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An Annotated Translation of the Islamic State’s “Liptako: Graveyard of Crusaders and Apostates”

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Translator’s Introduction

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is a key armed actor in the tri-border zone between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.¹ ISGS is the central counterterrorism target for those governments and especially for France, and the tri-border zone has become the key priority for France’s Sahel-focused counterterrorism mission, Operation Barkhane. That zone is also the priority for the French-backed G5 Sahel Joint Force, which draws soldiers from Mauritania and Chad in addition to the three countries that make up the tri-border zone.² The Joint Force was created in 2017.³

ISGS emerged out of a May 2015 rupture within al-Murabitun, itself a breakaway faction of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁴ ISGS’ leader, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Over time, his unit has gained more recognition from the Islamic State central leadership, which labels ISGS a part of the “Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).” At the international level, ISGS is most famous for its October 2017 ambush on a joint American-Nigerien patrol outside the Nigerien village of Tongo-Tongo.⁵

¹ For background on the violence in the tri-border zone, see William Assanvo, Baba Dakono, Lori-Anne Thérout-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga, “Violent extremism, Organised Crime and Local Conflicts in Liptako-Gourma,” Institute for Security Studies, December 2019, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf>.

² Burkina Faso’s President Roch Kaboré affirmed this prioritization following the January 2020 Sahel summit hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron in Pau, France. See “Conférence de presse conjointe à l’issue du sommet de Pau,” 13 January 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/01/13/sommet-de-pau-declaration-conjointe-des-chefs-detat>.

³ For background on the force, see Jennifer Cooke, “Understanding the G5 Sahel Joint Force: Fighting Terror, Building Regional Security?” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 November 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-g5-sahel-joint-force-fighting-terror-building-regional-security>.

⁴ The part of al-Murabitun that did not pledge allegiance to the Islamic State would rejoin AQIM later in 2015. See Andrew Lebovich, “The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region,” Combating Terrorism Center *Sentinel* 9:1 (January 2016), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region/>.

⁵ For reporting on that ambush, see Rukmini Callimachi, Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, Alan Blinder, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “‘An Endless War’: Why 4 U.S. Soldiers Died in a Remote African Desert,” *New York Times*, 20

In 2019, ISGS moved from accommodation to confrontation with another, even more important Sahelian jihadist group: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (The Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims, JNIM), which is part of al-Qaida. JNIM was formed in March 2017 as a coalition of jihadist groups with varying degrees of pre-existing connection to or membership within al-Qaida. Among other components, JNIM includes the Saharan units of AQIM as well as the portion of al-Murabitun that did not pledge allegiance to the Islamic State. JNIM is led by Malian national Iyad ag Ghali, who founded the Malian jihadist group Ansar al-Din (Defenders of the Faith) in late 2011 and led it, working closely with AQIM, until the creation of JNIM and the absorption of Ansar al-Din into that new structure. Another key component of JNIM is the central Malian unit known as Katibat Macina or Macina Battalion, an extension of Ansar al-Din; Katibat Macina's leader is Malian national Amadou Kouffa.

A number of analyses have treated the JNIM-ISGS conflict. Several analyses are rigorous and informative.⁶ In explaining why the shift from accommodation to confrontation between JNIM and ISGS has occurred, these analyses tend to cite two or sometimes three factors: competition over territory and recruits, ISGS' rejection of JNIM's willingness to negotiate with the Malian government, and the central Islamic State's incitement to ISGS to fight JNIM.

There is considerable merit to this approach, but I have two suggestions for alternative viewpoints. First, several analyses have framed the JNIM-ISGS conflict as the end of an exception or anomaly within the global rivalry between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. This is true on one level. However, ISGS' move from accommodation to confrontation against an al-Qaida affiliate is less exceptional in the global context than it might first seem. Around the world, the timelines of intra-jihadist clashes follow heavily local logics and are informed by local and regional, in addition to global, dynamics. In this sense, the Sahelian case in its very idiosyncrasy is not an exception but a confirmation of a trend that has appeared elsewhere.⁷ Amid what is sometimes a stale debate among analysts regarding "globalism"

February 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/17/world/africa/niger-ambush-american-soldiers.html>.

⁶ The best treatments of the JNIM-ISGS conflict are Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The End of the 'Sahel Exception'," Center for Global Policy, 2 June 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>; Flore Berger, "Sahel – A New Battlefield between IS and Al-Qaeda?" The Africa Report, 4 June 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/29184/sahel-a-new-battlefield-between-is-and-al-qaeda/>; and Hèni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida Finally Came to West Africa," Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel 13:7 (July 2020), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

⁷ One intriguing article, a case study of Islamic State-affiliated units and Taliban units in Afghanistan, notes the following: "We conceive the Taliban and ISIS as parts of a broader 'jihadist movement industry' that is simultaneously

versus “localism” in the study of jihadist groups, it is worth emphasizing that the two perspectives are not mutually exclusive – local dynamics affect how global trends play out, just as global trends influence local conflicts. Put differently, the global trend in intra-jihadist conflict is local fluctuation. Even the ISGS-JNIM conflict may take unpredictable turns, other than just continued fighting, in the future.

Second, the JNIM-ISGS conflict obviously deserves center stage when that is the topic of discussion, but the conflict does not necessarily have to be treated as a binary one. New dimensions of analysis open up when the conflict is treated as a triangular one involving France, JNIM, and ISGS – or, at a greater level of complexity, as a multi-sided conflict in which jihadists are crucial actors, but far from the sole decisive actors amid a war involving numerous armed factions, state and non-state. The JNIM-ISGS conflict is shaped by that war. Emphasizing the triangular or multi-directional nature of the conflict is important for several reasons:

- (a) This emphasis hews closer to how the jihadists themselves discuss the conflict – for example, as seen below, ISGS propaganda focuses just as much, if not more, on France as it does on JNIM. Moreover, ISGS also condemns various Sahelian militias and political blocs due to those actors’ alleged support to JNIM; and
- (b) Stressing the multi-sided character of the conflict helps emphasize non-jihadist actors’ agency in shaping and even benefiting from intra-jihadist violence.

Amid its fight with France and its confrontation with JNIM, Islamic State propaganda and in particular the weekly Arabic-language newsletter *Al-Naba’* (“Information” or perhaps “News”) has represented the central Islamic State’s effort to narrate and amplify the violence on the ground. Articles in *Al-Naba’* have also represented key sources for analysts. What follows below is an annotated translation of an important and representative *Al-Naba’*

united and divided by the logic of their embeddedness in the movement. While most existing research emphasizes intra-jihadist conflict or rivalry, we found that the relationship between the two groups goes through cyclical shifts, vacillating between conflict and cooperation.” Niamatullah Ibrahim and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Intra-Jihadist Conflict and Cooperation: Islamic State–Khorasan Province and the Taliban in Afghanistan,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, published online 7 January 2019, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1529367>, quotation from article abstract. Or to take another case, Elisabeth Kendall shows how the Islamic State’s branch in Yemen, which had to be essentially reconstituted after a first phase of failure, switched from mainly attacking the Houthis in 2017 to mainly attacking al-Qaida from 2018-2020. Kendall suggests that the global rivalry is an insufficient explanation for this shift, and she raises the possibility that the Yemeni manifestations of Islamic State, al-Qaida, or both may have become tools in the hands of regional powers. She writes, “It is almost inconceivable that Yemen’s splintered jihadist groups, weakened by drone strikes and riddled with spies, could have avoided getting swept up to unwittingly serve well-funded geopolitical agendas.” See Kendall, “ISIS in Yemen: Caught in a Regional Power Game,” Center for Global Policy, 21 July 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-yemen-caught-in-a-regional-power-game/>.

article, “Liptako: Graveyard of Crusaders and Apostates.”⁸ This article appeared in issue 238 (19 Shawwal 1441 or 11 June 2020).⁹

The Liptako refers to a geographical zone and an item of historical memory. The Liptako is now often described conjunctively as the Liptako-Gourma, where the Gourma can refer variously to a province in eastern Burkina Faso, a large administrative *cercle* within Mali’s Timbuktu Region (Gourma-Rharous), the Gourma or Gourmantché ethnic group, and/or other meanings. At its vaguest, the Liptako-Gourma zone is simply defined as the tri-border zone involving Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The Liptako-Gourma Authority, created in 1970 by the three governments, takes an expansive definition of the zone. This definition includes central, eastern, and northern Burkina Faso, including the national capital Ouagadougou; the two southeastern zones of Niger, Tillabéry and Dosso, including the national capital Niamey; and the four northernmost zones of Mali.¹⁰ In terms of history, meanwhile, the Liptako refers back to a nineteenth-century emirate tied to the “Sokoto Caliphate,” whose geographical center of gravity was in present-day northwestern Nigeria.¹¹ The emirate signed a treaty with France in the 1890s.¹² Up to the present there is a continuous line of Emirs of the Liptako, based in the northeastern Burkinabè city of Dori. For its part, the Islamic State also takes an expansive view of the zone’s geographical extent, as will be seen shortly. Yet the broadest geographical definitions may be too expansive for the purposes of this analysis; Ouagadougou, for example, is only rarely the site of jihadist attacks, and has not been the site of direct JNIM-ISGS clashes.

A final crucial point is that the Islamic State’s propagandists sometimes clearly misrepresent the facts – in other words, the authors lie. The clearest example in the translation that follows is the Islamic State’s audacious and almost certainly false claim that France is underreporting its casualties in the Sahel.

As with most other articles in *Al-Naba’*, the piece below is unsigned. It comprises an introduction and ten short sections. If one assumes that the Islamic State attempts to follow what is a widespread practice in Islamic or would-be Islamic writing, then the order in which these sections appear also points to the authors’ prioritization of topics.

⁸ Or “The Graveyard of the Crusaders and the Apostates.”

⁹ Issues of *Al-Naba’* are available for registered users of the website www.jihadology.net.

¹⁰ L’Autorité de Développement Intégré de la Région du Liptako-Gourma, “Zones d’intervention,” undated, <http://www.liptakogourma.org/index.php/presentation/zones-d-intervention>.

¹¹ The classic study of the Sokoto Caliphate is Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1967).

¹² See the short entry “Liptako” in Lawrence Rupley, Lamissa Bangali, and Boureima Diamitani, *Historical Dictionary of Burkina Faso*, Third Edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), p. 126.

Translation

In recent years, the Crusader Alliance¹³ has been intent on focusing its military operations and security efforts on the Liptako region, which is shared by a number of countries in the African Sahel after it came to represent (*batat tushakkil*) a source of concern for them and their allies among the apostate armies. [This was] a result of the important military developments and major attacks that occurred there, and which embarrassed them greatly, confused their military plans, and frustrated their strategies of supporting and training the armies of apostasy¹⁴ so that they [i.e., those armies] might become capable of confronting the mujahidin in the region.

The great Liptako region extends over parts of northern Burkina Faso, eastern and central Mali, and southwestern Niger. The Crusader forces, and with them the armies of apostasy, seek to consolidate control over this region, and to strengthen the borders between the countries, with the goal of removing the soldiers of the Caliphate from them. [The borders] form a field of continuous movement for their operations and their shifts in position between different zones of the region.¹⁵

America Is Participating in the Crusader Campaign¹⁶

America was forced to reveal its forces' presence in the field in Niger after the killing and wounding of six of its special forces (Green Berets) in a clash with the Caliphate's soldiers near the village of Tongo-Tongo in the Tillabéri Region on the border on 14 Muharram 1439 [4 October 2017].

¹³ This phrase, painting France and others as “Crusaders,” is in line with how the Islamic State has long described its Western adversaries. The Islamic State seeks to superimpose a medieval conflict over contemporary geopolitics, and to “telescope” time by suggesting that Western nations are, at heart, anti-Islamic.

¹⁴ The Islamic State, in keeping with wider conventions in much jihadist thought, labels as “apostates” various governments and armies that are mostly led and staffed by Muslims. This labeling is meant to help provide theological, legal, and rhetorical justification for what many Muslims might consider Muslim-Muslim conflict.

¹⁵ The pronoun “their” in this sentence refers, in my view, to ISGS fighters, although it could conceivably refer to French and Sahelian forces.

¹⁶ The author/s may be leading with a mention of American involvement in an effort to attract the attention of an international audience, perhaps calculating that many *Al-Naba'* readers feel a stronger sense of anti-Americanism than anti-French sentiment. Mentioning America early on also provides an opportunity to call attention to the Tongo-Tongo attack. The United States, according to publicly available information, is not a major participant in conflict in the tri-border zone, typically playing more of a support role for France and others.

Recently, American forces have been exposed to other attacks. Among them was the explosion of a tank of theirs near the city of Ouallam in Shawwal 1440 [June 2019].¹⁷ Likewise, they suffered losses in their ranks during their participation alongside the forces of Barkhane when two aircraft were downed east of the Infoukaretane region on the border, south of Ménaka, in the same period.¹⁸

The course of events also revealed the American forces' strategic role in the region through their establishment of surveillance and drone bases for supplying their French allies with information and offering logistical support for the forces of Barkhane – and their participation in the field in a number of military campaigns and special operations.¹⁹

France Isn't Concealing Just Its Casualties!²⁰

On the level of the war with French forces, confrontation with them began early in this region, specifically since the soldiers of the Caliphate announced their allegiance to the Commander of the Believers Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may God accept him. No more than a few weeks had passed since the announcement of the pledge of allegiance,²¹ before the first chapters of this murderous war began between the mujahidin and the Crusaders.

This war has kept increasing in ferocity and viciousness day after day, despite their misleading media campaigns and fabricated reports, which keep silent about their forces' true losses in the field. The goal is to lift the morale of their soldiers and to convince political blocs, the media, and the people inside France that the war in which they are absorbed in the African Sahel is of the first degree for the interest of France, and that it is achieving its results with the least losses! So they claim. France has only lost – according to the statements of its Minister for the Armed Forces – 44 soldiers from the time of its

¹⁷ Here the author/s refer to a roadside bomb that impacted an American vehicle near Ouallam. No fatalities were reported. See “US Military Vehicle Hits Roadside Bomb in Niger,” Associated Press, 9 June 2019, <https://apnews.com/2eec050c4b7c4f28ac7b20ee37039ff7>.

¹⁸ I believe the author/s are here referring to the 25 November 2019 crash of two French helicopters in the Ménaka Region of Mali. Thirteen French personnel died in the incident. ISGS claimed responsibility for firing on one aircraft and provoking the mid-air collision, while French authorities denied that ISGS was directly responsible. See “French Helicopters Involved in Mali Crash Were Not Under IS Fire, Military Says,” France24/AFP, 29 November 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191129-french-army-helicopters-involved-in-mali-crash-were-not-under-is-fire-military>. I have not seen any international media reporting on American casualties connected with the incident.

¹⁹ The Tongo-Tongo incident and the ensuing investigation certainly suggested that the United States military's role in patrols and operations went beyond what had been publicly assumed. U.S. drone bases, surveillance, and logistical support to Barkhane were all matters of public knowledge well before the Tongo-Tongo ambush, however.

²⁰ Note that this is the longest section of the article – considerably longer than the section on JNIM. If length and order indicate the authors' prioritization, then the author/s are indicating that France is a bigger concern, militarily and rhetorically, than JNIM.

²¹ As a reminder, this occurred in May 2015.

intervention in northern Mali and the Sahel region up to the present moment!!²² Nearly half of them were killed in operations by the Caliphate's soldiers in the Liptako region between Niger and Mali.

Yet the reality is that French forces have faced attacks that took the lives of numerous soldiers of theirs, many more than the figure their Ministry of the Armed Forces has published.²³

Part of that is [due to] the explosions that strike their motorized units and their columns. After every explosion to which these motorized units are subjected, their Ministry of Defense rushes to announce “the death of one French soldier” during the explosion; in a spectacle that has become familiar and recurring, the media have grown accustomed to hearing this from the statements of the French army and the declarations of their leaders.

Not to mention the fact of their other losses in martyrdom attacks and certain-death attacks (*al-hajamat al-istishhadiyya wa-l-inghimasiyya*),²⁴ and direct clashes with the soldiers of the Caliphate. Part of that is the suicide operation which targeted – in broad daylight – an assembly of their Crusader forces in the region of Akabar on the border with Niger in the month of Rajab 1441 hijri [March 2019].²⁵ It caused them grave losses of life.²⁶ The situation necessitated the intervention of a number of Chinook helicopters belonging to some of the European countries working in the forces of MINUSMA, to transport the wounded and the dead. After the attack, the French Chief of Army Staff confronted us with a statement in which he spoke about “French soldiers suffering injuries during the explosion of a booby-trapped vehicle²⁷ that targeted a military unit” in the region!²⁸

²² This is also the total given in much reporting following the above-mentioned helicopter crash in November 2019.

²³ It is inconceivable to me that the French government could deceive the French public about fatalities in Mali – casualty counts are tracked carefully by a host of media outlets and other reporters, and in the event of cover-ups it seems certain that fallen soldiers' families would raise an outcry. The simplest conclusion here, then, is that the Islamic State is lying.

²⁴ These two terms are often each translated as “suicide attacks.” The Islamic State, like other jihadists, draws an implicit distinction between attacks where death (in their view, “martyrdom”) is itself weaponized; and attacks where a fighter “abandons himself” or “plunges into” (*yanghamis*) enemy ranks.

²⁵ For a discussion of the attack, see “Mali: Complex Attack Against French Forces in Menaka,” MENASTREAM, 11 March 2019, <http://menastream.com/mali-complex-attack-against-french-forces-in-menaka/>.

²⁶ This specific claim, like the general claim that ISGS has inflicted mass casualties on French forces, appears not to be true.

²⁷ Or what Western military officials and analysts sometimes called a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device.

²⁸ For more, see Laurent Lagneau, “Mali : Deux militaires français sérieusement blessés lors d’une attaque jihadiste « complexe »,” Opex 360, 11 March 2019, <http://www.opex360.com/2019/03/11/mali-deux-militaires-francais-serieusement-blesses-lors-dune-attaque-jihadiste-complexe/>.

France is not content just with issuing statements minimizing the size of the losses in its ranks after each attack to which its forces are subjected. In addition to that, it fails to mention the number of attacks that target its forces, especially those occurring in remote and unpopulated regions.²⁹

Losses for the Forces of Mali and Niger³⁰

Alongside the losses in the ranks of the Crusaders' forces, the Liptako region has been a graveyard for the armies of apostasy and their militias in the regions, where the soldiers of the Caliphate have brought down hundreds, killed and wounded, from the Nigerien army. They have chased off its special, American-trained forces near Tilwa and Tongo-Tongo, just as they attacked and took over a number of military posts in the cities of Abala, Bani-Bangou, Chinagodrar, Tilwa, Inates, and Ayorou.³¹ They made those forces retreat to the limits of the capital Niamey, leaving behind them vast expanses of land, together with the major military equipment they lost.³²

As for the Malian army and its militias that are supported by France and the governments of the region, the losses in their ranks were great as well, due to the fact that the mujahidin have launched a number of attacks against the Malian army in the regions of In-Kiringya

²⁹ This claim is somewhat more plausible than the claim about France concealing casualties, but it still would appear quite difficult for France to conceal the fact that large numbers of attacks were going unreported.

³⁰ The most meticulous cataloguer of ISGS attacks and activities is Hèni Nsaibia of the MENASTREAM consultancy and ACLED. See his "Attacks Claimed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)," MENASTREAM, originally posted 23 June 2018, and current through 14 May 2019 as of the time I accessed the post on 6 September 2020. Available at <https://menastream.com/attacks-islamic-state-greater-sahara/>.

³¹ In terms of importance, after the Tongo-Tongo ambush the most significant attacks of those listed here were the ISGS attacks on a Nigerien military outpost at Chinagodrar on 9 January 2020, which killed at least 89 soldiers, and the ISGS attack on a Nigerien base at Inates on 10 December 2019, which killed at least 71 soldiers. See "Death Toll in Niger Army Base Attack 'Rises to 89'," Al Jazeera, 12 January 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/death-toll-niger-army-base-attack-rises-89-200112050947816.html>; and Hannah Armstrong, "Behind the Jihadist Attack in Niger's Inates," International Crisis Group, 13 December 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/behind-jihadist-attack-inates>.

³² This claim is quite credible and has become truer even since the publication of this article in *Al-Naba'*. Following the attack at Kouré, southeast of Niamey, on 9 August 2020, a state of emergency previously covering most of the Tillabéri Region was extended to the entire region, meaning that Niamey is now completely surrounded by areas under a state of emergency. See my "Niger: Details on the Enlarged State of Emergency in Tillabéry," Sahel Blog, 18 August 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/08/18/niger-details-on-the-enlarged-state-of-emergency-in-tillabery/>. Nigerien government bodies have themselves admitted massive losses of equipment, particularly following the Inates and Chinagodrar attacks. See Commission nationale de droits humains, "Mission d'Enquête, d'Investigation, de Vérification et d'Établissement des Faits en cas de Violation des Droits Humains dans la Commune Rurale d'Inatès, Département d'Ayorou, Région de Tillabéri," 4 September 2020, 15, https://www.cndh-niger.org/images/pdf/Prsentations_Crmonie_de_Publication_Rsultats_Missions_dEnquete_CNDH-REPPAD_AYOROU.pdf.

south of Ménaka, Indelimane, and Tabankort.³³ These attacks resulted in the fall of approximately 200 soldiers from the Malian army.

The Losses of the Apostate Movements and Militias³⁴

Likewise, several times that number [of fighters] fell among the ranks of armed movements and militias loyal to the Malian government, and which have been partnering with French forces in their military campaigns during the past three years. As a result, these militias suffered major losses in their confrontations with the soldiers of the Caliphate in the regions of Liptako, beginning with the battles of Intameda,³⁵ Akabar,³⁶ Tidimbawen,³⁷ Taranguit,³⁸ and Inékar,³⁹ among other battles.

The soldiers of the Caliphate were able to assassinate the field leaders for the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad,⁴⁰ and the security official in the city of Ménaka in the year 1439

³³ The attacks at Tabankort and Indelimane, both in November 2019, killed a combined total of 92 Malian soldiers. See “Islamic State Replaces al-Qaeda as Enemy No. 1 in Sahel,” France24, 15 January 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200115-islamic-state-replaces-al-qaeda-as-enemy-no-1-in-sahel>.

³⁴ “Apostate” is used here because the combatants in these militias are often if not overwhelmingly Muslims, and the Islamic State considers them to have left the faith by virtue of their political choices.

³⁵ As above, Nsaibia’s “Attacks Claimed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara” is a useful resource for contextualizing some of these attacks. I am also grateful to Nsaibia for his help, through direct communications, in helping me identify how several place names are rendered in Roman characters. Note that the Islamic State’s Arabic-language transliterations of Sahelian place names are often quite loose – Intameda, for example, is rendered *تيمدهي* in Al-Naba’, effectively lacking the first syllable of Intameda. What this suggests about the process of composition is unclear – are articles dictated over the phone to writers unfamiliar with local geographies?

³⁶ Via Nsaibia, here is an interview with the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad’s Moussa ag Acharatoumane (see below) following the clash at Akabar. “Moussa Ag Acharatoumane: au Mali, «nous combattons une organisation criminelle»,” RFI, 23 April 2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20180423-moussa-ag-acharatoumane-porte-parole-msa-mouvement-le-salut-azawad>.

³⁷ For images from this battle see <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1098225616132939778>.

³⁸ For images from this battle see <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1112191966836604928>.

³⁹ I believe the authors are referring to an incident from January 2019. See, Mohamed ag Albachar, “Communiqué suite à l’attaque des villages de Taghatert et Inekar-ouest le 15 janvier 2019,” Movement for the Salvation of Azawad, 16 January 2019, <https://www.msa-azawad.com/actualites/88-communiqu%C3%A9-suite-%C3%A0-l-attaque-des-villages-de-taghatert-et-inekar-ouest-le-15-janvier-2019.html>.

⁴⁰ The history of the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement pour le salut de l’Azawad, MSA) constitutes, itself, a micro-history of the northern Malian conflict as a whole. It was founded in September 2016 by Moussa ag Acharatoumane, a former influential member of the separatist National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (French acronym MNLA). The MSA aligned with an anti-rebel coalition, the Platform, against the ex-rebel coalition the Coordination of Azawad Movements or CMA, which includes the MNLA. Ag Acharatoumane hails from the Daoussahak, who are either a branch of the Tuareg or a distinct but linguistically and culturally adjacent people, depending on the definition used. The MSA soon split, partly along ethnic lines, into MSA-Daoussahak (MSA-D) and MSA-Chamanamas (MSA-C). The MSA-D worked closely with France’s Operation Barkhane, and with another northern militia, the Groupe autodéfense touareg Imghad et alliés (Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies, GATIA) to fight ISGS starting in 2018. The best sources for understanding the evolving internal and external politics of the MSA are the successive reports by the United Nations’ Panel of Experts on Mali. For wider context on how the

hijri [April 2019],⁴¹ and after that to assassinate his deputy in the year 1440 hijri in special operations in which they used weapons with silencers and night vision goggles that were looted from the American special forces.⁴²

The Crusader Campaign Enters Its Sixth Month⁴³

As the Crusader campaign continues and enters its sixth month, so continues the Crusader forces' bleeding in the Liptako region where they have been exposed to a number of attacks and clashes during the past month.

On 14 Ramadan [7 May], two soldiers of the Caliphate clashed with a French force near the region of Tassalatine southeast of Ménaka. This clash resulted in the death of 4 French soldiers, while France acknowledged the death of just one soldier!⁴⁴

Likewise, on 24 Ramadan [17 May] a number of the Caliphate's soldiers clashed with a column belonging to the French forces near the region of Tinahama northeast of the city of Ansongo. An intense exchange of gunfire occurred that lasted for a period of time. They called for the intervention of helicopters to save the day,⁴⁵ and the mujahidin were able to return safely to their bases.

Wounded [Soldiers], and the Destruction of a Tank Belonging to the Crusader Forces

On 28 Ramadan [21 May], columns of the Crusader forces headed toward a number of areas located on both sides of the main road linking Ménaka and Ansongo, where a group of

MSA fits into northern Malian politics, see Fransje Molenaar, Jonathan Tossell, Anna Schmauder, Rahmane Idrissa, and Rida Lyammouri, "The Status Quo Defied: The Legitimacy of Traditional Authorities in Areas of Limited Statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya," Clingendael Institute, September 2019, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya.pdf. For discussion of MSA's role in counterterrorism, see Héni Nsaibia, "Targeting of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)," ACLED, 21 March 2018, <https://acleddata.com/2018/03/21/targeting-of-the-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-isgs/>.

⁴¹ See "Attacks Claimed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara" for details on this incident.

⁴² Again, ISGS appears keen to emphasize that they are fighting not just France, JNIM, and Sahelian states, but also the United States.

⁴³ This is section title confused me, given that Barkhane's campaign against ISGS ramped up in 2018. Perhaps the reference is to developments starting with the summit in Pau, France in January 2020.

⁴⁴ ISGS may have gotten the date wrong; they are likely referring to an incident on 4 May. See "Un légionnaire français tué dans des combats au Mali," *Le Monde*/Reuters, 4 May 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/05/04/un-legionnaire-francais-tue-dans-des-combats-au-mali_6038644_3210.html.

⁴⁵ The Arabic reads "li-nqadh al-mawqif" but I believe this is a typographical error for "li-nqadh al-mawqif."

special forces had made camp near the region of Inazole, 30 kilometers west of Ménaka,⁴⁶ while tank columns had advanced in a straight line with the aim of carrying out a precise combing of the wadis of the area and their rocky branches, and of encircling the region and controlling the entrances leading to them.

But at one of the narrow bends, the soldiers of the Caliphate surprised them by opening fire unexpectedly on the front of one of the columns. This caused a convulsion in the ranks of a number of the vehicles, which scattered in an effort to reorganize their formation. Yet the intensity of the gunfire aimed by the soldiers of the Caliphate hit one of the tanks. Fire broke out in it, forcing the soldiers inside it to dismount outside it. One of the soldiers of the Caliphate, who was near to the vehicle, aimed the fire of his automatic weapon at them, striking some of them, while a helicopter rushed to evacuate the wounded.

Following that, these columns retraced their steps, without completing the task of combing which they had come out to do with this great number of forces, leaving behind them parts of the broken tank and medical bandages with the blood of their wounded on them.

A War on the Apostate al-Qaida Front

At the same time that the Crusader attack is intensifying, the Qaida of Apostasy has not stopped shoving hundreds of its fighters⁴⁷ into the losing war against the mujahidin. Nor has help ceased from their allies among the other factions of apostasy, in their different orientations, and their support through ammunition and provisions, and assuring secure and continuous supply lines for them.

Likewise, other reinforcements from the al-Qaida militia have not ceased arriving from the Ifoghas mountains on the border with Algeria and the regions of Tabankort and Timbuktu, to join in fighting against the mujahidin, and to lift the morale of their soldiers which is sinking as a result of the shocks of the recent battles that have befallen them in their war against the soldiers of Islam on the borders between Mali and Burkina Faso.

Amid the hasty manner of attacks that the Qaida of Apostasy is launching, aiming at finishing the battle quickly and ending the confrontation with the soldiers of the Caliphate in the least time possible, the losses in the militias' ranks were huge, and surprising to them. These militias are not accustomed to the occurrence of such losses in their ranks in this form and in this manner.

⁴⁶ See the map available here: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/acted-participative_mapping-1-menaka.pdf.

⁴⁷ Literally, "its elements," anasiriha.

170 Killed, By the Admission of One of Their Leaders

One of their leaders, the apostate Ja'far Dicko,⁴⁸ has acknowledged that they have lost nearly 170 dead in some of their battles against the Caliphate's soldiers. Among them was the ferocious confrontation that broke out in the region of Boula⁴⁹ on the borders between Mali and Burkina Faso. It resulted in the death of around 50 of their fighters, after they had tried to attack the Caliphate's soldiers in large numbers. The mujahidin repelled their offense and scattered their troop with a suicide operation in a booby-trapped car [or suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device]. Then they chased their lost flocks, frightened them off, and looted their materiel. Likewise, on 24 Ramadan the Caliphate's soldiers killed 7 of al-Qaida's fighters and wounded others in the area of Fada [N'Gourma, capital of the Est/Region and of the Gourma Province]⁵⁰ on the borders between Burkina Faso and Ghana after they attempted to attack a group of the mujahidin who were present in the area.

The amount of their dead in the recent clashes has reached nearly 200 dead, apart from the wounded. The soldiers of the Caliphate continue to resist the attacks of al-Qaida's apostates in a number of regions of Burkina Faso. More than two thousand fighters from their militias held to these areas to offer support and assistance to their fighters there.

Dubious Alliances for al-Qaida⁵¹

This mobilization and major support for al-Qaida against the Caliphate's soldiers in the Sahel raised a number of question marks around the organization!

⁴⁸ Ja'far Dicko, whose real name is reportedly Amadou Boucary, is a Burkinabè jihadist leader. He is the younger brother of Ibrahim Dicko, the founder of the Burkinabè jihadist group Ansar al-Islam or Ansaroul Islam (Defenders of Islam). Ibrahim Dicko reportedly died of an illness in 2017, whereupon Ja'far succeeded him. See Seidik Abba, "Ja'far Dicko, le nouveau visage du djihadisme au Burkina Faso," *Le Monde*, 21 December 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/21/jafar-dicko-le-nouveau-visage-du-djihadisme-au-burkina-faso_5232877_3212.html. For broader background on Ansar al-Islam, see International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North," 12 October 2017, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/254-the-social-roots-of-jihadist-violence-in-burkina-faso-s-north.pdf>; and Pauline Le Roux, "Ansaroul Islam: The Rise and Decline of a Militant Islamist Group in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 29 July 2019, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/ansaroul-islam-the-rise-and-decline-of-a-militant-islamist-group-in-the-sahel/>.

⁴⁹ The Arabic original might be transliterated into English as "Bila" or "Bellah." I am indebted to Hèni Nsaibia for helping me understand the Islamic State's own errors in transliteration into Arabic, which then introduce difficulties in attempting to transliterate from Arabic to other languages. Boula is in northern Burkina Faso in the vicinity of the "Forage Christine," a zone (and hydraulic project) near the town of Oursi in the Ouadalan Province.

⁵⁰ Here, too, the Islamic State's Arabic transliteration is problematic – it could be rendered in English as "Fidi." And once again I am in Nsaibia's debt for his help in identifying what the Islamic State's authors intended to say.

⁵¹ Here the Islamic State attempts to undermine JNIM's credibility as jihadists by raising questions about JNIM's extra-jihadist alliances. Unlike in the case of the Islamic State's charges that France downplays its real casualty figures, the Islamic State's claims about JNIM's alliances may have some merit.

How could an organization like al-Qaida – whose soldiers normally hide their weapons and their wireless communications devices from the fronts of apostasy that are loyal to the Malian government, and who take refuge in the bases controlled by the Coordination of Azawad Movements⁵² in order to hide and camouflage themselves when the Crusaders undertake patrols to comb through their areas, and who carry a number of flags of the apostate fronts on their vehicles for use as it suits them during their movements and transfers,⁵³ and some of whose leaders live in the cities of Timiaouine and Tin Zaouatine inside the borders of Algeria!⁵⁴

How is it possible for an organization in that situation to announce, suddenly, this comprehensive war and to plunge into its ups and downs without finding assurances and facilitations for moving these marches of thousands of apostate fighters and their vehicles, the likes of which have never been mobilized before against any of its enemies in the region! These armed marches traverse vast distances, moving in the open without facing the least

⁵² The Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA) was formed in 2014 as a political-military bloc uniting and representing three key northern Malian movements that might be termed "ex-rebels." These are the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad), part of the Arab Movement of Azawad (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, MAA), and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (Haut conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad, HCUA). The last of these groups, the HCUA, includes prominent former members of Ansar al-Din – figures who are also extremely prominent politicians and hereditary authorities within the Kel Adagh Tuareg confederation of the Kidal Region. The past overlap between the HCUA and Ansar al-Din has added to continued speculation, and not just from the Islamic State, that the HCUA (and hence the CMA) communicates and coordinates with JNIM and especially with JNIM leader Iyad ag Ghali. See, for example, Baba Ahmed, Benjamin Roger, Christophe Boisbouvier, and Farid Alilat, "Sahel : Iyad Ag Ghaly, l'insaisissable ennemi public n°1," *Jeune Afrique*, 19 March 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/540964/politique/sahel-iyad-ag-ghaly-linsaisissable-ennemi-public-n1/>. Worth noting as well is that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has sanctioned multiple CMA officials for allegedly working with JNIM; one example is the HCUA's Ahmed Ag Albachar. See UNSC, "2374 Sanctions Committee Amends List Entries of Seven Individuals," 14 January 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14079.doc.htm>. A top CMA leader, Ahmada ag Bibi, was identified in credible press reports as a lead negotiator in JNIM's exchange of hostages with the Malian government in 2020, and allowed himself to be photographed with the released hostages. See my "What Do We Learn About the CMA and JNIM from the Negotiations over Soumaïla Cissé? Part One – the CMA," Sahel Blog, 13 October, 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/10/13/what-do-we-learn-about-the-cma-and-jnim-from-the-negotiations-over-soumaila-cisse-part-one-the-cma/>.

⁵³ I find these particular accusations plausible.

⁵⁴ Here, too, the Islamic State is far from the first to charge that JNIM leaders – and, according to other sources, ag Ghali specifically – take shelter in southern Algeria. See Charlotte Bozonnet, Cyril Bensimon, Nathalie Guibert, Joan Tilouine, and Madjid Zerrouky, "Iyad Ag-Ghali, l'ennemi numéro un de la France au Mali," *Le Monde*, 27 July 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/07/27/mali-iyad-ag-ghali-l-ennemi-numero-un-de-la-france_5336668_3212.html?xtmc=iyad_ag_ghali&xtcr=3. There have also been instances of Malian jihadists – including one former ISGS associate – turning themselves in to Algerian, rather than Malian, authorities. See "Algérie: reddition du chef terroriste malien Sultan Ould Badi à Tamanrasset," RFI, 13 August 2018, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20180813-algerie-reddition-chef-terroriste-malien-sultan-ould-badi-tamanrasset>. I personally have not seen solid evidence that ag Ghali benefits from Algerian government protection or sponsorship, although the rumors are very persistent on that score.

impediment from any of the different armies that are found in the region?! And without facing any aerial bombardment on their way to fight the Islamic State?!⁵⁵

And what is the relationship between all of that, and what has been officially announced in terms of the preparation that is occurring for negotiations between al-Qaida and the Malian government⁵⁶ in the same manner as what has occurred with their exemplar, “Taliban”?!⁵⁷ And upon what will they agree?! Many questions, and the time will not be long before their answers appear to all.⁵⁸ Let the one who is destroyed be destroyed by proof and let the one who lives live by proof.

3 Killed from the Burkinabè Army⁵⁹

Despite the Soldiers of the Caliphate being occupied by repelling the offense of al-Qaida’s apostates in Burkina Faso, that has not prevented them from continuing their jihad against the Burkinabè army there. The Caliphate’s Soldiers clashed with a group from the Burkinabè army on the route linking the two capitals, Ouagadougou and Niamey, near the border with Niger. This led to the killing of 3 of their fighters, and to God is the praise.

⁵⁵ I find it implausible that JNIM fighters’ movements would be abetted by France or by the armed forces of Sahelian states. But if the Islamic State is here alleging that various militias may help JNIM with logistics, passage, and secrecy, that charge would be much more plausible.

⁵⁶ Here the Islamic State refers to the negotiations that may have been proceeding between the government of Mali’s President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (elected 2013, re-elected 2018, overthrown in a military coup on 18 August 2020) and JNIM. In early 2020, both Keïta and JNIM publicly stated that they were willing to negotiate, and Keïta confirmed that there had been contact. See “Mali: ‘Line in the Sand’ Over Talks with Jihadists,” RFI, 26 February 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200226-mali-line-sand-over-talks-jihadists>. For the Islamic State, the negotiations are further evidence of JNIM’s (and al-Qa’ida’s) “apostasy.” Recall that the October 2020 hostage exchanged occurred well after this *Al-Naba’* article was published.

⁵⁷ Here the Islamic State refers to the negotiations between the United States government and the Taliban, and also refers to the idea that the Taliban’s leadership technically sits at the top of al-Qa’ida’s hierarchy. The Islamic State’s argument is, essentially, that an (in the eyes of the Islamic State) un-Islamic penchant for negotiation with unbelievers suffuses the global al-Qa’ida organization and allied groups.

⁵⁸ Interestingly, the Islamic State’s propagandists do not fully unpack the implications of these allegations.

⁵⁹ The article ends on an oddly anticlimactic note, reinforcing the sense of *Al-Naba’* as primarily a news digest rather than a forum for sustained political discussion. However, the anti-JNIM propaganda continues on the next page of *Al-Naba’*, which features a transcribed excerpt from a speech by Islamic State spokesman Abu Hamza “al-Qurashi” (I add quotation marks because I am skeptical of the implicit claim to descent from the Quraysh tribe, to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged). I opted not to translate that relatively generic passage as well, but the first paragraph is worth including here, because it even more frankly states the Islamic State’s charge against JNIM: “In West Africa Province, in whose various regions the Crusaders and Apostates have been incapable of defeating the Islamic State, the apostates of the al-Qaida organization are putting themselves forward as their proxy in fighting the Caliphate’s Soldiers. They are finding the tyrants there have accepted to negotiate with them, and the Crusaders are leaving off fighting them.”