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Preliminary Analysis: Merger of Terrorist Groups in Mali

Situation: On Thursday 2 March 2017, leaders of the three Jihadist groups operating in the Sahel-Sahara Region; Ansar Eddine, led by **Iyad Ag Ghaly**, Al Mourabitoune, led by the notorious terrorist **Moukhtar Bel Mokhtar**, the Macina Brigade, led by **Mohammad Koufa**, and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), local emirs led by **Yahaya Abou Al-houmam and Abou Abdelrahman al-Sahaji**, announced via a video clip they have released, that their groups had merged and that the merger has pledged allegiance to AQIM. They declared that the new alliance is to be known as “**Jama’ at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen,**” literary meaning “Support of Islam and Muslims”. The former leader of Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was announced as the leader of the new group. According to the group, the merging of Jihadist factions in Syria has inspired their union.

Comment: It would appear that the merger example from Syria has also influenced Jihadist groups in Libya too. In spite of the known public animosity between al-Qaida and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) groups operating in Libya, it has recently been reported that the two are increasingly cooperating. The Tripoli government has recently



reported that ISIL militia groups after losing much ground in the North and East of Libya, are now actively re-grouping in the South with al-Qaida providing logistical support to help the ISIL groups recuperate, refit and regain their combat power.

The merger of the Jihadist groups in Mali is however not out of the blue. The groups are known to have provided mutual support to each other in the past, in the holding of Northern Mali while it was under the control of Jihadist groups in 2013. Their unification could be seen as an indicator of a desire for a more coordinated effort against Malian and international security forces currently operating in the area.

The unification could also have been influenced by a realization or a presumption that the decline of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is a result of the lack of cooperation and coordination with the other Jihadist groups. In effect, the unification could be entirely due to the exigency of declining capacity of the splinter groups as is typical of small Jihadist movements. Another school of thought is that the unification under the banner of al Qaida could be a response to the fear of being overshadowed by MUJAO's allegiance to the so-called Islamic State.

The designation of ***Iyad Ag Ghaly*** as leader of the new group is also in consonance with the known al-Qaida strategy of expanding Jihad to Sub-Saharan Africa, through a concept of domestication by identifying, recruiting and empowering representatives of local tribes so as to ensure local ownership of the global al-Qaida agenda.

The non-inclusion of a group such as Boko Haram and other Jihadist groups operating in other parts of Africa in the merger is an indicator that the area of operations of the new group is likely to continue to be restricted to Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Libya and Algeria. In deed it could be a massing to threaten the implementation of the Algiers peace agreement.

While the unification could be expected to reinforce the scope of operations of the Jihadists in the Sahel-Sahara Region, through the pooling of resources and effort to make them more potent, there is also the likelihood it could result in a power struggle as well as racial discrimination that would rather weaken it as has been the case in the past with other Jihadist groups in the Sahel- Sahara.