelhok, a village in the Kidal region, Ansar Dine forces killed 82 Malian soldiers and kidnapped at least 32 (unknown casualties).³²

June 2012: Ansar Dine and MUJAO fought alongside one another in the Battles of Gao and Timbuktu in northern Mali against the MNLA, ultimately seizing Gao, Timbuktu and their environs (unknown casualties).³³

October 23, 2013: Four Ansar Dine suicide bombers detonated cars saddled with explosives at the United Nations checkpoint in Tessalit in the Kidal region of Mali, killing peacekeepers and civilians (7 killed, 6 wounded).³⁴

August 3, 2015: Militants ambushed the Malian National Guard base in Gourma Rharous in the Timbuktu region of Mali, killing 11 Malian soldiers (11 killed, 1 wounded).³⁵

December 24-25, 2015: Ansar Dine militants attacked a MNLA base in Talhandak village in Kidal, Mali and allegedly took over the village (10 killed, unknown wounded).³⁶

February 12, 2016: A suicide bomber detonated a truck bomb on a U.N. base in the Kidal region. 6 peacekeepers died in the attack and the resulting heavy weapons fire. Ansar Dine claimed the attack was a response to the German president's pledge to send soldiers to support MINUSMA (6 killed, unknown wounded).³⁷

July 19, 2016: Militants attacked a Malian military base in Nampala, with at least 19 Malian soldiers killed and 5 kidnapped (19 killed, unknown wounded).³⁸

November 7, 2016: Ansar Dine forces temporarily took control of a national guard post near Gourma in the Timbuktu region. The group claimed to have captured 5 vehicles, burned 6, and captured at least one DShK machine gun (1 killed, unknown wounded).³⁹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- U.S. State Department Foreign Terrorist Organization list (FTO): March 21, 2013 to Present.⁴⁰
- UNSC ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List: March 20, 2013 to Present.⁴¹
- United Arab Emirates Cabinet Designated Terrorist Organization: November 15, 2014 to Present.⁴²

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Ansar Dine established Shariah law in its territory in Timbuktu, banning alcohol, smoking, cemetery visits on Fridays, soccer and demanding that all women wear veils.⁴³ The militant group punished those in its occupied territory that did not follow strict Shariah law by whipping them. Youth protests erupted in July 2012 in Goundam, a city in the Timbuktu region, after Ansar Dine whipped a woman holding her child for not having her veil properly positioned.⁴⁴ At the same time, the group permitted Malian humanitarian groups to enter northern Mali, under the condition that Ansar Dine was in charge of the transfer and distribution of food and medicines.⁴⁵

Most of Ansar Dine's members were Tuaregs from Ghali's Ifogha tribe and Berabiche Arabs from the Timbuktu area.

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Ansar Dine's ideology closely mirrored that of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which came to view Ansar Dine as its southern arm in Mali.⁴⁶ AQIM was also led by Ghali's cousin, Hamada Ag Hama, strengthening the tie between the two groups.

After the 2012 coup in northern Mali, Ansar Dine worked with the MNLA, AQIM, and the Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) to occupy the region.⁴⁷ As the MNLA seized new territory, Ansar Dine would enter the territory to help occupy it, but then take over leadership in order to install Shariah law. In April 2012, Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO ended their alliances with the MNLA, because the MNLA's objective, to establish a secular and independent state in northern Mali, strongly contradicted their aims to create a united Malian state governed by Shariah law.⁴⁸ Ansar Dine purportedly sent 100 fighters to help MUJAO fight the MNLA in Gao, while it fought the MNLA in Timbuktu during the Battles of Gao and Timbuktu from June 26-27, 2012. In December 2012, Ansar Dine participated in talks with the government of Burkina Faso and the MNLA to cease hostilities; unfortunately, the talks were unsuccessful.⁴⁹

In January 2013, Ansar Dine political chief Alghabass Ag Intalla split from the group to form the Islamic Movement for Azawad (MIA), a group purportedly composed solely of Malians. MIA claimed to seek negotiations as a way to peacefully end the Mali crisis.

Following the unrest in Mali, Amadou Kouffa, a mentee of Ghali, formed the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) as an affiliate to Ansar Dine for coordination of its operations in central and southern Mali. FLM gained international attention for its January 2015 violent attacks in central Mali in January 2015. The media attributed several attacks in 2015 to the FLM that Ansar Dine claimed responsibility for; however, it is unclear which group actually carried out the attacks.⁵⁰

Ansar Dine joined with Al Mourabitoun, the FLM, and the Sahara branch of AQIM into the unified organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen on March 2, 2017.⁵¹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

In 2013, various French and Malian government officials accused the Qatari government of providing material support to Ansar Dine and other militant groups in northern Mali. Qatari NGOs, including the Qatari branch of Red Crescent, were the only humanitarian organizations allowed into the region during militant rule.⁵²

MAPS

- North Africa
- Global Al Qaeda

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¹³ Weiss, Caleb. "Malian Al Qaeda Leader Threatens France in Audio Statement | The Long War Journal." The Long War Journal. The Long War Journal, 1 Nov. 2015. Web. 27 July 2016.

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