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### **Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the quest for supremacy in the Sahel**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> March four terrorist groups active in Mali announced their merger in a TV statement. The recording, produced by the al-Zaleqa media outlet, features the presence of the leaders of Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the *Front de Libération de Macina*. Speaking in front of the camera, the leader of Ansar Dine Iyad Ag Ghali announced the birth of the *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* (the 'Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims'). Ghali, who also was chosen as leader of the new group, renewed the allegiance of the new organisation to al-Qaeda, mentioning the three reference of the jihadist group: Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (better known as Abdelmalek Droukdel, the head of the local branch of al-Qaeda in the region, AQIM), Ayman al-Zawahiri (leader of al-Qaeda after the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011) and Mullah Haibatullah, the successor of Mullah Mansour at the head of the Taliban in Afghanistan since 2016.

Together with Ag Ghali, representatives of the included terrorist groups were present during the statement, including Hassan al-Ansari (deputy leader of al-Mourabitoun), Yahya Abu Hamman and Abu Abdul Rahman al-Sanhaji (respectively senior commander and sharia official of AQIM) and Amoud Kouffa (leader of the *Front de Libération du Macina*). The absence of the leader of al-Mourabitoun Mokhtar Belmokhtar fuelled speculations about its fate. Belmokhtar was supposedly killed or severely injured during a French airstrike in Libya in November 2016. Despite there has been no confirmation about the killing, the presence of Ansari at the foundation meeting of the new group is indicative of the current uncertainty about Belmokhtar's whereabouts.

Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, AQIM and the *Front de Libération du Macina* has been involved at various levels in the current instability in northern Mali. Since the uprising of 2012 all these groups took advantage of the upheaval to expand their influence in the area. However, the French intervention

of 2013 with the *Operation Serval* (later broadened to the entire Sahel region and dubbed *Operation Barkhane*) prevented the collapse of Mali. Despite the Ouagadougou agreement in 2013 and the Algiers Accord in 2015, instability is still persistent in the country, in particular in the restive north, but also in the central part of the country. As an example, on 18 January a suicide attack against a military base in Gao caused at least 77 deaths and 120 injured. Inside the base there were 600 fighters, part of them members of the *Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad* (CMA, a former revolutionary group composed of members of the Touareg minority); while others were part of the *Plateforme*, a pro-governmental coalition. Both groups were preparing themselves for organising mixed patrols, according to the Algiers Accord. The attack was claimed by al-Mourabitoun.

The *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* represents a serious threat to the security of Mali. The group was already behind the attack of 5<sup>th</sup> March against a military base in Boulikessi, in the central part of the country, which resulted in 11 soldiers killed. Even though press reports initially said that the attack was carried out by another terrorist organisation (Ansarul Islam, led by the Burkinabe Islamist Ibrahim 'Malam' Dicko), the *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* claimed responsibility through the Mauritanian agency ANI.

It is likely that the new terrorist group will increase its activity in the next months, in order to assume a leadership role among the different armed groups present in the country. The concurrence between the jihadist groups (which also includes the Islamic State terrorist organisation) could have dire consequences for the country: the UN Mission in Mali (*Mission multidimensionale intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation du Mali – MINUSMA*) is already considered the deadliest active peacekeeping mission in the world. Moreover, the death toll among locals is already high: last year 332 people died (207 of them were civilians) and 385 attacks were recorded in the country.

However, the instability produced by the *Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin* in its quest for the jihadist supremacy goes well beyond Mali's borders. The Sahel region is already affected by an increasing terrorist activity, the result of three political and security crisis around the region: Mali, Libya and Nigeria. Jihadist groups joining forces in Mali, the persistent activity of Boko Haram in Nigeria and the resilience of the Islamic State terrorist organisation in Libya after the fall of Sirte are raising concerns about the future trends of the region. The three crises are reverberating in the Sahel region, where attacks and kidnappings are occurring more frequently, opening also further development possibilities for organised crime and "grey areas". For this reason on 6<sup>th</sup> February the G5 Sahel (including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) announced the creation of a joint force to fight against the terrorism in the region, demanding the help of the European countries to establish a '*Sahel de la Défense*' to counter the terrorist threat.