

Al-Qa'ida's New West African Map: Ançar Dine, Boko Haram, and Jihadism in the Trans-Sahara

Micha'el Tanchum

On March 27, 2012, the Touareg separatist organization MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azaouad) signed an agreement with the al-Qa'ida affiliated militant organization Ançar Dine to administer the territory under their joint control as an Islamist state. In mid-January 2012, the nationalist MNLA began a military campaign to create an independent Touareg state called Azawad from the three northern Touareg regions of Mali – Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, a vast desert and semi-desert area constituting approximately 66% of Malian territory. The newly proclaimed Islamic Republic of Azawad presents al-Qa'ida with increased potential for linking North Africa's Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) with the al-Qa'ida affiliated Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Even if the agreement between the MNLA and Ançar Dine should collapse in the face of opposition from the more secular, nationalist faction within the MNLA, Ançar Dine may develop a decisive advantage over the MNLA through its working alliance with AQIM and Boko Haram.

In its escalating war on the Nigerian state in the past two years, Boko Haram has killed over 1000 people. In January 2010, AQIM head Abdel Malek Droukdel publically offered to train and arm Nigerian volunteers to wage jihad against Christian Nigerians who were engaged in a "crusade" against Muslims.¹ Six month earlier, Nigerian police and army units stormed Boko Haram's headquarters in Maiduguri, capturing the organization's leader Muhammad

Yusuf and killing an estimated 500 Boko Haram militants.² Yusuf was later killed while in custody. The surviving top level of the organization, including Abubakar Shekau who assumed the leadership of Boko Haram, fled to Niger and Chad. Droukdel and the AQIM *shura* provided resources to Shekau to rebuild the organization, augmenting its capabilities and altering its operational outlook to more resemble al-Qa'ida. The Boko Haram escapees in Niger were assisted by the AQIM's south Saharan *katiba* ('brigade') commanded by Abdelhamid Abu Zeid.³

During the first three months of 2012, MNLA separatists successfully conducted a military campaign to create an independent Touareg state of Azawad. Many MNLA fighters were seasoned veterans of Muammar Qaddafi's armed forces, using weapons they had transported from Libya as Qaddafi's regime disintegrated in Autumn 2011. Experienced in desert combat, the MNLA fighters pushed the Malian military into a series of retreats.⁴ After capturing Kidal's major towns, MNLA forces took Gao and then Timbuktu in quick succession. Controlling all three Malian regions, the MNLA spokesman Mossa Ag Attaher formally declared the independence of Azawad on French Television on April 6, 2012.⁵

Despite the MNLA's declaration, significant portions of the territory came under the actual control their putative ally, the Islamist Ançar Dine (Ar : Anṣār al-Dīn or 'Defenders of the Religion'). Led by Iyad ag Ghaly, a prominent leader from the Touareg rebellion of 1990-1995, Ançar Dine is linked to al-Qa'ida particularly through ag Ghaly's cousin, Hamada ag Hama, who leads a small AQIM faction. On March 21, 2012, Ançar Dine issued a statement to Agence France Presse announcing its imposition of Shari'ah law in Kidal's major towns.⁶ Ançar Dine spokesman Cheikh Ag Aoussa declared "It is an obligation for us to fight for the application of Shari'ah in Mali." Ançar Dine, aided by AQIM units, then drove MNLA forces from Timbuktu, burned the national flag of Azawad, and began to administer a *shari'ah*-run regime in the city. Promising to fight to the death against those advocating the creation of a democratic republic of Azawad, Iyad ag Ghaly told Timbuktu's Muslim clerics that 'he did not come for independence but for the application of Islamic law.'⁷ A month later, as sign of the implementation of a Salafi Islamist regime, Ançar Dine militants destroyed the shrine of Sidi Mahmoud Ben Amar, one of Timbuktu's venerated medieval saints, claiming that the traditional Muslim piety of the area was not authentically Islamic.

Ançar Dine's conquest of Timbuktu had been achieved by a multi-ethnic Salafist force which included several Nigerians.⁸ Abu Zeid, the commander of AQIM's southern *katiba*, which had been providing training to Boko Haram militants in neighboring Niger, met with Iyad ag Ghaly in Timbuktu.⁹ With the Touareg comprising only 10% of Timbuktu's population, the MNLA's Touareg nationalism enjoys little support among the majority of the city's residents. Many Touareg were expelled from the Timbuktu region during the second Touareg rebellion in the early 1990s. The lingua franca of Timbuktu, as with the city of Gao, is not the

Touareg language of Tamasheq, but the Koyra Chiini language of Mali's Songhai population who maintain a historic antagonism against the nomadic Touareg. The other significant ethnic group is the semi-nomadic Fulani who live in the Niger River region between Timbuktu and Gao. Without a credible alternative to Mali's national government in Bamako, the Fulani, particularly the more rural Fulani herdsmen, may begin to view accommodation with the multi-ethnic, Salafist Ançar Dine as a better alternative. Because of Boko Haram's assistance to Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria, a segment of Mali's Fulani population may prove more amenable to the Boko Haram-allied Ançar Dine. Since 2004, Boko Haram units in Nigeria have intervened repeatedly in inter-religious conflict to assist local Muslim populations, often Fulani herdsmen against non-Fulani, Christian farmers. In this manner, Boko Haram has successfully expanded beyond its initial ethnic and geographical base.¹⁰ Some Nigerian militants have already been engaged by Ançar Dine to instruct segments of Timbuktu's population in the Salafi practice of Islam.¹¹

The independence of Azawad has not been internationally recognized. In early April, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) began planning the creation of a 3,000 man force to intervene in Mali.¹² The military intervention of ECOWAS, particularly if assisted by France,¹³ would enable al-Qa'ida to reframe the Touareg insurgency, especially its own participation, within its global jihadist narrative of the "near enemy" and the "far enemy." If an ECOWAS intervention should prove to be insufficiently swift and decisive or not conclude with an accord that genuinely accommodates Touareg grievances within a Malian national framework, Mali may well attract jihadists from around the continent, and thus further AQIM and Boko Haram's ambition to create a coordinated jihadist movement across West Africa.

Dr. Micha'el Tanchum teaches in the Master's in Middle Eastern Studies (MAMES) program in the Department of Middle East and African History at Tel Aviv University. He is a fellow in the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem.

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<http://israelcfr.com/documents/6-2/6-2-6-MichaelTanchum.pdf>

¹ Jean-Pierre Filiu, "Could Al-Qaeda turn African in the Sahel?" *Carnegie Papers* 112 (June 2010) 7, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/al_qaeda_sahel.pdf.

² Taye Obateru, Kingsley Omonobi, Lawani Mikairu, and Daniel Idonor, “Nigeria: Boko Haram Leader, Yusuf, Killed,” Vanguard News Website, July 30, 2009, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200907310003.html>; “Nigerian sect leader ‘captured’” BBC News Website, July 30, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8177390.stm>

³ Yossef Bodansky, “Nigeria’s Boko Haram Links with al-Qaida,” Defense & Foreign Affairs: Strategic Policy (August 2010) 18; William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, “Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” Case Study No. 4, AQAM Futures Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies, (September 2011), 7.

⁴ “Mali: Tuareg Rebellion,” Foroyya News Website, February 22, 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201202221166.html>

⁵ The announcement was made on the France 24 television station. “Le comité exécutif du MNLA a proclamé l’indépendance de l’Azawad” France 24 television, April 6, 2012, <http://fr.allafrica.com/view/resource/main/main/id/00031249.html>

⁶ “Islamist fighters call for Sharia law in Mali” Agence France Presse, March 13, 2012, <http://news.yahoo.com/islamist-fighters-call-sharia-law-mali-144233731.html>; Part of the 13 minute video which was aired by AFP can be viewed on youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OM1AyeRLPo>

⁷ Iyad ag Ghaly’s statement was reported to AFP by an eyewitness. Daniel De Serge, “La mythique Tombouctou sous le joug des islamistes,” Agence France Presse, April 3, 2012, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jdr1MkVjNMgLrz8oXY7gVFfBliA?docId=CNG.89cdocc3c48b9aaf643fe7e06ad17b83.b71>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Abu Zeid’s rival and leader of a different katiba, also attended the meeting. “Les islamistes chassent les rebelles touareg,” La Presse de Tunisie, April 4, 2012, <http://www.lapresse.tn/04042012/47805/les-islamistes-chassent-les-rebelles-touareg.html>.

¹⁰ Micha’el Tanchum, “Al-Qa’ida’s West African Advance: Nigeria’s Boko Haram, Mali’s Touareg, and the Spread of Salafi Jihadism,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* VI:2 (May 2012), 77-78

¹¹ Daniel De Serge, Op. cit.

¹² Stanislas Ndayishimiye, “Afrique de l’Ouest: Les chefs militaires ouest-africains proposent un mandat pour l’envoi d’une force,” Radio France Internationale, April 6, 2012, <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201204060350.html> The intervention is subject to the ECOWAS approval.

¹³ French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé announced that France is prepared to handle the logistics for the ECOWAS force. Ibid.

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