DESERT DRIFT, DECLINING DEADLINESS

UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLUTION OF AQIM'S SUICIDE BOMBINGS

Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Caleb Weiss | October 2020

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Understanding the Evolution
of AQIM's Suicide Bombings

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Cover Photo: Algerian soldiers stand next to the rubble of a coast guard barracks in Dellys, Algeria, which a suicide truck bomber attacked on September 8, 2007. (Louafi Larbi/Reuters)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Executive Summary

Contemporarily, al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its affiliate group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) are among the greatest threats to peace and stability on the African continent. Despite the fact that AQIM, JNIM, and the multiple other AQIM-affiliated or allied groups that have risen and fallen over the past 13 years have come to serve as major sources of concern for the states and populations in which they operate (and thus the international community writ large), little systematic analysis has been undertaken to understand the nature of AQIM and its current and historical affiliates' employment of one particular tactic of violence that the group has used across multiple countries, toward various targets, and in every year since its inception: suicide bombings.

In an effort to offer the most comprehensive overview to date of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts and strategies, this report leverages a unique database created by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which details the entirety of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts from March 2007, when its first suicide bombing occurred, to September 2020, when data collection ended. In offering the most in-depth overview of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts, this report adds to observers' understanding of AQIM and its lineage of affiliated or allied terror groups that are collectively being regarded as some of the most pernicious and destabilizing threats on the African continent. In the course of examining the duration of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts, the following takeaways come to the fore:

- **General Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Efforts**

    » Between March 2007 and September 2020, AQIM and its network has claimed 101 suicide attacks using 154 attackers.

    » In total, an estimated 730 individuals have been killed and 1,575 have been injured by suicide attacks during this time period.

- **An All-Male, Nearly Exclusively Adult Corps**

    » Unlike other African jihadi groups, there are no known instances of AQIM deploying a female suicide bomber.

    » Unlike other African jihadi groups, AQIM is confirmed to have used only one 'underage' suicide bomber—defined as a teenager or child—in the course of its operations.

- **The Wide Geographic Reach in Africa**

    » AQIM and its network have claimed suicide attacks in eight countries, making their geographic reach the widest of all suicide bombing efforts from a single terror group on the African continent.

- **A Shift from North Africa to the Sahel**

    » Analysis shows that AQIM's suicide bombing efforts have occurred in two general periods, or campaigns, which this report refers to as the "North African campaign" and the "Sahelian campaign." These campaigns are defined by AQIM's shifts in both geography and timing of attacks.

        › *During the first campaign, from March 2007 to December 2012, AQIM's suicide bombing operations were centered predominantly in the Maghreb and constituted its "North African campaign," with suicide attacks occurring in Algeria (34) with a more limited focus in Morocco (4) and Mauritania (3).*

        › *During the second campaign, running from February 2013 to September 2020, AQIM's suicide bombing operations shifted southwards during its "Sahelian campaign," with a focus on Mali (41), Niger (2), and Burkina Faso (1), while still retaining some limited activities in North Africa including in Libya (11), Tunisia (3), and Algeria (1).*

- **A Slowing Deployment with Decreasing Deadliness**
  - » Year over year, AQIM has, in the aggregate, slowed its use of suicide bombers.
    - › *Each phase started with a relative high; the North African campaign saw its highest deployment in 2007, with 19 bombers.*
    - › *In 2013, the start of the Sahelian campaign, AQIM and its network deployed 34 suicide bombers.*
    - › *Since those peaks, AQIM has deployed fewer suicide bombings as the group has developed more sophisticated tactics and multi-method assaults.*
  - » AQIM's earlier North African campaign was decidedly more lethal than its later Sahelian campaign.
    - › *During the North African campaign, AQIM's suicide bombers killed 393 people, for an average of 9.6 deaths per attack and 6.6 deaths per attacker.*
    - › *Conversely, during the Sahelian campaign, AQIM's suicide attackers have killed 337 people, for an average of 5.6 deaths per attack and 3.6 deaths per attacker.*

- **North African Campaign Dominated by AQIM Proper, Sahelian by Multiple Groups**
  - » During the North African campaign (2007-2012), AQIM proper was the primary group responsible for suicide attacks, though the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) claimed some toward the end of this period.
  - » During the Sahelian campaign, many AQIM-affiliated or allied groups claimed suicide attacks in 2013, but since March 2017, no group other than JNIM has conducted suicide attacks.

- **Notable Shifts in Targeting: From Police and Government to Military and United Nations**
  - » The shift from the North African campaign (2007 to 2012) to the Sahelian campaign (2013 to 2020) was accompanied by shifts in AQIM's targeting tendencies.
    - › *Suicide attacks in the North African campaign had a greater focus on non-military government institutions and police.*
    - › *In contrast, suicide attacks during the Sahelian campaign had a greater focus on domestic military installations (especially in Mali), as well as U.N. and other non-domestic international installations.*

- **Consistencies in Targeting: A General Avoidance of Soft Targets**
  - » Across the two time periods, AQIM generally avoided hitting soft targets like civilian spaces or religious institutions. Instead, as articulated above, AQIM has tended to focus on police and government installations (North African campaign) and military installations of domestic and international forces (Sahelian campaign).
  - » To underscore this point, there have been no AQIM suicide attacks on civilian targets via suicide bombing since 2013.
  - » This trend of avoiding hitting soft targets is likely due to AQIM's adherence to the September 2013 directive issued by al-Qa`ida, which has historically cautioned its global affiliates like AQIM against targeting civilians and civilian spaces.

- **Suicide Attack Failures Common, But in Different Ways Across Campaigns**
  - » Failures in AQIM's suicide bombings—which the authors define as occurring when a bomber fails to detonate at all, or detonates with no kills other than himself—are common.

> › *AQIM's suicide attackers failed to detonate more frequently during the North African campaign (25% of would-be AQIM suicide attackers) than in the Sahelian campaign (9.5%).*

> › *Both campaigns had similar issues with the second type of failure: failure to kill upon detonation. The North African campaign saw AQIM attackers fail to kill anyone other than the bomber himself in 22.9% of attacks with detonations, the Sahelian campaign equaled the prior period in acquiring this type of failure at 22.3% of all attacks.*

- **AQIM's Teams of Suicide Attackers: Increasingly Common, Large, and Ineffective**

  » AQIM has used "teams" of suicide attackers widely over its life: 37.6% of all of its attempted suicide attacks have had a "team element," meaning that at least one attacker undertook a suicide bombing coupled with another attacker of some sort. This second attacker in the "team" may be a suicide attacker, or another type of combatant.

  » Across its two campaigns, AQIM has increasingly used suicide attack teams over time, in addition to incorporating increasingly larger teams, as it shifted from the North African campaign to the Sahelian campaign.

  » AQIM's preferences for teamed attacks are "simultaneous" attacks (when two bombers detonate simultaneously) (11) and "sequential wave" attacks (when one bomber detonates shortly after a prior bomber) (9), with a lesser focus on "non-proximate" attacks (when bombers attack different locations in the same polity on the same day, but not in proximity to one another) (4). Mixed-method attacks (9), in which a suicide attacker pairs with a non-suicide attacker, have also occurred, especially in recent years.

  » In 2018, 2019, and 2020, a majority of bombers (66.7%, 66.7%, and 100%, respectively) deployed in teams. This trend indicates that teams of attackers seem to be a feature of AQIM's current strategy, even though its lethality rate when using them has been very poor.

Part One: Introduction

"Three terrorism suspects implicated in the bombing of an Internet cafe in Casablanca blew them- selves up on Tuesday as the police closed in, and a fourth suspect was shot as he tried to detonate a bomb. The police said investigation into the [prior] March 11 cafe bombing, which killed the bomber and four others, led them to the four men and to a wider plot to attack the port in Casa- blanca, as well as the police and tourist sites."[1]

"'Terrorists wearing blue helmets aboard two cars laden with explosives, including one in the colours of the Malian army and another with a 'U.N.' written in it, attempted to infiltrate these camps,' the Malian government statement said … The attack, which aimed to take control of the camp, 'included indirect fire, presumably mortars, and the explosion of three vehicle bombs in order to create a breach in the enclosure,' the post said, adding that some of the assailants wore explosive belts."[2]

"The two suicide bombers had been getting ready to blow up their Atos-brand vehicle in Algiers when they were intercepted at about 1730 hours by the security agencies at the northern edge of Thenia at the Ouled Ali intersection. It was thanks to a relative of one of the suicide bombers, who several hours previously had alerted the security agencies, that the latter were successful in intercepting the booby-trapped vehicle on time."[3]

Despite their occurrences in Morocco, Mali, and Algeria, the three preceding vignettes have one com- mon thread: the suicide bombings described above were all undertaken in the name of or in support of the salafi-jihadi insurgent group known as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM. Since its 2007 inception in Algeria, AQIM has expanded its insurgency beyond Algeria's borders, waging a multi-front offensive that has stretched more broadly across North Africa, West Africa, and, in rare instances, outside of the African continent.

While AQIM and its affiliates have been undertaking often devastating violence against civilians and non-civilians alike for more than a decade, as of September 2020, this violence has been eliciting acute concern. When asked about his perception of the greatest threats defining the African security landscape in early 2020, the Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command in Africa, U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Dagvin Anderson, was unequivocal: al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, and its affiliate, JNIM. Even in the context of discussions of the impact of the Islamic State in Africa, as he told *CTC Sentinel* in an interview published in February 2020:

[A]l-Qa`ida is [the United States'] deeper concern on the [African] continent, and I think long- term, al-Qa`ida poses a greater threat to the West and to U.S. interests. … The deeper concern, though, for me is looking at how al-Qa`ida is engaging in [West Africa] particularly through JNIM [Jama'at Nasr [sic] al-Islam wal Muslimin] and through AQIM [al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb].[4]

In speaking of the al-Qa`ida-dominated West African landscape in a separate February 2020 inter- view with the Associated Press, he likewise reiterated: "I believe that if it's left unchecked, it could very easily develop into a great threat to the West and the United States."[5]

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1   "The Terrorism Fronts April 8-14," *New York Times*, April 15, 2007.

2   Fergus Kelly, "Mali militants disguised as peacekeepers attack French and UN bases killing one, injuring dozens," Defense Post, April 15, 2018.

3   "Would-be bombers planning 'carnage' in Algiers identified," BBC, July 27, 2011.

4   Jason Warner, "A View from the CT Foxhole: Brigadier General Dagvin R.M. Anderson, Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).

5   Carley Petesch, "AP Interview: Al-Qaida, IS Affiliates Team up in West Africa," AP News, February 27, 2020.

Such concerns about the increasingly tenuous security landscape in the Sahel—dominated by AQIM—as of early 2020, had become widespread. In April 2020, American Enterprise Institute (AEI) researcher Katherine Zimmerman noted that, characterized by AQIM and its affiliates, the "Salafi-jihadi landscape in the Sahel is growing rapidly," creating a "unique ecosystem of ideology and terror."[6] Meanwhile, the month prior, in March 2020, the International Center for the Study of Terrorism referred to the rise of terrorist violence in the Sahel as "unprecedented,"[7] while earlier, in 2019, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), referred to the AQIM-dominated Sahel as a new "hotspot" for terrorism in 2019.[8]

To be sure, these concerns about the tenuousness of the Sahel are not unfounded. Since 2015, the Sahel has seen an approximate yearly doubling of violence conducted by Islamist groups.[9] In 2019 alone, the Sahel saw an estimated 800 violent events linked to Islamist militant groups (mostly attributable to AQIM and offshoots), leading to more than 4,000 deaths in the same year.[10] The African Center for Strategic Studies noted in early 2020 that the AQIM-dominated Sahel saw the most dramatic increase in violent extremist activity of any region in the African continent in 2019.[11]

To the extent that the global community has increasingly become concerned about the renewed threat posed by AQIM and its affiliates in the Sahel, no shortage of contemporary scholarship and reporting has focused on them. To that end, scholars have written excellent overviews of the Sahelian salafi-jihadi landscape broadly,[12] detailed histories of AQIM more specifically,[13] and the 2017 emergence of JNIM even more acutely still.[14] Still others have addressed more niche topics, including al-Qa`ida's entrance into Burkina Faso[15] and subsequent moves southward in that country;[16] descriptions of JNIM's collaborations with Islamic State elements in the Sahel;[17] and the possibilities and limits of negotiation as a way to end JNIM's reign of terror.[18] Concerning AQIM's tactics more narrowly, studies have been conducted on AQIM affiliates' strategies of prison breaks and prison assaults[19] and AQIM's use and knowledge transfer of IEDs to other militant groups in the Sahel,[20] while other academic studies have

6   Katherine Zimmerman, *Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2020).

7   Méryl Demuynck and Julie Coleman, *The Shifting Sands of the Sahel's Terrorism Landscape* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2020).

8   *Global Terrorism Index 2018: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2018).

9   "Threat from African Militant Islamist Groups Expanding, Diversifying," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 9, 2020.

10   "In the News: Sahelian Security Forces Accused of Hundreds of Extrajudicial Killings," New Humanitarian, May 5, 2020.

11   "Threat from African Militant Islamist Groups Expanding, Diversifying."

12   Zimmerman, Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel; Pauline Le Roux, *Responding to the Rise in Violent Extremism in the Sahel* (Washington, D.C.: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019); Vidar B. Skretting, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, September 24, 2020.

13   Sergei Boeke, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Terrorism, insurgency, or organized crime?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27:5 (2016): pp. 914-936; Skretting.

14   Héni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups In The Sahel Region Formalize Merger," Jihadology, March 27, 2017.

15   Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, "Ansaroul Islam and the Growing Terrorist Insurgency in Burkina Faso," *CTC Sentinel* 11:3 (2018); Le Roux.

16   Héni Nsaibia, "Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency," ACLED, January 17, 2019.

17   Atta Barkindo, "The Sahel: A New Theatre for Global Jihadist Groups?" *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12:2 (2020): pp. 21-26; Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Fluctuating Affiliations: Future Prospects for Realignment with al-Qa`ida," *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018); Heni 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," *CTC Sentinel* 13:7 (2020).

18   Jacob Zenn, "Negotiating With Jihadists in the Sahel and Nigeria," *Lawfare*, June 14, 2020.

19   Bennett Clifford and Caleb Weiss, "'Breaking the Walls' Goes Global: The Evolving Threat of Jihadi Prison Assaults and Riots," *CTC Sentinel* 13:2 (2020).

20   Melissa Pavlik, Hilary Matfess, and Héni Nsaibia, "Explosive Developments: The Growing Threat of IEDs in Western Niger," ACLED, June 19, 2019.

touched on—though not focused on—AQIM's kidnapping efforts.[21] And yet, despite some works that address AQIM's suicide bombings tangentially,[22] no work has undertaken an investigation of AQIM's use of suicide bombings, a tactic that the group and its affiliates have used across multiple countries, toward various targets, and in every year since AQIM's inception.

Given the current on-the-ground rise in violence by AQIM and the attendant scholarly interest in understanding the group's activities, this report provides a look at one specific tactic in AQIM's broader arsenal of violence: suicide bombing. While an investigation of AQIM's violence writ large could well be illuminating, this narrower focus has been chosen because it provides a discrete lens into specific, tangible instances of the groups' violence, while simultaneously serving as a useful metric to be compared to other African jihadi groups' profiles of the use of the same tactic.

To that end, this report seeks to answer several questions: What has been the nature of the emergence and long-term evolution of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts? How many suicide bombers has AQIM deployed in more than 12 years of attacks (2007-2020), and how many casualties and injuries did it incur? To what extent does the group employ "non-traditional" demographics of women and children in its suicide bombing ranks? What entities do AQIM's suicide bombers target, and how effective are they at reaching and hitting these targets? When, why, and how often do AQIM's suicide bombers "fail" in their suicide attacks? Finally, to what extent and in what manners do AQIM-affiliate groups employ "teams" of multiple suicide bombers?

In addressing the above queries, this report leverages a unique database created by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which details the entirety of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts from March 2007, when its first suicide bombing occurred, to September 2020, when data collection ended. In offering the first-ever answers to these questions, this report adds to the understanding of AQIM and its network of affiliated and allied terror groups that are collectively being regarded as some of the most pernicious and destabilizing threats on the African continent.

This report proceeds in four sections. Part Two, following this introduction, describes the research methodology. Part Three is the first of two sections that details the report's findings. This section describes some of the general statistics on AQIM's suicide bombing efforts over the course of its existence, most specifically demonstrating its division into the "North African campaign" (2007-2012) and the "Sahelian campaign" (2013-2020), and how its suicide bombing efforts in those periods coincided with its broader contemporaneous operational and strategic agendas.

Having delineated the existence of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts into two distinct periods, Part Four of the report compares AQIM's suicide bombing efforts along various dimensions across its two campaigns. First, attention is given to comparing the North African and Sahelian campaigns in broad terms (geographies, number of attackers, lethality, and injuriousness), before investigating the specific groups that undertook such attacks in the name of AQIM in each period. Following this, the report compares AQIM's targeting tendencies across the two campaigns, after which it investigates each campaign's tendency for "failures," and each campaign's use of teams of suicide bombers. Part Five offers a recapitulation of the findings of the report, and suggests implications of these findings for the states affected by these groups' violence as well as the international community writ large.

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21   Seth Loertscher and Daniel Milton, *Held Hostage: Analyses of Kidnapping Across Time and Among Jihadist Organizations* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2015).

22   Jean-Pierre Filiu, "The Local and Global Jihad of Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib," *Middle East Journal* 63:2 (2009): pp. 213-226; Dario Cristiani and Riccardo Fabiani, *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM): Implications for Algeria's Regional and International Relations* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2011); Hanna Rogan, "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb Strikes Again," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2:8 (2008): pp. 23–28; Gregory A. Smith, "Al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb," *Journal of Strategic Security* 2:2 (2009): pp. 53-72.

Part Two: Methodology

2.1: Data Collection and Verification

The data for this report was assembled by the research team using LexisNexis Uni to cull online newspaper stories containing a comprehensive set of search strings.[23] [24] Given that LexisNexis Uni may not capture articles where the bomber was not explicitly denoted as being a member of one of these groups, the Suicide Attack Database (by the Chicago Project on Security and Threats), University of Maryland's START database, ACLED, and datasets held by the FDD's Long War Journal were used to supplement CTC's database, in order to ensure the analysis captured the most accurate number of suicide attacks as possible. Broader Arabic-language and French-language open-source research was also utilized to supplement our data. Primary source data, including jihadi propaganda and claims of responsibility, were also utilized.

The individual attacks were then coded to create a comprehensive database detailing 20 dimensions of each AQIM-linked suicide bombing, insofar as data was available. Among the results returned from the search string, the database collected information regarding the date and geographic location of bombing; demographics of bombers (including gender and approximate age); nature of targets (including status as an institutional target or human target); resulting destruction wrought (including number of deaths and injuries); and instances of non-detonation or prevented attacks and presence of multiple bombers, among others.

Additionally, the database tracked instances where suicide bombers detonated their explosives but did not kill any individuals other than themselves. While most media reports seek to accurately categorize any citizens who are injured or killed (citing whether they are a soldier, politician, or even passerby), sources also tend to add a caveat to their casualty totals—that the total does (or does not) include the death of the perpetrator.

2.2: Notes on "AQIM" Group Inclusion

When discussing suicide bombings attributable to AQIM, it is important to note that, more so than any other terrorist group on the African continent, "AQIM" should be thought of not just as a single, unitary group, but rather, as an extensive network encompassing one core group and a universe of other actors undertaking violence either in its name or in support of its activities more broadly. More specifically, AQIM consists of a variety of internal "sub-groups" as well as a universe of external "affiliate," or "allied," groups, all of whose violent activities are undertaken in support of the broader AQIM enterprise. Here, the authors offer some notes on which groups' suicide bombings were counted as being undertaken in this regard.

First, AQIM includes the original core group based in Algeria, itself formerly the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which still retains a base there as of this writing in September 2020. Second, AQIM core itself has several internal "sub-groups," which fall directly under its control. AQIM, much like its predecessor factions the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the GSPC, has historically

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23   The authors began by leveraging the search string "AQIM or JNIM or JNM or Islamic Maghreb and bomber or suicide bomb or suicide attack." To capture other suicide attacks that may have been attributed to groups later associated with broader AQIM, they also used the following search strings: "(MUJAO OR MUJWA) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); (Masked Men Brigade) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); (Al-Mourabitoun OR Al-Mourabitoon OR Al Mourabitoun OR Al Mourabitoon) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); (Macina Liberation Front OR Katibat Macina) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); (Ansar al-Sharia OR Tunisia) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); (Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council OR Tunisia) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*); and (Ansar al-Sharia OR Libya) w/p (suicide bomb* OR suicide attack*).

24   This search does not limit results by language, so the authors' efforts included articles from global news sources.

been organized into several distinct regions or emirates,[25] which include the Central Emirate (Algiers and Kabylie and their surroundings), Eastern Emirate (eastern Algeria and Tunisia[26]), Southern (or Saharan) Emirate, and the Western Emirate (western Algeria).[27] Inside each region or emirate, AQIM maintains several distinct *katibas*, or battalions, which operate as sub-groups under AQIM's overall command hierarchy,[28] though they have varying degrees of autonomy. For example, this includes such sub-groups as Katibat al-Fath and Katibat al-Arqam in Algeria;[29] Katibat al-Furqan, Katibat Tariq bin Ziyad, and Katibat Yusuf bin Tachfine in the Sahel;[30] and Katibat Uqbah bin Nafi in Tunisia.[31]

Third, and distinct from its internal "sub-groups," are AQIM's external "affiliate" or "allied" groups. Unlike the "sub-groups" that fall under AQIM's direct hierarchy, AQIM's affiliate and allied groups are groups that have formally left or are outside of AQIM's command hierarchy, though still conduct violence in support of AQIM's broader efforts and enjoy significant AQIM support. To that end, the authors distinguish 10 AQIM affiliate or allied groups in the Sahel and North Africa whose attacks were counted as being attributable to AQIM's overall network. To further draw the distinction, it is useful to note that between 2007 and 2010, there were no AQIM affiliate or allied groups, but rather, only AQIM core and its own internal sub-groups.

The first of AQIM's affiliates to emerge was the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in 2011, which split from the Saharan Emirate following disagreements over AQIM's Algerian-dominated leadership.[32] Around the same time, AQIM began relying on a front organization, Ansar Dine, a mainly-Tuareg group that first appeared late 2011,[33] and later helped put a local face on its operations in Mali.[34] In December 2012, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran al-Qa`ida commander who led AQIM's Katibat al-Mulathameen (also known as the "Masked Men's Brigade" and "Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade") also took his battalion out of AQIM's Saharan Emirate and pledged allegiance directly to Ayman al-Zawahiri.[35] Much like with MUJAO, Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathameen continued to coordinate actions directly alongside AQIM in the Sahel despite formally leaving its command structure.

All three of the above were al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups operating in the Greater Sahara region, and although all originated as splinter or front groups of AQIM, they also maintained their own ties to and cooperated with their parent organization, AQIM core. Together, in 2013, two of these groups, MUJAO and Al-Mulathameen, merged to form a new, fourth group, Al-Mourabitoun, itself also an

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25   Boeke, pp. 914-936.

26   Aaron Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It: al-Qaeda in Tunisia's Inability to Take Advantage of the Islamic State's Setbacks," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13:1 (2019): pp. 62-76.

27   "The political economy of conflicts in northern Mali," ECOWAS Peace and Security Report, 2, April 2013; "The presence of Mauritanians in Al-Qaeda will increase as the number of Algerians shrink in the Saharan branch" (translated from Arabic), France 24, September 30, 2010.

28   Ibid.; Marc Memier, "AQMI et Al-Mourabitoun: Le djihad sahelien réunifié?" IFRI, January 2017.

29   "The presence of Mauritanians in Al-Qaeda will increase as the number of Algerians shrink in the Saharan branch."

30   Benjamin Roger, "Visuel interactif : le nouvel organigramme d'Aqmi," *Jeune Afrique*, October 25, 2013.

31   Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It;" Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda leader reported killed in Tunisia," FDD's Long War Journal, October 20, 2019; Tarek Amara and Lamine Chikhi, "Al Qaeda trying to regroup in Tunisia after Islamic State setbacks: sources," Reuters, February 7, 2018.

32   Adam Arroudj, "Sahel: la reddition d'un chef d'Aqmi affaiblit les djihadistes," *Figaro*, August 19, 2018; William Lloyd George, "Mali's irrevocable crisis," Al Jazeera, April 16, 2012.

33   Philipp Sandner, "Ansar Dine: radical Islamists in northern Mali," Deutsche Welle, December 18, 2014; Vincent Duhem, "Le groupe salafiste Ansar dine affirme contrôler le nord-est du Mali," *Jeune Afrique*, March 20, 2012.

34   Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "US designates al Qaeda's branch in Mali as terror organization," FDD's Long War Journal, September 5, 2018; Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda in Mali sought to hide foreign designs," FDD's Long War Journal, February 15, 2013; "Mali-Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook," Associated Press, February 2013.

35   Boeke; Bill Roggio, "Belmokhtar claims Algerian raid, slaying of hostages for al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, January 20, 2013.

al-Qa`ida affiliate group.[36] Al-Mourabitoun would later merge into AQIM's Sahara Emirate in late 2015.[37] These aforementioned groups—Ansar Dine, Al-Mourabituon, and AQIM's Saharan Emirate—along with a fifth group, Ansar Dine's central Malian contingent, Katibat Macina, coalesced to form a sixth group, the Group of Support for Islam and Muslims (JNIM) in March 2017. This merger was intended to consolidate al-Qa`ida's activities in the region into one cohesive group. The leader of JNIM, Iyad Ag Ghali, was to report to the leader of AQIM, Abdel Malik Droukdel,[38] the latter of whom was killed by French forces in Mali in June 2020.[39] The authors include all six of the above groups in their suicide attack database.

In addition to these six Saharan affiliates or allies of AQIM, the authors have also included suicide bombings attributed to four additional affiliate or allied groups in North Africa: Ansar al-Sharia franchises in both Libya and Tunisia, and two umbrella alliances in Libya known as the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) and the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna (DMSC). Both Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) and Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) have been included given their role as AQIM front groups in both Libya and Tunisia: both organizations' extensive ties to AQIM have been documented by researchers,[40][41] governments,[42] and non-governmental organizations,[43] as well as through statements from the groups themselves.[44] Additionally, suicide bombings claimed by the umbrella alliance group BRSC were also included due to its leadership being dominated by Ansar al-Sharia (Libya), itself an al-Qa`ida affiliate, as described above, as well as extensive AQIM support for the alliance in terms of both personnel and training.[45] Likewise, DMSC has been added as an allied group given its own ties to both AQIM and the wider al-Qa`ida network through its main constituent group, the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade.[46] Formed by two al-Qa`ida-linked individuals, Salim Derby and Abdul Hakim al-Hasidi, the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB) and its Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna enjoyed considerable support from AQIM in regard to propaganda and ideological support, advice

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36   Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda group led by Belmokhtar, MUJAO unite to form al-Murabitoon," FDD's Long War Journal, August 22, 2013.

37   Caleb Weiss, "Al Murabitoon, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, has reportedly rejoined AQIM according to AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel," Twitter, December 4, 2015; Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda attacks hotel in Burkina Faso," FDD's Long War Journal, January 15, 2016.

38   Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: Al Qaeda groups reorganize in West Africa," FDD's Long War Journal, March 13, 2017; Heni Nsaibia, "Jihadist Groups in the Sahel Region Formalize Merger," Jihadology, March 27, 2017.

39   "France says its army killed al-Qaeda's Abdelmalek Droukdel," Al Jazeera, June 6, 2020; Caleb Weiss, "AQIM confirms leader's death," FDD's Long War Journal, June 18, 2020.

40   For his part, Thomas Joscelyn, senior editor of FDD's Long War Journal, has documented extensive ties between Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL) and AQIM (as well as the larger al-Qa`ida network). Thomas Joscelyn, "Libya's Terrorist Descent: Causes and Solutions," FDD's Long War Journal, September 27, 2016; Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and the threat in North Africa," FDD's Long War Journal, November 21, 2013; Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Sharia Libya leader met with Osama bin Laden, followed his 'methodology,'" FDD's Long War Journal, February 11, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Sharia Libya relies on al Qaeda ideologues to guide followers," FDD's Long War Journal, February 2, 2016.

41   Aaron Zelin of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has also meticulously documented the close relationship between Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST) and AQIM, as well as AST's ties to al-Qa`ida more broadly. Aaron Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It," pp. 62-76.

42   Thomas Joscelyn, "State Department designates 3 Ansar al Sharia organizations, leaders," FDD's Long War Journal, January 10, 2014; "Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile," Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, August 2012.

43   Thomas Joscelyn, "UN recognizes ties between Ansar al Sharia in Libya, al Qaeda," FDD's Long War Journal, November 19, 2014.

44   AQIM and ASL have also been open about the overlap between fighters among their respective organizations, while AQIM fighters have been reported killed in ASL-held territory. See Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb squadron ambushed in Libya," FDD's Long War Journal, November 30, 2015, and Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb honors Ansar al Sharia's slain military commander," FDD's Long War Journal, October 29, 2015.

45   Joscelyn, "Libya's Terrorist Descent: Causes and Solutions;" Caleb Weiss, "Fighting between jihadists, Haftar's forces escalates in Benghazi," FDD's Long War Journal, October 27, 2014; Henrik Gråtrud and Vidar Benjamin Skretting, "Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: An Enduring Threat," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:1 (2017): pp. 40-53.

46   Thomas Joscelyn, "Veteran jihadists killed by Islamic State's 'province' in Derna, Libya," FDD's Long War Journal, June 12, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb backs jihadists fighting Islamic State in Derna, Libya," FDD's Long War Journal, July 9, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's 'wanted dead' list in Libya," FDD's Long War Journal, August 18, 2015; "Interview of Al-Masrah Newspaper with Abu Abd Illah Ahmad," Al-Masrah Newspaper No. 7, March 14, 2016, accessed at Jihadology.

and information-sharing, and personnel.[47] While it is unclear if it was ever a formal AQIM affiliate in the same vein as Ansar al-Sharia, ASMB and its Shura Council were at the very least part of AQIM's vast network. It should be noted, however, that some constituent groups of both the BRSC and DMSC were less affiliated with AQIM—though as a whole, both projects enjoyed wide AQIM support.[48]

Thus, for the purposes of this report, the authors include any suicide bombing that has been undertaken either by AQIM itself, including its internal emirates or sub-groups, or by any one of its 10 affiliated or allied groups, described above.[49] To make even clearer the groups whose suicide bombers the authors classify as being part of AQIM's network, they are delineated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: An Overview of Allied or Affiliated Groups within AQIM's Network

AQIM Affiliate Group Name	Group Leader	Years in Existence	Areas of Operations
Ansar Dine	Iyad Ag Ghaly	2011-2017	Mali, Algeria, Niger, Libya, Burkina Faso
Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (Harakat al Tawhid wal Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiyah)	Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, Ahmed al-Tilemsi, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi	2011-2013	Algeria, Mali, Niger
Masked Men Brigade/ Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade (Al Mulathameen/Al Mua'qi'oon Biddam)	Mokhtar Belmokhtar	2012-2013	Algeria, Mali, Niger
Al Murabitoun	Abu Bakr al-Masri, Ahmed al-Tilemsi, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, Himama Ould Lekhweir	2013-2017	Algeria, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, Ivory Coast
Macina Liberation Front (Katibat Macina)	Amadou Kouffa	2015-2017	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ivory Coast
Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) (Jamaat al Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen)	Iyad Ag Ghaly	2017-present	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mauritania, Ivory Coast
Ansar al-Sharia (Libya)	Mohammed al-Zahawi, Abu Khalid al-Madani, Sufian bin Qumu	2012-2017	Libya

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47   Ibid.

48   Lydia Sizer, "Libya's Terrorism Challenge: Assessing the Salafi-jihadi threat," Middle East Institute, October 2017; Joscelyn, "Libya's Terrorist Descent: Causes and Solutions."

49   In only one case, the Islamic State also claimed a suicide attack that was claimed by AQIM. The authors included this attack in the database, based on AQIM's competing claim.

Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia)	Seifallah Ben Hassine (Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi)	2011-2013	Tunisia
Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council	Mohammed al-Zahawi, Wissam bin Hamid, Jalal Makhzoum	2014-2017	Libya
Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna	Salim Derby, Abdul Hakim al-Hasidi, Omar Rifa'i Sorour	2014-2018	Libya

With a very brief history and evolution of AQIM and its affiliated and allied groups in hand, it bears making note of the status of the universe of all of these actors as of the time of this writing in September 2020. Today, AQIM and JNIM remain operational in North Africa and the Sahel, respectively, though to different degrees. Whereas AQIM proper still retains its hideouts in the mountains of northern Algeria,[50] JNIM has overtaken its parent organization in terms of operational capacity.[51] Following the killing of AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, in June 2020, a successor has so far yet to be named. However, even despite Droukdel's killing and JNIM's greater operational capabilities, it is generally believed that JNIM has retained its position as a subordinate affiliate under the hierarchy of AQIM. In any case, the universe of actors above is collectively included in the database as having been potentially responsible for suicide bombings as part of AQIM's network.

2.3: Caveats and Limitations of Search String and Methodology

Though LexisNexis Uni searches both domestic and international newspapers writing about northern and Sahelian Africa, it is less adept at capturing local, non-national newspapers. Since AQIM's suicide bombings have often occurred in more remote areas where press access is limited, curtailed, or absent, it is possible that some suicide bombings went unreported entirely. With these limitations in mind, the authors remain confident in the relative accuracy of their database, particularly since suicide bombing is most frequently—though not always—undertaken in areas of high population density (for maximum lethality), and where there is thus a higher likelihood of the incident being reported in the media.[52]

A second limitation of this study is that demographic information about attackers was often absent in the reporting of certain attacks, attributable both to the nature of the attacks and the limited media access and capacity in the region. For instance, only 37.7% of entries had information on the gender of the bomber(s); even fewer, 14.3%, had information on bombers' ages, either known or approximate. As a result, not all of the entries are fully complete as concerns demographic data, including age and gender of the perpetrating bombers, limitations that are discussed later.

A third limitation is that in some reports, the fatalities caused by AQIM's suicide bombers are tallied alongside fatalities resulting from another genre of attack—a gunman or accompanying explosion, for instance—that coincided with the bombing, making it difficult to parse the exact number of fatalities attributed to each individual suicide bomber. This is a particularly salient shortcoming for a study on AQIM, which, as this report details, has often used suicide bombings in conjunction with non-suicide bombings or shootings. In the absence of an intuitive solution, the authors have elected to list the highest number of reported fatalities of any attack in which an AQIM suicide bomber was involved, even if the totality of those fatalities cannot be attributed solely to the suicide bomber alone.

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50   Caleb Weiss, "AQIM, via Thabat News, claimed the ambush in Ain Defla #Algeria today that killed one soldier," Twitter, June 21, 2020; "Algeria: Clash with insurgents in Ain Defla leaves one soldier dead," *North Africa Journal*, June 21, 2020.

51   Adlène Meddi, "Sahel : le déclin d'Abdelmalek Droukdel était aussi celui d'Aqmi," *Pointe*, June 6, 2020.

52   The authors recognize, of course, that this statement is laden with its own biases: it might appear to be the case that suicide bombings most frequently occur in population-dense places with press present, precisely because of press reporting biases in those very places.

That said, for each instance in which a suicide bomber was but one member of a broader, non-suicide related attack, those attacks are labeled as "mixed-method."

A fourth limitation is that many of the articles discussing AQIM suicide bombings rely on estimated death counts, which, because they are unconfirmed and written in the immediate aftermath of an attack, often undercount casualties. Accordingly, this report relies on the highest-listed fatality count available so as not to underestimate those killed by AQIM's suicide attacks. The database similarly tracks failed suicide bombing attempts, which no other suicide database, to the authors' knowledge, captures. Given that the database tracks instances in which AQIM suicide bombers are deployed but may not detonate before being apprehended, the ratios of casualties per deployed attacker and number of casualties per bombing are inherently lower than if the authors had included only instances in which AQIM suicide bombers actually detonated.

A fifth and final limitation is that although observers are often interested in whether or not suicide bombers are detonating explosives themselves or whether another individual is detonating the bombs remotely, definitive data on these questions does not exist. While the database does track the methods by which individuals detonate explosives in a suicide attack—most typically via vests/belts or vehicles—beyond these broader categories, who is detonating the bomb (bomber or another person) is rarely reported, especially if detonators are never found. As such, given that collecting and reporting on such data is so problematic, the authors do not offer conclusions about the act of self-detonation versus detonation from afar.

Part Three: The North African to Sahelian Shift

Having laid out the importance of understanding AQIM's suicide bombing efforts and the method-ologies undertaken to compile data on this phenomenon, this section of the report describes some of the general statistics on AQIM's suicide bombing campaigns over the course of its existence. In pre-senting data on AQIM's suicide bombing efforts, it also puts those metrics in context, delineating how the group compares to its closest analogues, "Boko Haram"[53] and al-Shabaab. These comparisons are important as they highlight the peculiarities of AQIM's suicide bombing agenda and its commonalities and divergences with other African salafi-jihadi organizations using similar tactics.

With this in mind, the report then makes clear one of its primary driving points, relating to the clear division of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts into the "North African campaign" (2007-2012) and the "Sahelian campaign" (2013-2020). In so doing, it pays specific attention to how AQIM's suicide bomb-ing efforts in those periods coincided with its broader operational and strategic agendas.

3.1: An Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Campaign

Total Number of Bombers Deployed and Attacks Carried Out

According to the data, between March 2007 and September 2020 AQIM has claimed 101 suicide attacks using 154 attackers. A breakdown of the yearly number of attacks is presented below, with the caveat that as of September 2020, there had been just two AQIM suicide attacks in all of 2020.

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53   This piece uses quotation marks around "Boko Haram" to delineate that despite the reference to this group as a unitary actor, it is not so in practice. The group has been divided into two distinct factions—the "Islamic State West Africa (ISWAP)" faction of Abu Musab al-Barnawi, and the Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad (JAS) faction of Abubakar Shekau—since the split of both groups in August 2016.

Figure 1: AQIM Suicide Bombing Attacks
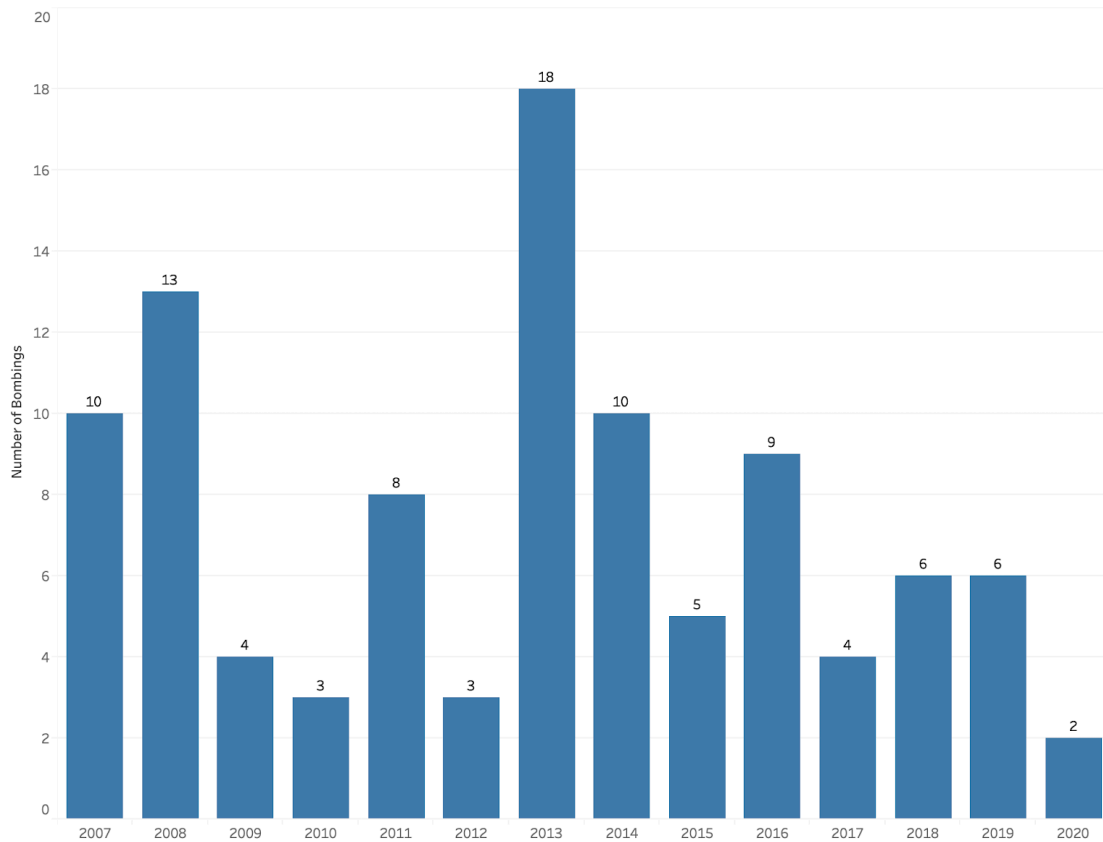
Total Killed by AQIM's Suicide Bombers

In total, an estimated 730 individuals have been killed and 1,575 have been injured by suicide attacks during this time period.

The Least Robust Suicide Bombing Program Among Major African Jihadi Groups

Based on the authors' previous studies of "Boko Haram's" suicide attackers between 2011 and 2017,[54] and al-Shabaab's suicide attackers between 2007 and 2018,[55] AQIM's suicide bombings are the least robust among the three groups, in terms of total number of suicide attacks undertaken, lethality per attack, and lethality per attacker. Thus, although AQIM, "Boko Haram," and al-Shabaab are of varying sizes, operate in differing environments and are thus not exactly comparable, given that they represent the three largest and most viable African jihadi groups—and given that the authors have data on these groups' suicide bombing efforts—a brief comparison is seemingly worthwhile. To put the above statistics on AQIM's suicide bombers into context, between 2007 and September 2020, al-Shabaab's suicide attackers killed 3,072 individuals, with a lethality rate of 14.0 deaths per attack and 10.3 deaths per attacker. For its part, between 2011 and July 2020, "Boko Haram's" suicide attackers have killed 3,055 individuals, for a lethality rate of 8.4 deaths per attack and 4.4 deaths per attacker.

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54   Jason Warner and Hilary Matfess, *Exploding Stereotypes: The Unexpected Operational And Demographic Characteristics of Boko Haram's Suicide Bombers* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2017).

55   Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, *Targeted Terror: The Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018).

Table 2: Comparative Data on African Suicide Terrorism

Group	Number of Bombings	Number of Deployed Attackers	Total Casualties	Casualties Per Bombing	Casualties Per Attacker
AQIM	101	154	730	7.2	4.7
"Boko Haram"	365	700	3,055	8.4	4.4
Al-Shabaab	220	297	3,072	14.0	10.3

The relatively low number of suicide bombings undertaken by AQIM as compared to the two other major African jihadi groups might be explained by the different security environments in which AQIM operates. While both "Boko Haram" and al-Shabaab have historically faced targeted campaigns against them by multinational security forces (the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), respectively), these two groups have retained significant operational capacity while still controlling or contesting rural areas in both Nigeria and Somalia.[56] Given the concentration of enemy forces in a relatively small area as compared to the more geographically expansive nature of North Africa and the Sahel, these realities likely afforded those groups more targeting choices in which to utilize suicide bombings. Likewise, Algerian counterterrorism efforts have been effective at beating back AQIM in the country[57] while French operations, alongside several Sahelian allies as part of the G5 Sahel force,[58] have likely reduced JNIM's operational capacity for these attacks in the Sahel.

A Uniquely All-Male Suicide Corps

Unlike the two aforementioned African salafi-jihadi groups, "Boko Haram" and al-Shabaab, the data reveals no instances of AQIM deploying a single female suicide bomber. In contrast, as per Table 3, AQIM's analogues, "Boko Haram" and al-Shabaab both used female suicide bombers. While the data suggests that 4.7% of al-Shabaab's bombers were women, "Boko Haram" is in relation to this metric, in all respects, an outlier: an estimated 54.0% of its suicide bombers are believed to be female, making it the first group in history to have a majority of its suicide workforce as such.[59]

Table 3: Comparative Data on African Female Suicide Bombers

Group	Number of Female Suicide Bombers Deployed	Number of Deployed Suicide Bombers	Overall Percentage of Deployed Female Suicide Bombers
AQIM	0	154	0%
"Boko Haram"	378	700	54.0%
Al-Shabaab	14	297	4.7%

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56   "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in West Africa Province," International Crisis Group, May 16, 2019; "Al-Shabaab is Resurging in Somalia," Cipher Brief, January 16, 2020.

57   Geoff Porter, "AQIM Pleads for Relevance in Algeria," *CTC Sentinel* 12:3 (2019).

58   The G5 Sahel force is composed of troops from Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. See "Sahel," France ONU, accessed July 9, 2020.

59   Warner and Matfess; Elizabeth Pearson, "Chapter 2: Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber," *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2018); Jason Warner, Ellen Chapin, and Hilary Matfess, "Suicide Squads: The Logic of Linked Suicide Bombings," *Security Studies* 28:1 (2019): pp. 25-57; Jacob Zenn and Elizabeth Pearson, "Women, Gender and the Evolving Tactics of Boko Haram," *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations* 5:1 (2014).

AQIM's lack of female suicide bombers may be attributed to its continuation of the *modus operandi* of its predecessor groups, which were also known not to weaponize women. Throughout the 1990s, AQIM's predecessor, the GIA, heavily restricted the roles of females in or affiliated with its organization to domestic duties while also simultaneously threatening violence against women for not following its strict interpretation of sharia law.[60] This practice was ultimately reversed by most other armed Islamist groups in Algeria by 1999, with most groups becoming more accommodating of women's roles both within their movements and within their ideas for governance as a whole.[61] Meanwhile, the GIA and its splinter, the GSPC, continued with the policy of restricting women inside their movements, mainly relegating them to domestic roles.[62]

Like its predecessors, JNIM has also made clear that it does not condone the use of women in its operations. In April 2018, following a suicide assault on a joint French-U.N. base in Timbuktu, Mali, French and Malian press widely reported the group had used a female suicide bomber in the attack.[63] Not long after, JNIM released a statement contradicting the reporting, responding that while "women have a great role in the *ummah's* [worldwide Muslim community] reality," the group assured outside observers that it "still has plenty of men willing to defend themselves, their religion, and their land."[64] Nevertheless, while this one potential instance of a female AQIM suicide bomber has been denied by AQIM, independent researchers have found that women are indeed part of various JNIM constituent groups more broadly.[65] But much like their predecessors in the GIA and GSPC, women's roles are quite limited compared to their male counterparts and are mainly limited to domestic or informant roles.[66] Further, JNIM's predilection for suicide car bombs (as will be discussed later) on more hardened targets also likely negates the necessity to utilize women to infiltrate potential targets and locations that could be considered too difficult for men to reach.[67]

A Seemingly All-Adult Suicide Corps

In addition to being unique among major African terror groups for its lack of the use of women, AQIM is also unique in its approach to ages of bombers: in only one instance does the data show AQIM used a bomber under the age of 18. The only definitive instance of AQIM's use of "underage" suicide bombers occurred with the deployment of a 15-year-old who detonated himself in Dellys, Algeria, in September 2007;[68] however, there may have been other underage bombers who were not detected or reported by

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60   "In Algeria, unveiled terrorism war: Muslim militants have threatened with death all layers of the population, from peasant to professional, even schoolgirls, who do not follow strict Islamic traditions," *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1996; Stephen Harmon, "From GSPC to AQIM: The Evolution of an Algerian Islamist Terrorist Group into an Al-Qaʻida Affiliate and its Implications for the Sahara-Sahel Region," Concerned Africa Scholars, Spring 2010; Anneli Botha, "Terrorism in the Maghreb: The Transnationalisation of Domestic Terrorism," Institute for Security Studies, June 2008; Meredith Turshen, "Algerian Women in the Liberation Struggle and the Civil War: From Active Participants to Passive Victims?" *Social Research* 69:3 (2002): pp. 889-911.

61   Harmon.

62   Ibid.

63   Aïcha Sangaré, "Femme kamikaze au Mali : La ligne rouge a été franchie," Maliactu, April 27, 2018; Vincent Hugeux, "Face à Barkhane, un ennemi aux abois," *L'Express*, April 20, 2018.

64   JNIM statement released on April 27, 2018.

65   Lori-Anne Theroux-Benoni and William Assanvo, "Mali's young 'jihadists': Fuelled by faith or circumstance?" Institute for Security Studies, August 26, 2016.

66   Ibid.

67   Indeed, previous research has shown that female suicide bombers do in fact tend to be used more frequently to hit soft targets, which, as described in this report, are less frequently hit by AQIM and its affiliates. See Warner and Matfess.

68   Amel Boubekeur, *Salafism and Radical Politics in Post-conflict Algeria* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008).

the media.[69] In addition to this known instance, certain suicide bombers that have appeared in AQIM propaganda also *appear* as though they might be underage. These include Musab al-Ansari (Figure 2), who detonated in Gao, Mali, in June 2016,[70] and Abdul Hadi al-Fulani (Figure 3), a suicide bomber responsible for a January 2017 attack in Gao.[71] In the absence of definitive proof, however, they were not recorded as "underage" in the data.

Figure 2: Photo of Musab al-Ansari

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69   Many media reports did not identify the gender or age of AQIM's bombers. For 124 AQIM suicide bombers, reports gave gender markers for only 47 of them, a reporting rate of 37.9%. For ages, the reporting rate was 20.2%. Where gender or age was not described in media reports, the authors make the assumption that the attacker is an adult male: no gender or age details are typically reported when the bomber seems to fit a "normal" attack profile of being male and an adult. In other words, details are provided on gender or age in news reports only when such details deviate from expectations, and thus, are deemed to be 'newsworthy.'

70   Caleb Weiss, "AQIM releases photos of the suicide bomber and one of the assaulters of the recent #Gao attack #Mali," Twitter, June 8, 2016.

71   Terror Monitor, "#MALI #AlQaeda In The Islamic Maghreb (#AQIM) Releases Picture Of #Gao Suicide Bomber. #TerrorMonitor," Twitter, January 18, 2017. Al-Fulani was previously involved in the November 29, 2016, suicide assault in Gao, where he was identified as Abdul Hadi al-Ansari. It is clear he survived that assault and undertook another one. See Caleb Weiss, "AQIM claims massive suicide attack on Malian base," FDD's Long War Journal, January 18, 2017.

Figure 3: Photo of Abdul Hadi al-Fulani

As compared to "Boko Haram," and al-Shabaab (as seen in Table 4), AQIM's deployment of one de-finitively-known underage bomber aligns with existing knowledge on the other al-Qa`ida branch on the continent, al-Shabaab, which itself has only ever deployed three underage bombers, to the authors' knowledge. The general lack of underage deployment by AQIM and al-Shabaab stands in sharp contrast to the tendencies of "Boko Haram," which, according to the data, has deployed at least 130 underage bombers, with several having been under seven years of age.[72]

Table 4: Comparative Data on African Underage Suicide Bombers

Group	Number of Child or Teenage Suicide Bombers Deployed	Number of Deployed Attackers	Overall Percentage of Deployed Underage Suicide Bombers
AQIM	1	154	0.65%
"Boko Haram"	130	700	18.6%
Al-Shabaab	3	297	1.0%

The near-total absence of underage suicide bombers by AQIM is a perplexing phenomenon. Despite showing a willingness to use underage fighters for assaults in such high-profile terrorist attacks in Mali,[73] Burkina Faso,[74] and the Ivory Coast,[75] as well as eulogizing teenage fighters in Algeria in the

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72   Warner and Matfess.

73   Caleb Weiss, "Al Murabitoon/AQIM released a photo of the two gunmen of the Radisson Blu hotel attack in #Bamako #Mali," Twitter, December 7, 2015.

74   Christopher Anzalone, "Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb photographs of the Burkina Faso, Splendid Hotel attack," Twitter, January 18, 2016.

75   Caleb Weiss, "AQIM releases the photos of the #IvoryCoast attackers. Also confirms joint raid btwn Sahara Emirate & Al Murabitoon," Twitter, March 16, 2016.

past,[76] AQIM has so far shown a reluctance to use underage boys (and especially girls) in its suicide bombings. One possible explanation is that AQIM-affiliated groups have tried to prioritize using more capable members to conduct suicide attacks, thus selecting older and more experienced members among their ranks to undertake suicide bombings, a trend in line with al-Qa`ida's broader ethos showing rigorous vetting for and training of its suicide bombers.[77] In short, due to the lack of reporting on the ages of most of AQIM's suicide bombers, despite the authors' claims that it has used only one underage suicide bomber, others may well eventually emerge with more definitive proof than offered here.

Detonation Type: A Preference for Vehicles Over Vests

As per Table 5 below, the data shows AQIM's strong preference for suicide attacks conducted with vehicles, also known as suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) (67.5% of attacks) over suicide vests or belts (24.5% of attacks). For 12 cases, the nature of the detonation type was unknown. These trends are in line with those of al-Shabaab, another al-Qa`ida affiliate, which also relies heavily on car bombings. By contrast, "Boko Haram" attacks often had an unlisted method of detonation and are thus not a particularly useful point of comparison in this domain.

Table 5: Comparative Data on African Suicide Bombing Detonation Tactics

Group	*Number of Vehicle-Borne Attackers*	*Number of Vested Attackers*	*Total Number of Suicide Attackers*	*Percent of Vehicle-Borne Bombings*	*Percent of Vest Bombings*
AQIM	104	38	154	67.5%	24.7%
"Boko Haram"	38	139	700	5.4%	19.9%
Al-Shabaab	180	79	297	60.6%	26.6%

Indeed, across time and geography, AQIM and its affiliates have demonstrated their proclivity for the use of vehicles in suicide bombings. For instance, in Algeria, AQIM demonstrated its use of civilian cars in suicide bombings on government targets in several video productions, most notably in a video showing the April 2007 suicide bombing on the Interpol offices in Algiers, with a second notable instance occurring in a 2009 video depicting the July 2008 bombing on an Algerian military convoy.[78] The utilization of the tactic in this instance was likely employed to allow the bombers to reach their targets relatively unimpeded while providing for more powerful explosions to maximize the attack's overall effectiveness.

Inside Libya, while affiliates of AQIM were not the first to use suicide bombing as a tactic,[79] they would come to be some of its prolific users. When, in early 2014, Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army (one of two rival claimants to power in the country) initiated Operation Dignity, which sought to wrestle back control of Benghazi from Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) and

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76   "Presenting the lamentation of the hero Abdul Qahar Belhaj: Words by the mujahid brother Salah Abu Muhammad," Al Andalus Media, July 29, 2011.

77   A report by the Counter Extremism Project indicates that al-Shabaab recruits must complete six months of training in various areas such as reading the Qur'an and correctly handling weapons. Only the best recruits have the opportunity to "join the years-long waiting list for the [...] group's suicide brigade." "Al-Shabaab," Counter Extremism Project, accessed June 26, 2020.

78   See, for instance, "The Battle of Badr," al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, 2007, and "Lovers of Virgins 2," Al Andalus Media, April 26, 2009.

79   It should be noted that jihadis were not the first to undertake such operations. In February 2011, a lone opposition figure, Mahdi Ziu, detonated his homemade SVBIED outside Benghazi's main military base. Lulu Garcia-Navarro, "Libya's Rebellion Spawns A Trio Of Unlikely Heroes," NPR, February 28, 2011.

its allies,[80] the tactic entered the national lexicon with more frequency. As such, on July 22, 2014, two Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) suicide bombers detonated themselves at a military base in Benghazi used by Haftar.[81] Subsequent battles inside Benghazi saw Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) utilize four other suicide car bombs as part of a wider counteroffensive against Haftar's forces in the city on October 2, 2014.[82] This tactic continued sporadically until August 2016, when the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, of which Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) formed the backbone, claimed its last suicide car bombing on Haftar's forces after the latter advanced further into the city.[83] Inside Derna, the Shura Council of Mujahideen is believed to have been responsible for just one suicide bombing attempt inside the city. In September 2016, three DMSC members accidentally detonated their explosive belts en route to target the city's Labraq airbase,[84] a headquarters of forces loyal to Haftar.[85]

As in North Africa, the same rationales for the use of SVBIEDs can be applied in the Sahel, wherein AQIM has often used this tactic on fortified targets to pave the way for a follow-on assault team.[86] This tactic was utilized in assaults on the joint U.N.-French base in Timbuktu in April 2018,[87] on the G5 Sahel base in Sevare, Mali, in June 2018,[88] and on a Malian base in Tarkint in January 2019.[89] Moreover, the widespread use of 4x4 vehicles in northern Mali, for example, can allow for AQIM to effectively maneuver in a tough environment,[90] affording the group the ability to travel through the desert without using main roads,[91] giving it a further tactical advantage when using the vehicles for bombings.

Included within the broader category of VBIEDs are suicide motorcycle-borne improvised explosive devices (SMBIEDs), which have been used to various effect inside the Sahel. On at least four occasions, AQIM and its network utilized this method to target military and local forces inside Mali. For example, the first recorded suicide bombing inside Gao, Mali, on February 8, 2013, utilized a SMBIED in the attack.[92] A video later released by MUJAO, which took credit for the bombing, later confirmed the use of a SMBIED.[93] On March 31, 2013, an attempted AQIM suicide bomber detonated himself on a motorcycle after being stopped at a checkpoint near Timbuktu.[94] Then on May 4, 2013, another MUJAO suicide bomber used a SMBIED on Malian troops near Amakouladji in the Gao Region.[95] And finally a month later, another AQIM suicide bomber detonated his SMBIED at the house of the military leader of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, AQIM's former ally during the 2012 takeover of northern Mali.[96]

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80   Alison Pargeter, "Haftar, Tribal Power, and the Battle for Libya," War on the Rocks, May 15, 2020.

81   "Suicide attack escalates Libya violence, oil output slips," Al Jazeera, July 22, 2014.

82   "Libya suicide blasts leave 40 soldiers dead," Al Jazeera, October 2, 2014.

83   "Libya: Several soldiers killed in suicide explosion claimed by the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council" (translated from Arabic), France 24, August 2, 2016.

84   Heni Nsaibia, "#Libya: #MSCD (Derna) statement on the death of 3 of its fighters while on way to carry out attack on Labraq Airbase," Twitter, September 2, 2016.

85   "Libya's Benghazi airport reopens after three-year hiatus," New Arab, July 16, 2017.

86   See Caleb Weiss, "JNIM hits French base with suicide assault," FDD's Long War Journal, August 4, 2019, and Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda's JNIM claims suicide assault in Timbuktu," FDD's Long War Journal, April 20, 2018.

87   Weiss, "Al Qaeda's JNIM claims suicide assault in Timbuktu."

88   Caleb Weiss, "Suicide assault targets African coalition military base in central Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, June 29, 2018.

89   Caleb Weiss, "JNIM claims suicide assault on Malian military," FDD's Long War Journal, January 31, 2019.

90   Michael Shurkin, Stephanie Pezard, and S. Rebecca Zimmerman, *Mali's Next Battle: Improving Counterterrorism Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

91   Morten Bøås, "Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 7:4 (2014).

92   "Kamikaze à un check-point malien à la sortie nord de Gao, le MUJAO revendique (actualisé)," Lignes de Defense, February 8, 2013.

93   "Lovers of Paradise 1," al-Murabitoon Media Foundation, July 21, 2013, accessed at Jihadology.

94   "Mali : attentat suicide à Tombouctou, le kamikaze tué," Agence France-Presse, March 31, 2013.

95   "Mali: 5 killed, including 2 Malian soldiers, after suicide bomber attacks army patrol near Gao," Associated Press, May 4, 2013.

96   "Mali: attentat-suicide dans la maison d'un chef du MNLA à Kidal," RFI, June 4, 2013.

The use of SMBIEDs is likely explained by a few factors specific to the Sahelian region. One, the use of motorcycles for transportation is widespread in the Sahel.[97] As such, this is an easily obtainable and relatively cheap vehicle for these operations. Additionally, the use of motorcycles also affords the potential suicide bombers greater mobility and lower chance of detection when approaching their targets. As the conflict in Mali dragged on, this method of suicide bombing likely fell out of favor after French and local forces shifted their defense postures to better defend against and counter-act suicide attacks. While the use of motorcycles is still widespread among al-Qa`ida's forces in the Sahel,[98] it has not used this method of suicide bombings since 2013.

Figure 4: Photo of MUJAO suicide bomber Abu Ubaidah al-Azawadi, who conducted the first recorded suicide bombing in Mali on February 8, 2013, with a SMBIED[99]

And yet, despite the prevalence of AQIM and affiliate groups' use of SVBIEDs, so too has it used vests and belts for its suicide bombings in other instances. For example, the suicide bomber in the March 2007 attack in Casablanca, Morocco, used a suicide belt,[100] and a month later, three other bombers in the city used the same method.[101] In March 2009, an AQIM suicide bomber detonated his explosive vest at a military base in Tadmait, Algeria,[102] while a few months later, another AQIM bomber deto-

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97   Kylie Kiunguyu, "Mali: Everyday Women Riders of Mali," AllAfrica, January 15, 2020; Alex Duval Smith, "Mali road safety exhibition highlights perils of motorbike culture," *Guardian*, January 6, 2014.

98   "Bandits on bikes: Niger to deploy robust security measures," Africa News, May 14, 2020; "Mali : la circulation à moto est interdite dans la région de Mopti," Africa News, March 27, 2017; Brahima Ouedraogo, "Burkina Faso cracks down on motorbike-riding extremists," Associated Press, September 21, 2018.

99   "Lovers of Paradise."

100 Tom Pfeiffer, "Four suspected bombers killed in Casablanca," Reuters, April 11, 2007.

101 Ibid.

102 "Three killed in a suicide bombing in Algeria," Reuters, March 7, 2009.

nated his explosive vest outside the French embassy in Nouakchott, Mauritania.[103]

The Widest Geographic Reach Among Major African Jihadi Groups

One notable feature of AQIM and its networks' suicide bombing initiative is that it constitutes, by far, the widest reaching efforts of any of the major African jihadi groups. As per Figure 5, AQIM's network has conducted suicide attacks in eight countries, making its reach the widest geographically of all suicide bombing efforts from a single group on the African continent. In descending order of their prevalence of countries targeted, these are: Mali (41), Algeria (35), Libya (12), Morocco (4), Mauritania (3), Tunisia (3), Niger (2), Burkina Faso (1). To be clear, however, the vast majority of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts (75.2%) have occurred in just two countries, Algeria and Mali, further underlining the main focus areas of AQIM's two major campaigns.

Figure 5: AQIM Suicide Attacks By Country in Aggregate
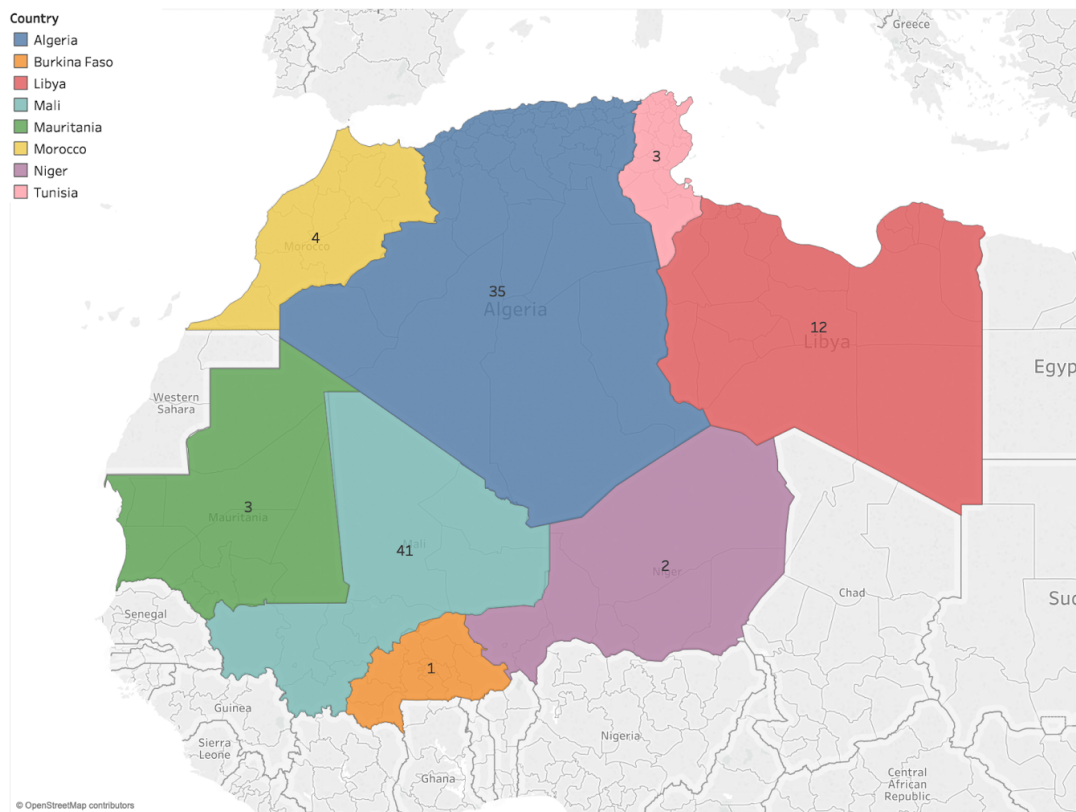
To put the geographies of AQIM's suicide bombings in context with other African jihadi groups, between 2011 and 2017, "Boko Haram" conducted suicide attacks in only four countries—Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad[104]—while, between 2007 and 2018, al-Shabaab conducted suicide attacks in only five countries—Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Uganda.[105]

This wide geographical reach might best be explained through the lens of how al-Qa`ida has divided the various areas of operations among its global branches and affiliates. In this regard, AQIM has been tasked with covering much of North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Libya)

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103 "France condemns Mauritania suicide attack," Reuters, August 9, 2009.

104 Warner and Matfess.

105 Warner and Chapin.

and through JNIM, much of West Africa and the Sahel (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso). Resultantly, AQIM's area of operations is the largest of the two al-Qa`ida branches on the African continent, and larger than any other analogue African jihadi group.

Facilitating this wide geographic reach in its suicide bombing efforts is the fact that AQIM has historically had one of the largest recruitment bases for any jihadi group in Africa. In addition to recruiting heavily among the populations of North Africa, AQIM has also greatly benefited from recruitment across the Sahel and even several other West African states where AQIM has not yet conducted a suicide attack.[106] This has been underscored by AQIM leaders themselves, who have even publicly claimed to have facilitated recruitment cells in countries such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria.[107] While in an interview with Mauritanian news outlet Al-Akhbar in 2016, Saharan AQIM commander Yahya Abu al-Hammam openly touted the group's recruitment among Fulani, Songhai, Dogon, and Bambara communities in West Africa.[108] It is unsurprising then that AQIM, utilizing its large recruitment base, has conducted suicide operations in such a large geographical expanse of the African continent.

3.2: From North Africa to Sahel: Demonstrating AQIM's Two-Phase Suicide Bombing Campaigns

Though the broad contours of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts have been delineated above, this report argues that one of the most striking and therefore defining features of its efforts is that, in broad terms, AQIM-conducted suicide attacks have occurred in two distinct geographic and temporal phases, or "campaigns." This report refers to these two phases of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts as the "North African campaign" (2007 to 2012) and the "Sahelian campaign" (2013 to 2020).[109] The rationale and data for the delineation of these two periods follows below.

This report's conceptualization of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts in two distinct campaigns rests on patterns observed both geographically and temporally. First, as per Figure 6, AQIM's suicide bombing efforts have occurred in two distinct geographic theaters. Between 2007 and early 2012, AQIM's suicide bombing efforts focused on just three countries: Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, or what the authors refer to as "North African campaign." Following what was *one* of its longest pauses—though not *the* longest pause[110]—in the use of suicide bombings, which occurred between July 2012 and January 2013, AQIM's efforts showed a clear geographic shift, with the following year (2013) showing a focus on suicide attacks in Sahelian countries of Mali (14) and Niger (1), as well as some additional activity in North Africa in Tunisia (2) and Libya (1). Together, the clear *geographic* shifts from North Africa to the Sahel combined with a less prominent (though still meaningful) *temporal* pause between July 2012 and January 2013 serve as the rationales for the delineation of these two distinct eras in AQIM's suicide bombing strategy. Below, this report offers more detail on these two distinct stages of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts.

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106   For instance, AQIM has benefited from members from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin, and Guinea in the past. This has also been confirmed by former hostages of AQIM, who reported meeting AQIM members from these aforementioned states. See "Briefing: The new Jihadist strategy in the Sahel," *Africa Renewal*, February 4, 2016; Lucinda Rouse, "High-profile terror trial speaks to an emerging threat in Senegal," New Humanitarian, August 1, 2018; "Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa," Financial Action Task Force, October 2016; author (Caleb Weiss) interview, Johan Gustafsson who was held by AQIM in Mali for seven years, May 2020.

107   Al Jazeera, "Orphans of the Sahara | Rebellion (Episode 2)," YouTube, January 17, 2014.

108   "Al-Hammam in his first interview since the French intervention in Mali" (translated from Arabic), Al-Akhbar, January 10, 2016.

109   Despite these broad trends, there are nevertheless some outlier cases, such as the few suicide bombings undertaken by Ansar al-Sharia and the Mujahideen Shura Councils in Benghazi and Derna, Libya, from 2013 to 2016.

110   As can be evidenced from Figure 7, AQIM and affiliated groups actually had a longer pause in the use of suicide bombings, which occurred between June 2017 and February 2018. However, because this pause was not accompanied by a shift in geography, it is less meaningful, the authors suggest, than the one described above.

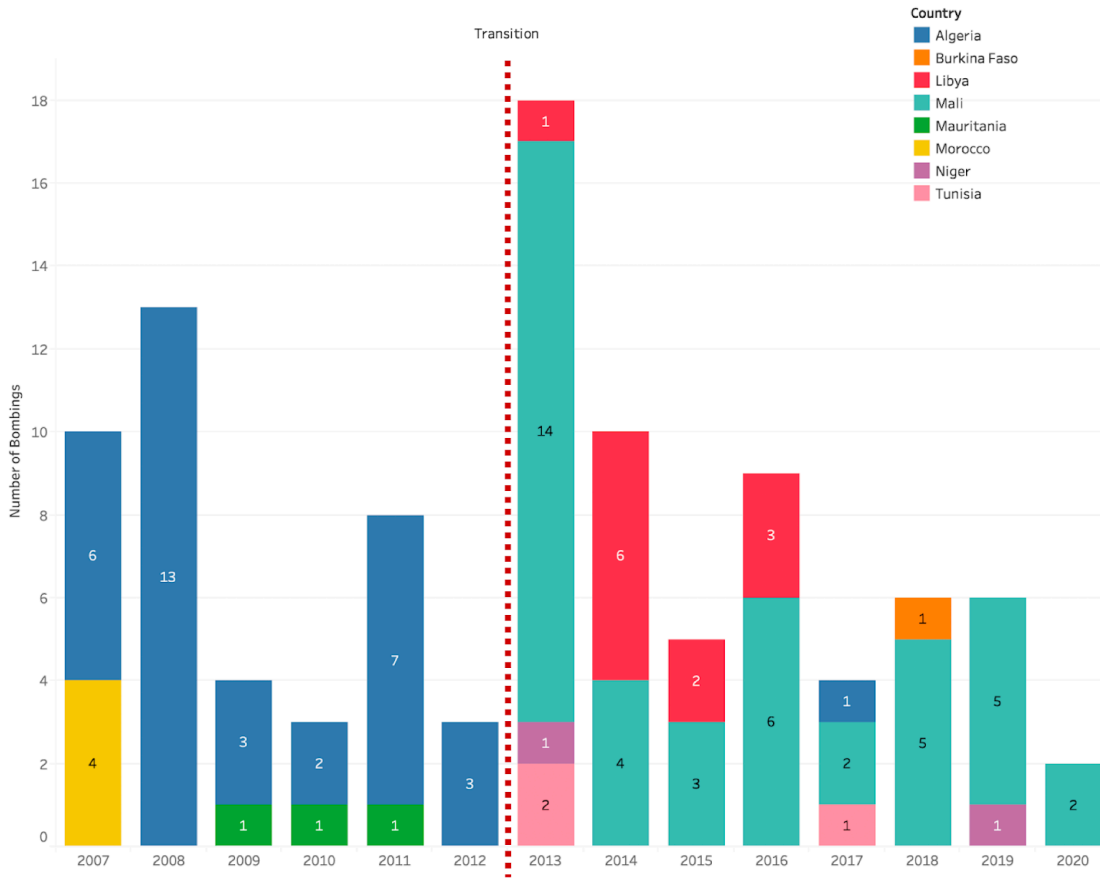*Figure 6: AQIM Suicide Bombings By Country Over Time*

Figure 7: AQIM Suicide Bombings By Month and Year

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Transition 2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
January		3							1		1		2		7
February					1		4		1	2			2		10
March	1		1	1		2	3		1			1			10
April	4						1	1	1		1	1			9
May							3			2	1				6
June		3		1		1	2	1				1		1	10
July	1	1	1		5			2	1	1		1	1	1	15
August		5	2	1	2			1		1	1				13
September	3	1						1		1					6
October							3	3		1		1			8
November								1		1		1			3
December	1						2						1		4
Total	10	13	4	3	8	3	18	10	5	9	4	6	6	2	101

3.3: Tracing the Evolution of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Campaigns

Although this report suggests that as time has progressed, there have been two primary periods in AQIM's suicide bombing evolution—the "North African campaign" and the "Sahelian campaign"—for the purposes of analytical clarity, it sub-divides these two main periods further into two smaller sub-periods, in an effort not to make overly broad claims about multi-year time periods. These two main periods, and their four constituent sub-periods are described below, with respect not only to the suicide bombing efforts themselves, but how these suicide bombing efforts figure into the larger strategic context of AQIM more broadly during each given period.

The North African Campaign, Part I: Starting at Home: Algeria and Morocco (2007-2008)

Status and Activities of AQIM Generally

AQIM was formed from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was itself a splinter organization from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).[111] Both organizations originated in Algeria during the civil war of the 1990s, in part as a response to the Algerian government's cancellation of the 1991 legislative elections, which the country's major Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, was

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111   For more on the GIA, see Lauren Vriens, "Armed Islamic Group (Algeria, Islamists)," Council on Foreign Relations, May 27, 2009.

poised to win.[112] While the GSPC announced its support for al-Qa`ida in the early 2000s,[113] the group officially pledged allegiance to Usama bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida in September 2006.[114] In January 2007, the GSPC officially rebranded itself as al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb[115] and held as its goal overthrowing the Algerian state and instituting sharia law. Soon, AQIM began to successfully adapt to the new tactics that it had learned as a result of its relationship with al-Qa`ida,[116] including the use of suicide bombings.

Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Efforts

During its initial two years of existence as an al-Qa`ida affiliate, AQIM's suicide bombing efforts were squarely focused on the two countries from which its members primarily originated: Algeria, its birthplace, and Morocco, from which it had also drawn members.[117] March and April 2007 would signal the start of AQIM's bold two-country suicide bombing campaign. Despite what would ulti-mately be a subsequent acute focus on Algeria, AQIM's first purported series of suicide bombings occurred in Casablanca, Morocco, where, on March 11, 2007, a suicide bomber prematurely detonated his explosives after being spotted in an internet cafe.[118] A month later, on April 10, 2007, a team of four suicide bombers would again strike in Casablanca.[119] While three of these four bombers would detonate themselves after fleeing from pursuing security forces, a fourth would-be bomber was shot dead in one of the city's slums.[120] The next day, Algeria would enter the mix, with a team of two AQIM bombers targeting the prime minister's headquarters in Algiers and a police base in Bab Ezzouar, an Algiers suburb,[121] in a non-proximate team attack. The near simultaneous explosions from two suicide truck bombs would leave at least 30 people dead.[122] Back in Casablanca just three days after that, on April 14, 2007, another team of two AQIM suicide attackers would try, but fail, to infiltrate the U.S. Consulate in Morocco.[123] Within just these two months, AQIM's suicide attackers had unequivocally announced their presence.

Over the next two years, 2007 and 2008, Morocco would fade away as a main target of AQIM sui-cide attackers, while Algeria would become the primary focus. Facilitating this initial AQIM success in Algeria were the internal power struggles between the waning influence of the secret police, the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS), and the ascending Direction Générale de la Sûreté Nationale (DGSN) of Algeria's interior ministry.[124] Aided by this disarray, a variety of Algerian

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112 For more on the emergence of AQIM from GSPC and the GIA, see Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Council on Foreign Relations, March 27, 2015. Also see Jonathan Randal, "Algerian Elections Canceled," *Washington Post*, January 13, 1992.

113 Jonathan Schanzer, "Algeria's GSPC and America's 'War on Terror,'" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2, 2002.

114 Kathryn Haahr, "GSPC Joins al-Qaeda and France Becomes Top Enemy," Jamestown Foundation, September 26, 2006.

115 Laub and Masters.

116 Dario Cristiani, "Ten Years of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: Evolution and Prospects," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 15:9 (2017).

117 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2012 - Morocco," United States Department of State, May 30, 2013; Botha.

118 Lamine Ghanmi, "Bombers had targeted Casablanca landmarks: papers," Reuters, March 13, 2007.

119 Pfeiffer.

120 Ibid.

121 An additional suicide bombing was planned on the local Interpol offices in Algiers, but security forces were able to identify the vehicle and subsequently defuse the explosives. It is unclear what happened to the third reported bomber, who did not end up participating in the attack. See Craig S. Smith, "Blasts by Qaeda Unit Are Deadliest Attack in Algiers in Years," *New York Times*, April 12, 2007, and Craig S. Smith, "Death Toll in Algeria Bombings Rises to 33; Manhunt Underway," *New York Times*, April 13, 2007.

122 William Maclean and Lamine Chikhi, "Al Qaeda claims deadly Algiers bombings," Reuters, April 11, 2007.

123 Lamine Ghanmi, "Two bombers attack U.S. targets in Morocco," Reuters, April 14, 2007.

124 Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Luis Martinez, and Ulla Holm, "Algeria after the Revolts: Regime Endurance in a Time of Contention and Regional Insecurity," Danish Institute for International Studies (2014:15), p. 14; Saphia Arezki, "Half a century of Algerian intelligence history," *Contemporary Africa* 260:4 (2016): pp. 78-82.

cities began experiencing AQIM suicide attacks. This shift occurred as Moroccan security and intelligence forces began to successfully clamp down on AQIM activities in the kingdom.[125] Throughout 2007 and 2008, AQIM suicide bombers would target Algerian cities and suburbs including Algiers, Batna, Ben Akoun, Bordj El Kiiffan, Bouira, Boumerdes, Dellys, Hydra, Issers, Lakhdaria, Naciria, Thennia, Tizi Ouzou, and Zemmouri. While the targets of these attacks would vary—ranging from U.N. offices in Algiers in December 2007[126] to a military base in Lakhdaria in July 2007[127] to a police station in Naciria in January 2008[128]—AQIM's suicide bombers were always men, and none showed clear evidence of being underage.

The North African Campaign, Part II: Looking Southward: Attempts in Mauritania (2009-2012)

Status and Activities of AQIM Generally

Although AQIM had existed for its first two years (2007 and 2008) with some degree of operational latitude within Algeria, by 2009, its existence in the country had become more difficult. Algerian public support for AQIM had begun to decline,[129] while simultaneously, Algerian state oil revenues increased, and the aforementioned domestic political squabbles among security services ceased, giving Algiers more capability to undertake more frequent and more successful counterterror offensives against the group.[130] By 2009, political restructuring made by then President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to weaken the DRS,[131] increase police recruitment,[132] and the concurrent emergence of new regional security initiatives helped refocus Algerian security operations against AQIM.[133] Likewise, in Morocco, despite early AQIM recruiting success, new Moroccan counterterrorism efforts initiated by King Mohammed VI largely prevented AQIM suicide bombing efforts after 2008.[134] From then on, AQIM's local fortunes in both Algeria and Morocco began to wane both militarily and politically, even though, as detailed below, AQIM continued to target Algeria with suicide attacks from 2009 through 2012.

This gradual primary shift out of Algeria and secondary shift out of Morocco, however, were not solely informed by the national politics within those countries, but were also compelled by broader regional developments. While primarily an Algerian group, AQIM prior to 2009 already had links that extended outside of the country. For its part, the GIA had already begun operating in Niger as early as 1994,

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125   Jack Kalpakian, "Against both Bin Laden and Belliraj: Lessons from Moroccan Counterterrorism," *Contemporary Security Policy* 29:3 (2008): pp. 453-476; "Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia: Response to Terrorism," Law Library of Congress, September 2015; "A real network of terror?" *Economist*, September 11, 2008; John Rollins, "Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, January 25, 2011.

126   Lamine Chikhi, "Suspected al Qaeda car bombs kill 67 in Algiers," Reuters, December 11, 2007.

127   "Suicide Bombing Outside Algiers Kills 10 Soldiers at Military Post," Associated Press, July 12, 2007.

128   "Algerian suicide bomb kills four," BBC, January 2, 2008.

129   This point was seemingly confirmed by then AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel himself in a 2017 interview with al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's Inspire magazine. According to the jihadi leader, "the Algerian front suffers from a rarity — and at times almost complete absence — of those willing to support and assist [the mujahideen], whether internally or externally." Droukdel contrasted this with the following statement: "As for the other fronts, especially Tunisia, Libya, the Sahel, Sahara, they have seen an unprecedented Jihadi awakening." It is clear from these quotes that Droukdel recognized the group's limitations in recruiting and operating in Algeria and it looked elsewhere as a result. "Inspire Interview: Sheikh Abu Mus'ab Abdul Wadood," Inspire Magazine 17, Al-Malahem Media, Summer 2017, p. 36.

130   Cristiani.

131   Alexis Arieff, "Algeria: Current Issues," Congressional Research Service, January 18, 2012, p. 4; John P. Entelis, "Algeria: democracy denied, and revived?" *Journal of North African Studies* 16:4 (2011): pp. 653-678.

132   Arieff, p. 9.

133   Ibid.

134   Kalpakian, pp. 453-476; "Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia: Response to Terrorism;" "A real network of terror?;" Rollins.

while the GSPC had already made northern Mali a rear base for its Algerian operations by 1998.[135] By 2006, al-Qa`ida's fighters in Mali began to clash with Tuareg militants over influence in the region.[136] Meanwhile in neighboring Mauritania, the GSPC attempted to make inroads inside the country via the Mauritanian Group for Preaching and Combat beginning in the early 2000s.[137] A few years later, envoys sent to Mauritania by al-Qa`ida would also form Ansar Allah al-Murabitin, which had meant to be al-Qa`ida's local entity before its leadership was arrested by Mauritanian authorities in 2008.[138] The GSPC itself began to directly target Mauritania in June 2005, following a deadly raid on a military outpost near Lemgheity.[139] That AQIM would, by 2009, begin to look toward Mauritania for its suicide bombing efforts, was therefore unsurprising.

Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Efforts

As AQIM's focus began to move southward beginning in 2009, so too did its suicide attack efforts also shift slightly. While AQIM retained its focus on Algeria as its primary target, Morocco was abandoned as a primary site of attacks, and instead, Mauritania was targeted once each in 2009,[140] 2010,[141] and 2011[142] by AQIM suicide attackers, who tended to seek to strike government targets such as the French embassy in Nouakchott in 2009 and a military barracks in Nema in 2010. Nevertheless, during the second half of the North African campaign, Algeria remained the clear focus on AQIM's suicide attacks, being successfully targeted 34 times with AQIM suicide bombers between 2009 and 2012, most of which targeted police stations and military targets, though the group also failed with high frequency. Of note, during the entire North African campaign, AQIM targeted 20 different cities in Algeria with suicide attacks, rarely attacking the same city more than once in the same year.

The Sahelian Campaign, Part I: The Malian Turn, With Some North African Efforts (2013-2015)

Status and Activities of AQIM Generally

While AQIM began to shift out of Algeria incrementally beginning in approximately 2009, by late 2011, a substantial number of its fighters had found refuge in the Saharan stretches of northern Mali. Indeed, although prior to 2012 this region had never been one of AQIM's primary areas of operation, it had always been home to some members and rear bases of AQIM.[143] By intermarrying with local Tuaregs and becoming involved in the region's smuggling networks, by 2012, AQIM had increasingly implanted itself in northern Mali,[144] in what Dario Cristiani says, "represented one of the most signif-

135 Bøås; Abu Akram Hisham, "Sheikh Abu Muhammad al Yemeni: His Journey to Algeria and the Story of his Martyrdom," Ifriqiyya Musli-mah, December 28, 2015; Abu Akram Hisham, "Sheikh Usama and the Story of his Support for the Algerian Jihad," Ifriqiyya Muslimah, 2015.

136 "Mali Tuaregs say Algerian militant killed in clash," Reuters, October 1, 2006; "Mali. Al-Qaida veut séduire les Touaregs," *Courrier International*, October 9, 2008; Tanguy Berthemet, "Comment l'Aqmi a pris place dans le désert malien," *Figaro*, September 22, 2010.

137 Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Salafi-Jihadis in Mauritania at the Center of al-Qaeda's Strategy," Jamestown Foundation, March 26, 2010.

138 Nicholas Schmidle, "The Saharan Conundrum," *New York Times*, February 13, 2009.

139 "Attaque sanglante contre une base de l'armée," RFI, June 6, 2005. Following this raid until February 2011, al-Qa`ida was responsible for a series of military assaults, bombings, and kidnappings in Mauritania before ceasing to target the country altogether. Geoff Porter, "The Renewed Jihadi Terror Threat to Mauritania," *CTC Sentinel* 11:7 (2018).

140 Adam Nossiter, "Suicide Blast Wounds 2 at Embassy in Mauritania," *New York Times*, August 8, 2009.

141 "Car bomber attack on Mauritanian army base thwarted," Reuters, August 25, 2010.

142 Three AQIM suspects were killed when their explosives-laden vehicle detonated during a firefight with Mauritanian troops outside the capital Nouakchott. It is generally believed they were attempting to carry out a suicide bombing somewhere in the city. See "Maurita-nia: 'Al-Qaeda men die' as troops fire on car," BBC, February 2, 2011.

143 Ibid; "Mauritania strikes at militants on Mali border," BBC, September 18, 2010.

144 Richard Chelin, "From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel: The Transformation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018).

icant developments in the organization's evolution."[145]

Evidence of the presence of AQIM in northern Mali would be felt most acutely in 2012. In January 2012, independence-seeking ethnic Tuaregs in northern Mali (operating under the banner of the MNLA, the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad) began cooperating with members of AQIM's Saharan Emirate as well as AQIM affiliates MUJAO and Ansar Dine to take control of stretches of northern Mali. After the Malian government bungled the response to these uprisings by Tuaregs in March 2012,[146] members of the Malian army conducted a coup, ousting the president, Amadou Toumani Touré, thus leading to even more operational latitude for the country's insurgent groups.[147] By April 2012, the coalition in northern Mali declared the existence of a state called "Azawad,"[148] and by late June 2012, they had succeeded in overtaking, at their height, approximately two-thirds of northern Mali,[149] where they began the strict imposition of sharia law following the ouster of the MNLA from various cities.[150] Indeed, by the end of June 2012, AQIM-affiliated jihadi groups (Ansar Dine, MUJAO, and AQIM's Saharan Emirate) essentially hijacked the independence movement of the MNLA.[151] Once members of these groups began advancing toward central Mali, in January 2013, France intervened to neutralize the groups, launching its Serval operation.[152] Within a matter of weeks,[153] Serval forces had succeeded in dislodging both AQIM affiliates (from MUJAO and Ansar Dine) and non-jihadis (from the secular and independence-minded MNLA) from the major northern towns of Mali, dispersing their fighters throughout the sub-region.[154]

Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Efforts

As the epicenter of AQIM's violent efforts shifted from Algeria to Mali, logically, so too did its suicide bombing efforts. First, it should be noted that although AQIM had obviously begun to move into northern Mali prior to the MNLA/MUJAO/Ansar Dine takeover, there is no evidence of suicide attacks occurring in Mali until *after* the launch of France's Operation Serval in January 2013. In other words, the prolonged pause of AQIM suicide bombings (from July 2012 to January 2013) which marked the transition period from the end of the "North African campaign" to the beginning of the "Sahelian campaign" occurred precisely during the time that these AQIM affiliates were attempting to hold cities throughout northern Mali, such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal. While the offshoots were trying to hold territory, they seemingly did not undertake suicide attacks.

In the authors' assessment, AQIM's Sahelian suicide bombing campaign began in earnest in Mali in February 2013, when, just weeks after the initiation of France's Serval intervention, MUJAO used a suicide bomber to attack a military checkpoint deployed in Gao, Mali, on February 8.[155] A day later, another MUJAO suicide bomber attempted to detonate himself at another Malian military post in

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145 Cristiani.

146 "Turmoil In Mali Deepens After Military Coup," NPR, April 5, 2012; "Mali mutiny 'topples' President Toure," Al Jazeera, March 22, 2012; Thomas Hofnung, "Les rebelles touaregs contrôlent un tiers du Mali," *Libération*, March 13, 2012.

147 Ibid.

148 Shreeya Sinha, "Timeline on Mali," *New York Times*, accessed July 9, 2020.

149 "Nord du Mali : les islamistes du Mujao ont pris Gao, le MNLA déterminé à poursuivre le combat," Radio France Internationale, June 28, 2012; Thomas Hofnung, "Gao libre, mais tenté par la vengeance," *Libération*, January 29, 2013.

150 Sinha; "'Dozens Killed' in Northern Mali Fighting," Al Jazeera, June 28, 2012.

151 Sergei Boeke and Giliam de Valk, "The Unforeseen 2012 Crisis in Mali: The Diverging Outcomes of Risk and Threat Analyses," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019).

152 Ibid.

153 Chelin, p. 12.

154 Christopher S. Chivvis and Andrew Liepman, *North Africa's Menace: AQIM's Evolution and the U.S. Policy Response* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), p. 9.

155 "Suicide bomber strikes northern Malian checkpoint," France 24, February 8, 2013.

Gao, but was shot dead.[156] Neither attempt killed any of MUJAO's intended targets. While these initial attempts were failures, over the next eight months, from February to October 2013, AQIM and its affiliates would undertake the highest concentration of suicide attacks in their history, focused primarily on the Malian cities of Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, and Tessalit, all places that AQIM affiliates were then seeking to occupy and hold, and all places that Malian and French counterterror forces were attempting to wrest away from them.

During 2013, the overwhelming majority of AQIM's suicide bombings targeted either Malian military targets—such as the September 2013 bombings on a Malian military base in Timbuktu[157]—or international targets, especially the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA)[158] and later the United Nations MINUSMA force that entered Mali on July 1, 2013[159]—such as what occurred in the April and October 2013 bombings on Chadian troops in Kidal and Tessalit, respectively.[160] Unquestionably, 2013 was the most prolific year for AQIM suicide attacks in the group's history, with a total of 18 attacks, many comprised of multiple bombers.

Outside of this initial high point of AQIM suicide attacks in Mali, 2013 would also see AQIM affiliates conducting suicide attacks in one other West African state, Niger, in addition to attacks undertaken in North Africa by members of Ansar al-Sharia in Libya and Tunisia. In Niger, AQIM affiliates would launch its first suicide bombing in the country, the May 2013 coordinated attacks in Arlit and Agadez that killed at least 20 people.[161] The bombings were jointly claimed by MUJAO and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Katibat Al Mulathameen.[162]

Inside Libya, the local Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) branch, described previously, officially began its suicide bombing campaign in December 2013, when it targeted a military base in the eastern city of Benghazi.[163] Over the next years several years (2013-2015), the vast majority of Ansar al-Sharia (Libya)'s suicide bombings were concentrated in Benghazi, except for a suicide car bombing in Deriana[164] and one failed attempt in Ajdabiya, both in October 2014.[165] Despite representing a relative spike in AQIM suicide bombings in North Africa following its Sahelian shift, Ansar al-Sharia (Libya) nevertheless made sparing use of the tactic, using it only as a last ditch effort in the wake of a military offensive against the group inside Benghazi beginning in May 2014.[166] During this time, as forces loyal to renegade Libyan general Khalifa Haftar advanced through Benghazi, Ansar al-Sharia would lose several of its top leaders and fighters.[167] As Ansar al-Sharia's influence began to wane, the Islamic State, the

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156 "Mali army shoots dead would-be suicide bomber," Business Ghana, February 10, 2013.

157 "Suicide bombers attack Mali's Timbuktu," Al Jazeera, September 29, 2013.

158 AFISMA, which was an initiative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), was authorized by the United Nations Security Council in December 2012 and deployed to Mali alongside the French in January 2013. See "Mali conflict: West African troops to arrive 'in days,'" BBC, January 15, 2013.

159 MINUSMA entered in July 2013, taking over authority from the previous AFISMA force. "History," MINUSMA, May 7, 2014.

160 "Mali conflict: Chadians killed in Kidal suicide attack," BBC, April 12, 2013; "UN troops killed in Mali suicide attack," Al Jazeera, October 23, 2013.

161 "Niger suicide bombers target Areva mine and barracks," BBC, May 24, 2013.

162 Bill Roggio, "Belmokhtar's unit participated in Niger suicide attacks," FDD's Long War Journal, May 24, 2013.

163 Ayman al Warfalli, "Suicide bomber kills seven outside Libya's Benghazi," Reuters, December 23, 2013.

164 "Incident ID: 201410220032," Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism.

165 "Libya: The arrest of an Egyptian who tried to blow himself up at a security barrier" (translated from Arabic), 24 News, October 30, 2014.

166 Aimen Majeed and Moutaz Ahmed, "Hafter launches Benghazi attack on Islamists," *Libya Herald*, May 16, 2014; Camille Tawil, "Operation Dignity: General Haftar's Latest Battle May Decide Libya's Future," Jamestown Foundation, May 30, 2014; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, *Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2015).

167 "Libyan Militant Group Says Its Leader, Mohammed al-Zahawi, Was Killed," Associated Press, January 24, 2015; Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb honors Ansar al Sharia's slain military commander."

group's main rival in eastern Libya, began to poach many members from the group in Benghazi and Dernah.[168] By late 2015, Ansar al-Sharia had lost most of its stature in Benghazi, which was further reflected on the ground by the lack of continued suicide bombings. In May 2017, it would finally dissolve itself while its remaining forces folded into the larger Benghazi Defense Brigades structure, itself a continuation of the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council.[169]

Elsewhere, in Tunisia, AQIM has historically struggled to maintain a successful insurgency. Despite early al-Qa`ida efforts in Tunisia, such as the April 2002 suicide bombing on a synagogue in Djerba[170] and sporadic clashes with state security forces in 2006[171] and 2007,[172] all before the creation of AQIM, its movement inside the country was not able to significantly expand. Beginning in 2011, AQIM attempted to enter the Tunisian political scene through Ansar al-Sharia and its leader Seifallah Ben Hassine (or Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi) as part of the wider Arab Spring.[173] Later, AQIM attempted to foment an insurgency through the creation of its own internal sub-group in the country, Katibat Uqbah bin Nafi, in 2012.[174] Initially unfocused on military affairs, Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia)'s calculus changed following a severe government crackdown on the group in 2013.[175] As a response, members of Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia) in Sousse and Monastir undertook two failed suicide bombings in October of that year.[176] Thus, despite the fact that the authors suggest that the period between 2013 and 2015 was most heavily and notably marked by AQIM's southward, Sahelian shift, this shift was not exclusive, as its affiliates' efforts in Libya and Tunisia underline.

The Sahelian Campaign, Part II: The Emergence of JNIM (2017), and a Near-Exclusive Focus on Mali (2016-2020)

Status and Activities of AQIM Generally

A turning point for AQIM's presence in the Sahel came on March 2, 2017, when members of four groups—Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front (or Katibat Macina, itself a sub-group of Ansar Dine), al-Mourabitoun, and AQIM's Saharan Emirate—announced that they had merged to form a new AQIM-affiliated umbrella group, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin, or JNIM. In doing so, the group pledged allegiance to the emir of al-Qa`ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and then emir of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb, Abdelmalek Droukdel.[177] These pledges would be accepted soon thereafter by AQIM on March 4[178] and al-Qa`ida core on March 19.[179] The creation of the JNIM umbrella would prove to be a critical development: as previously noted, as of July 2020, JNIM has become one of the

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168   "Libya's Extremist Ansar al-Sharia Dissolves itself," Asharq Al-Awsat, May 29, 2017; Lachlan Wilson and Jason Pack, "The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition," *CTC Sentinel* 12:3 (2019).

169   "Libya's Extremist Ansar al-Sharia Dissolves itself;" "Libyan Islamist group Ansar al-Sharia says it is dissolving," Reuters, May 27, 2017.

170   "Blast at Tunisian synagogue kills five," BBC, April 11, 2002.

171   Craig S. Smith, "Tunisia Says Suspects in Gun Battle Had Blueprints of Embassies," *New York Times*, January 14, 2007.

172   Ibid.

173   Zelin, *Your Sons Are at Your Service*; Zelin, "Not Gonna Be Able To Do It."

174   Ibid.

175   Tareek Amara, "Analysis: Crackdown on radical Islamists tests Tunisia's stability," Reuters, May 23, 2013; Carlotta Gall, "Tunisia Broadens Crackdown on Extremists," *New York Times*, August 23, 2013.

176   "Tunisia arrests suspects after failed suicide attacks," Deutsche Welle, October 30, 2013.

177   Droukdel was killed by French forces in northern Mali in early June 2020. AQIM has so far yet to name a successor. See Weiss, "AQIM confirms leader's death."

178   Abdelmalek Droukdel, "Congratulations and Blessings: Integration of the Saharan Mujahideen," Al-Andalus Media, March 14, 2017, accessed at Jihadology.

179   "Support and Blessing for Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen," al-Qa`ida General Command, March 19, 2017, accessed at Jihadology.

greatest threats to security on the African continent.[180]

Overview of AQIM's Suicide Bombing Efforts

With the exception of a leader of AQIM's Katibat Uqbah bin Nafi detonating himself during a security raid in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in April 2017[181] and a suicide attack in Almoustarat, Mali, in May 2017,[182] the announcement of the formation of JNIM in March 2017 would signal the longest cessation in suicide attacks conducted by AQIM affiliates in the group's 13-year history. Indeed, after JNIM's formation—with the exception of the two aforementioned detonations—AQIM would go from February 2017 to March 2018, more than 13 months, without a single suicide attack. That streak of inactivity was broken with conspicuous timing: on March 2, 2018, AQIM would resume its activity with its first-ever suicide attack in Burkina Faso, targeting its capital Ouagadougou, killing at least eight Burkinabe soldiers and wounding 85 other people, on the one-year anniversary of JNIM's founding.[183]

Following that resumption of suicide attacks after the JNIM-formation-induced hiatus, what stands out about AQIM's suicide attacks is that they have not only declined in number from what they were prior to the hiatus, but have also decreased in efficacy. Following the March 2018 Burkina Faso attack, the group has conducted most of its suicide attacks in Mali: in Gao, Kidal, Tessalit, Timbuktu, Kouroume, Bourem, Ber, Ansongo, Almoustarat, Sévaré, Aguelhok, Tarkint, and Bamako. JNIM has since only conducted one suicide bombing in Niger, which targeted a Nigerien military base in the western Tahoua region in December 2019.[184] Showing that its suicide efforts remain focused inside Mali, JNIM's only two recorded suicide bombings in 2020 as of September have taken place in Dinangourou, Mopti, in June[185] and Gossi, Timbuktu, in July.[186] In sum, though JNIM is now newly threatening via other tactics, suicide attacks are not a tactic that it has employed especially well, or, as of late, especially frequently.

180 Warner.

181 "Tunisian security forces storm terror-cell plotting deadly Ramadan attack," New Arab, April 30, 2017; "Opération terroriste de Sidi Bouzid : 4 suspects écroués et 4 laissés en liberté," Tunis Tribune, May 16, 2017; Malek Bachir, "L'émir de la katiba Okba Ibn Nafaâ enterré en Algérie," Middle East Eye, May 22, 2017.

182 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM targets Malian base in suicide assault," FDD's Long War Journal, May 8, 2017.

183 Brahima Ouedraogo and Carley Petesch, "Al-Qaida-linked group releases photo of Burkina Faso bomber," Associated Press, March 5, 2018; "Attaques de Ouagadougou : un nouveau bilan fait état de huit militaires burkinabés tués," Monde, March 7, 2018.

184 "Insécurité : au moins 2 soldats tués et 5 autres blessés dans l'attaque d'une position militaire à Agando (Tahoua)," ActuNiger, December 9, 2019.

185 Réelle Afrique, "Mopti: FAMas attacked in Dinangourou. Our security forces were victims of a bomber car attack followed by heavy gunshots ...," Facebook, June 27, 2020.

186 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM targets French troops in suicide assault," FDD's Long War Journal, July 30, 2020.

Part Four: Comparing the North African and Sahelian Phases

Having delineated the existence of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts into two distinct campaigns and the particularities of each of those campaigns' historical sub-periods in the previous section, Part Four of this report compares AQIM's suicide bombing efforts along various dimensions across its two campaigns. First, attention is given to comparing the North African and Sahelian campaigns in broad terms (geographies, number of attackers, lethality, and injuriousness) before investigating the specific groups that undertook such attacks in the name of or in support of AQIM's wider efforts in each period. Following this, the report compares AQIM's targeting tendencies across the two campaigns, after which it investigates each campaign's tendency for 'failures,' and each campaign's use of teams of suicide attackers.

4.1: Comparing Broad Trends Across Campaigns

Comparing Geographies: A Shift Southward

As delineated in the previous section, AQIM's suicide bombing efforts have occurred in two phases, or campaigns, marked by a general southward movement, while also expanding temporarily into Libya. During the "North African campaign," which ran from March 2007 to June 2012, AQIM's suicide bombing operations were centered predominantly in the Maghreb and constituted its "North African campaign," with suicide attacks occurring in Algeria (34) with a more limited focus in Morocco (4) and Mauritania (3). During the "Sahelian campaign," which began in February 2013 and continues to the present writing of this report in September 2020, AQIM's suicide bombing operations shifted southwards, with a focus on Mali (41), Niger (2), and Burkina Faso (1), while still retaining some limited activities in North Africa including in Libya (12), Tunisia (3), and Algeria (1).

A Greater Number of Attacks and Attackers in the Sahelian Campaign

Between March 2007 and September 2020, AQIM has claimed 101 suicide attacks with 154 attackers, with the Sahelian campaign showing approximately 50% greater prevalence of each as compared to the North African campaign. During the North African campaign, it conducted 41 attacks with 60 attackers. During the Sahelian campaign, its efforts have been notably greater, with AQIM-aligned groups conducting 60 attacks with 94 attackers. However, it should be noted that although the Sahelian campaign has a higher aggregate tally in both cases, these were both concentrated heavily at the beginning of the campaign, thus potentially wrongly skewing perceptions about the overall contemporary presence of the tactic.

Decreased Deployment Year Over Year, and Campaign by Campaign

When broken down by year, data indicates that AQIM and its network has slowed their use of suicide bombers year over year. This decline is not linear, though. While each campaign period starts with a high level of suicide attacker deployment, violence also appears to increase before the group shifts tactics or physical locations, as seen in 2011 and 2018-2020. That said, in addition to the year-over-year declination, data also suggests a general decline in deployments over each campaign.

Figure 8: Trends in AQIM Suicide Bomber Deployment By Year
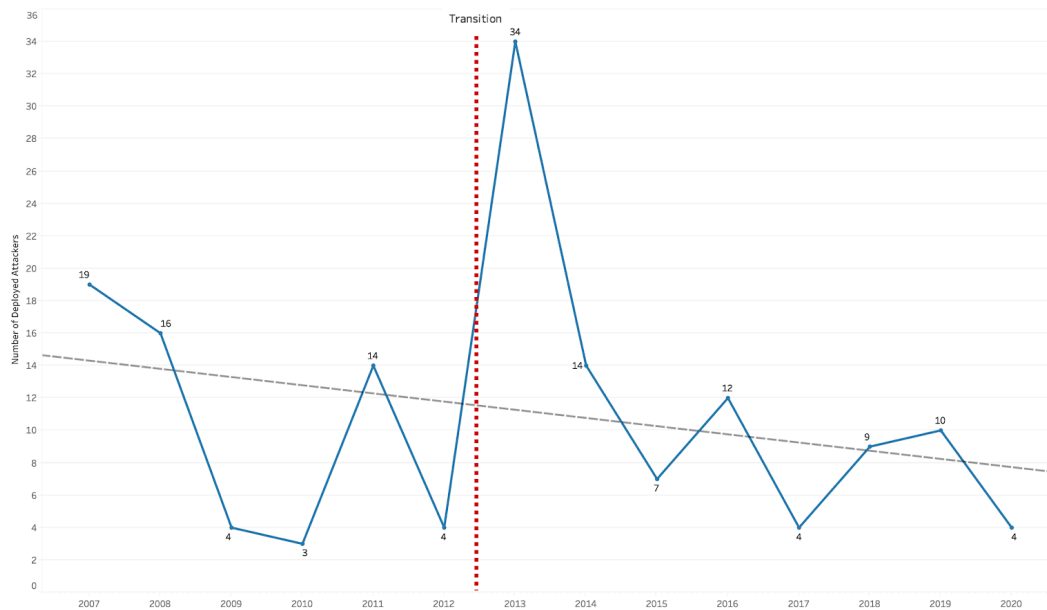
The authors find the overall decline in suicide attacks is likely linked to the changes in the overall security environments in which AQIM operates. As stated previously, Algerian counterterrorism efforts had greatly reduced AQIM's overall capacity to mount suicide bombings and other large-scale attacks by 2009. As such, the group was forced to utilize other methods in its insurgency such as improvised explosives devices (IEDs) and standard military assaults.[187] Save for a relative spike in 2011, which researcher Andrew Lebovich has postulated was the result of both rising insecurity in neighboring Libya and the relaxing of some internal Algerian security policies,[188] which gave AQIM more breathing room to operate, the tactic nevertheless continued to decline until the Sahelian shift.

Following the French-led intervention against AQIM and its allies in northern Mali in 2013, the group witnessed a further spike in the use of suicide bombings as it fought to keep control over its territory. As the French campaign continued, however, AQIM's capabilities to launch such attacks were again greatly reduced.[189] It is also possible that the installation of several hardened bases inside Mali, such as the joint French-U.N. bases in Timbuktu[190] and Tessalit,[191] have served to dissuade the wide-scale use of the tactic in some areas of the Sahel, thus presenting fewer targeting choices for AQIM.

187   Hanna Rogan, "Violent Trends in Algeria Since 9/11," *CTC Sentinel* 1:12 (2008).

188   Andrew Lebovich, "AQIM Returns in Force in Northern Algeria," *CTC Sentinel* 4:9 (2011).

189   Derek Henry Flood, "A Review of the French-led Military Campaign in Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 6:5 (2013).

190   Benoit Bryche, "The UN Base in Timbuktu: A Demanding Deployment in the Sahara," PassBlue, October 30, 2017.

191   "Rocket attack on UN base in Mali leaves 20 wounded," *National*, January 9, 2020.

Figure 9: Trends in AQIM Suicide Bomber Deployment By Campaign
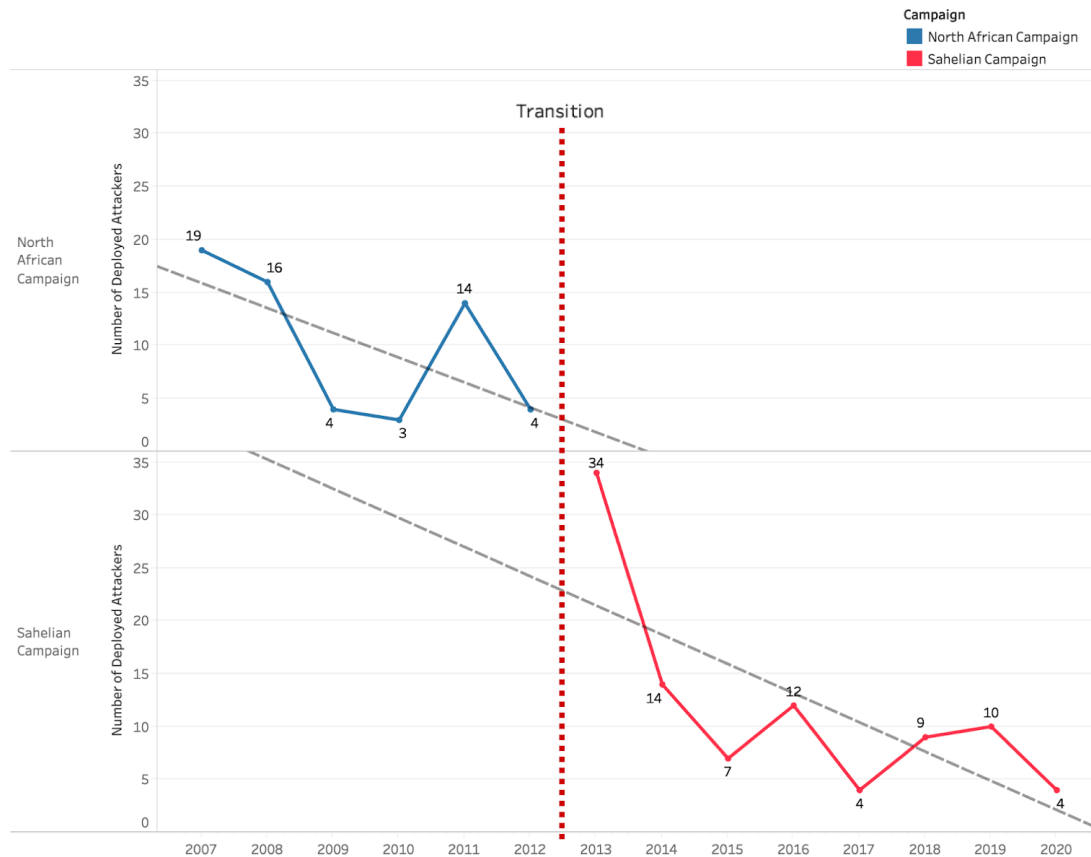
The North African Campaign More Lethal than the Sahelian Campaign

In addition to a decrease in overall numbers of attacks deployed, AQIM's suicide campaigns have also seen a decrease in lethality over time: its North African campaign was decidedly more deadly than its later Sahelian campaign. During the North African campaign, AQIM's suicide bombers killed 393 people, for an average of 9.6 deaths per attack and 6.6 deaths per attacker. Conversely, during the Sahelian campaign, AQIM's suicide attackers have killed 337 people, for an average of 5.6 deaths per attack and 3.6 deaths per attacker.

These variations in lethality, the authors suggest, are most likely correlated to the geography in which AQIM has conducted its various suicide bombing campaigns. In its earlier efforts, in Algeria, for instance, many of AQIM's suicide bombings occurred in cities or other densely populated areas, thus leading to higher levels of lethality. AQIM suicide bombings in Algiers in 2007,[192] Tizi Ouzou in 2008,[193] Issers in 2009,[194] and Cherchell in 2011,[195] for example, have all taken place against targets where many military troops or civilians were also present. Contrasted with its Sahelian campaign, wherein most

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192   Smith, "Blasts by Qaeda Unit Are Deadliest Attack in Algiers in Years."

193   "AQIM Claims Suicide Attacks Against Army & Police In Algeria," CBS News, August 6, 2008.

194   Scott Stewart and Fred Burton, "Algeria: Taking the Pulse of AQIM," Stratfor, June 24, 2009.

195   "Al Qaeda claims responsibility for Algeria attack," Reuters, August 29, 2011.

suicide bombings have taken place in remote areas or lesser populated cities[196] or on fortified bases,[197] these phenomena have led to less collateral damage and thereby smaller fatality numbers.

4.2: Comparing AQIM-Affiliate Attacks by Campaign

As emphasized at the introduction to this report, AQIM's suicide attacks have been undertaken not by one group, but rather, at times, by multiple groups that are all operating under the broader umbrella of AQIM. To give insight into the specific actors undertaking suicide attacks in the names of AQIM (below), this report investigates which AQIM sub-groups dominated suicide attacks during specific campaigns.

North African Campaign: Dominated by AQIM Proper, with Late Entry By MUJAO

Perhaps unsurprisingly, suicide attackers' group affiliations during the North African campaign (2007-2012) were dominated by members of AQIM proper. This is unsurprising, since none of the 10 affiliate or allied groups came to rise prior to 2011 when MUJAO emerged. In 2012, the last year of the North African campaign, MUJAO did, however, claim one suicide bombing in Algeria.[198] This suicide bombing also likely helped introduce a 'martyrdom culture' among Sahelian jihadi groups, which had previously not undertaken suicide operations.[199] In the wake of the French intervention in Mali, the norms and cultures that MUJAO helped establish in regard to suicide bombings among the local Sahelian populations in which it recruited likely had a profound effect on the proliferation of the tactic.

Sahelian Campaign: An Initial Diversity of Groups, Finally Dominated by JNIM

In contrast to the AQIM proper-dominated North Africa (2007-2012) campaign, the Sahelian campaign (2013-2020) was initially characterized by suicide attacks claimed by a multiplicity of groups, including a few jointly claimed attacks. However, as the Sahelian campaign wore on, and following the creation of JNIM in March 2017, every AQIM suicide attack since has been attributed to JNIM.

During the beginning stages of the Sahelian campaign following the French-led intervention against AQIM and its allies in January 2013, suicide bombings inside Mali were undertaken individually by AQIM, MUJAO, Ansar Dine, and eventually al-Murabitoon, all as part of the wider al-Qa`ida effort in defense of its aspirant proto-state. Apart from individually-claimed attacks, in May 2013, the first jointly claimed suicide bombings occurred in the region. In a massive attack against a military barracks and French-owned mine in Niger, suicide bombers from both MUJAO and Al-Mulathameen (which claimed the attack as "Al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam, or "Those Who Sign in Blood") took part in the operation.[200] Similarly—and while not suicide bombings—a series of high-profile terrorist attacks in

196 "Suicide bomb strikes checkpoint in Malian city of Kidal," France 24, February 27, 2013; "Suicide attack kills two Chadian UN troops, child in Mali," Reuters, October 23, 2013; Weiss, "JNIM claims suicide assault on Malian military."

197 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM claims suicide bombing on French troops in Gao," FDD's Long War Journal, July 2, 2018; Weiss, "JNIM hits French base with suicide assault."

198 Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa, "Ouargla Martyrdom Operation in Algeria," Al-Murabitun Foundation, December 5, 2012, accessed at Jihadology.

199 David Brooks, "The Culture of Martyrdom," *Atlantic*, June 2002; Mohammed M. Hafez, "Rationality, Culture, and Structure in the Making of Suicide Bombers: A Preliminary Theoretical Synthesis and Illustrative Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29:2 (2006): pp. 165-185.

200 Roggio, "Belmokhtar's unit participated in Niger suicide attacks;" Bill Roggio, "MUJAO suicide bombers hit uranium mine, barracks in Niger," FDD's Long War Journal, May 23, 2013; and "Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'masterminded' Niger suicide bombs," BBC, May 24, 2013.

Mali,[201] Burkina Faso,[202] and the Ivory Coast[203] in 2015 and 2016 were also all jointly claimed by both AQIM and Al-Mourabitoun.[204]

Figure 10: AQIM Suicide Bombing Attacks By Sub-Group
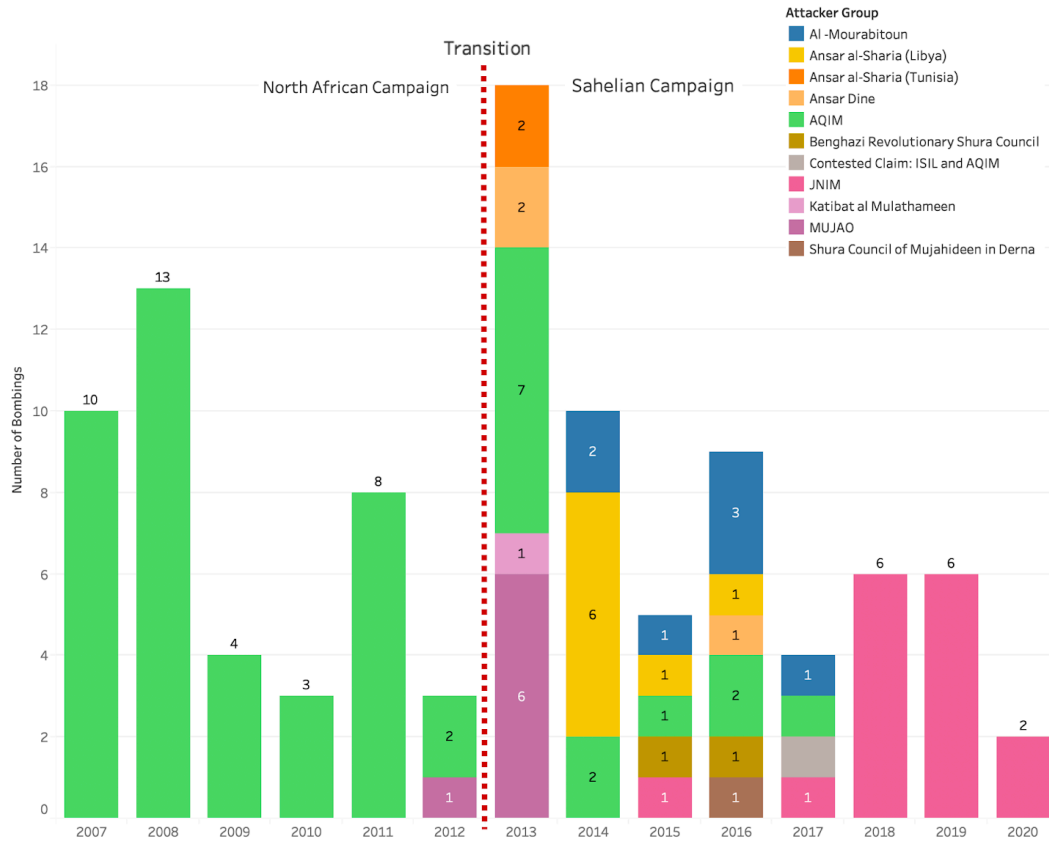
Following the creation of JNIM, all attacks, suicide bombings or otherwise, have been claimed under the JNIM moniker. The one possible exception to the preceding claim is the one suicide bombing in Algeria that was claimed in the AQIM name just a few months *after* the creation of JNIM, but whose architects are disputed. On August 31, 2017, two Algerian policemen were killed by a suicide bomber in Tiaret in the country's north.[205] That same day, the Islamic State would claim the blast was carried out by one of its members.[206] But just four days later, AQIM would allege that a member of its Katibat al-Fath, which belongs to its Central Emirate, actually carried out the bombing.[207] This suicide bombing was included in the database, but to distinguish its uncertainty as to who actually carried out the

201   Bill Roggio and Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda group claims credit for attack on hotel in Mali's capital," FDD's Long War Journal, November 20, 2015.

202   Weiss, "Al Qaeda attacks hotel in Burkina Faso."

203   Caleb Weiss, "AQIM targets beach resort in Ivory Coast," FDD's Long War Journal, March 13, 2016.

204   Following the November 2015 attack in Bamako, Mali, al-Murabitoon was then reintegrated into AQIM's overall structure. However, the group maintained some level of autonomy as indicated by its own media outlet, Al-Ribat. In the claims for the January 2016 attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and the March 2016 attack in Grand Bassam, Ivory Coast, AQIM still delineated al-Murabitoon and the other AQIM subgroup that took part in the operations.

205   "Two policemen martyred in suicide bombing in Tiaret," Ennahar, August 31, 2017.

206   Menastream, "#Algeria: #ISIS claimed this morning's suicide attack in #Tiaret," Twitter, August 31, 2017.

207   Menastream, "#Algeria-#BREAKING: #AQIM/Katibat al-Fath claims suicide bombing in #Tiaret (note that #ISIS already claimed the attack)," Twitter, September 4, 2017.

attack, the authors denote this as a competing claim by both AQIM and the Islamic State.

4.3: Comparing AQIM's Targeting Tendencies Across Campaigns

From Government and Police Targets in North African Campaign to Domestic Military and U.N./ International Targets in Sahelian Campaign

One striking feature of AQIM's shift from northern Africa to the Sahel is the changes in targets that the group focused on hitting. Figure 11 shows these trends. As evidenced, during the North African campaign (2007-2012), the most common genres of targets for successful AQIM suicide attacks were government (10), police (11), and domestic military (8). As AQIM's suicide bombing campaign moved southwards during the Sahelian campaign (2013-2020), a shift in its targeting has also occurred, with focus on U.N./international targets (42) and domestic military targets (40).

Figure 11: AQIM Deployed Suicide Attackers Deployed By Target Over Time
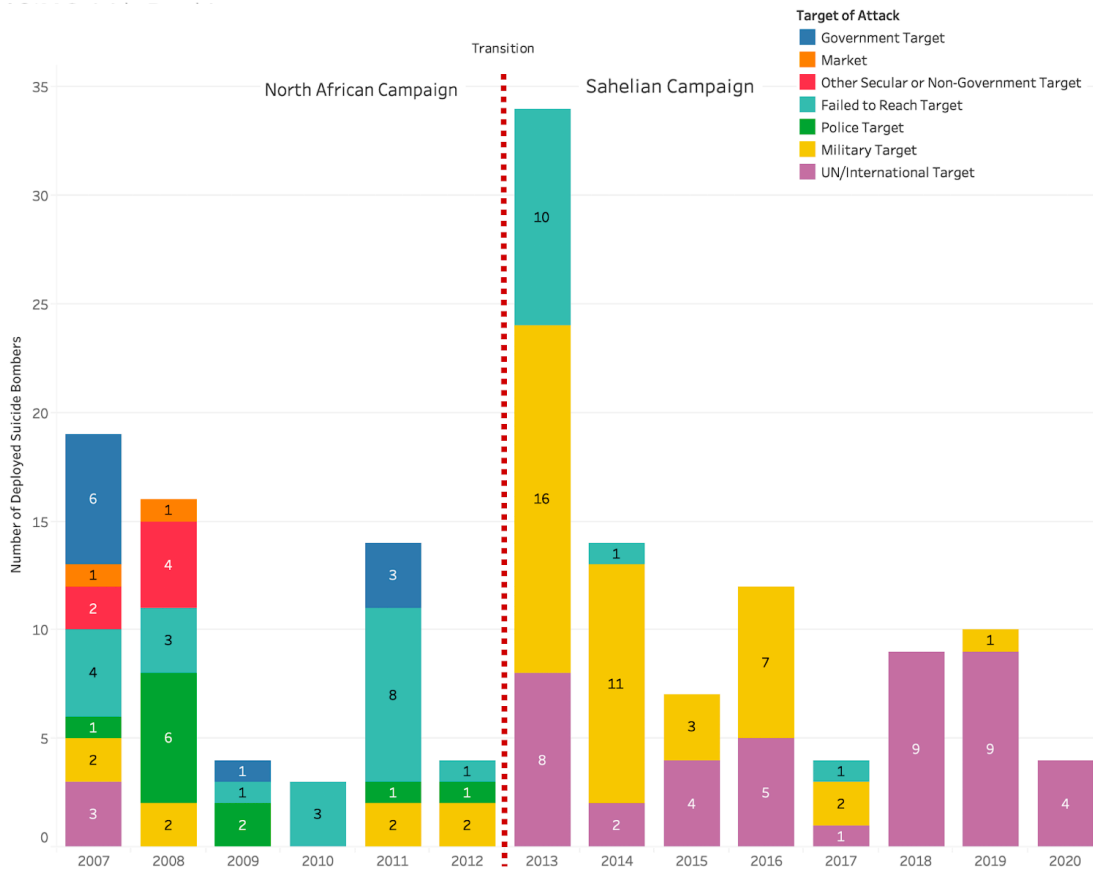
This shift in targeting was likely influenced by two notable factors: the nature of AQIM's new Sahelian insurgency and the declaration of general al-Qa`ida guidelines against indiscriminate violence targeting civilians. First, as concerns its Sahelian targeting of domestic and international military bases, since being forced out of the major cities of northern Mali in 2013, AQIM has faced opposition from a myriad of international forces, including a French-led counterterrorism operation (Barkhane), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the G5 Sahel Force (comprised of troops from Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad). While still focused on striking at local Malian military installations, the wide-scale presence of international

troops has provided AQIM and its affiliates with a more distinct combat environment than what it found inside Algeria in regard to targeting choices.

In this respect, AQIM has utilized suicide bombings to achieve its strategic goals inside the Sahel. For instance, in January 2017, AQIM targeted the garrison of the Operational Coordination Mechanism (MOC), a joint force meant to bring together the Malian military and ex-combatants in northern Mali into mixed patrols, in Gao.[208] This bombing, which killed at least 50 people and wounded over 100 more, had a profound impact on the implementation of the MOC and contributed to significant problems within the mechanism.[209] Combined with threats,[210] assassinations,[211] and kidnappings,[212] this suicide bombing helped AQIM in its efforts to end the joint force.

Similarly, a June 2018 suicide bombing targeted the G5 Sahel base in Sevare, Mali.[213] That bombing, which killed two soldiers and one civilian, destroyed the base, causing the G5 Sahel force to relocate to Bamako.[214] The forced relocation created significant setbacks for the force, including a change in its top leadership[215] and a great deal of civil strife as civilians protested the move.[216] AQIM later capitalized on the relocation by framing it as a victory for its men against France and its allies.[217] So while the internationalized nature of the Sahelian conflict has afforded AQIM more targeting opportunities, AQIM and its allies have also utilized suicide bombings on these particular targets to advance its strategic goals in the region.

At the same time, the paucity of non-military government institutions in northern Mali inherently means that these institutions will be less frequently targeted when compared to AQIM's activities in Algeria. The lack of basic government services and institutions in northern Mali has been a long-standing grievance of the local populations and has manifested itself in several rebellions, including the 2012 rebellion that began the current crisis in the country.[218] Even without the presence of a multitude of foreign targets in northern Mali, the lack of non-military government institutions in the region means this category would already be underrepresented in the Sahelian campaign as opposed to AQIM's targeting choices in Algeria.

A Minimal Focus on Soft Targets Across Both Campaigns

An important facet of AQIM's suicide targeting tendencies is that the group and its affiliates, in general, tend not to primarily attack "soft" targets, or places that are primarily frequented by civilians. To

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208   Weiss, "AQIM claims massive suicide attack on Malian base."

209   "Peace process in Mali: in Gao, the MOC doesn't reassure anymore," Sahelien, May 26, 2017; Morgane Le Cam, "Dans le nord du Mali, l'incertitude du désarmement," *Monde*, November 8, 2018.

210   Caleb Weiss, "JNIM official warns competing militia groups in northern Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, October 24, 2018.

211   Housseyne Ag Issa, "Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb) adopts the killing of a commander in the Coordination Movement and official in the joint patrols, Salem M'begui, who was assasinated in TImbuktu," Twitter, September 21, 2018 (translated from Arabic); "Mali: the Operational Coordination Mechanism in Danger?" aBamako, September 25, 2018.

212   "22 Former Rebel, Militia Fighters Kidnapped In Mali," Channels Television, September 6, 2019.

213   Weiss, "Suicide assault targets African coalition military base in central Mali."

214   "New G5 Sahel Joint Force commander moves HQ to Mali capital Bamako after June attack," Defense Post, September 28, 2018.

215   Anne Kappès-Grangé and Benjamin Roger, "G5 Sahel : le général Didier Dacko remplacé à la tête de la force conjointe," *Jeune Afrique*, July 10, 2018.

216   Malcolm Webb, "Mali: Anger over G5 Sahel headquarters transfer to Bamako," Al Jazeera, June 17, 2019.

217   Caleb Weiss, "JNIM portrays its fight as part of Al Qaeda's global jihad," FDD's Long War Journal, October 2, 2018.

218   Marco d'Errico, Francesca Grazioli, and Aurélien Mellin, "The 2012 crisis in Mali and its implications on resilience and food security," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2017, p. 4; "Mali: Reform or Relapse," International Crisis Group, January 10, 2014; Grégory Chauzal and Thibault van Damme, "The roots of Mali's conflict: Moving beyond the 2012 crisis," Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, March 2015, pp. 22-23; Stephanie Pezard and Michael Shurkin, "Achieving Peace in Northern Mali: Past Agreements, Local Conflicts, and the Prospects for a Durable Settlement," RAND Corporation, 2015.

the extent that soft target targeting has occurred, it was most prominent early in the North African campaign, where markets were the most common soft target. While the group did not publicly claim the operation, AQIM's first purported bombing targeted an internet cafe in Casablanca in March 2007. Another then targeted a market in Lakhdaria, Algeria, in September 2007, and a third targeted a market in Bordj El Kiffan, Algeria, in June 2008. Following that, AQIM's last and final targeting of a market occurred in Marrakesh, Morocco, in April 2011,[219] even though, in the latter case, AQIM later denied responsibility despite Moroccan authorities linking AQIM to the bombing.[220] AQIM has not targeted markets since then.

Figure 12: Percentage of AQIM Deployed Attacker Targeting
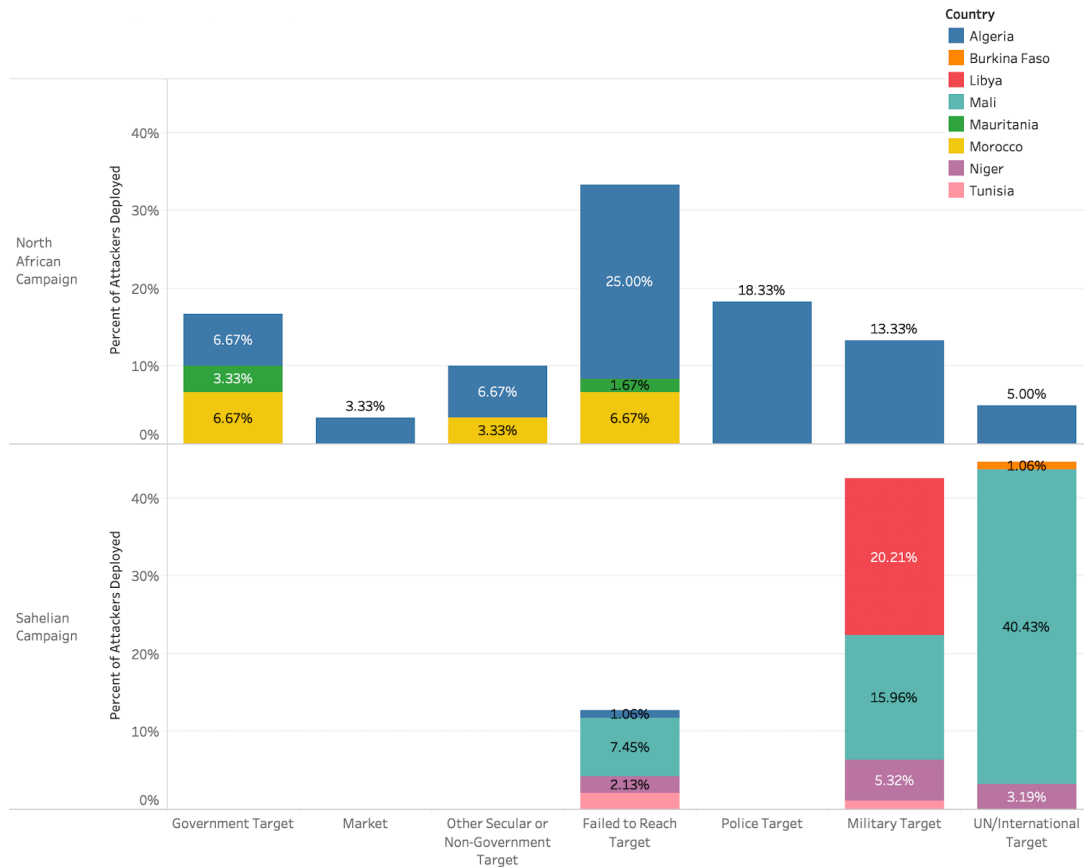
As AQIM transitioned into the Sahelian campaign, its soft targeting stopped completely. As per Figure 12 above, it has not launched a single attack directly against civilians in the entirety of its seven-year Sahelian campaign.[221] To underscore the lack of soft targeting, it has been nearly 12 years since AQIM or its network successfully targeted a civilian space, when, in 2008, an attack struck the Hotel Sofi in Bouira, Algeria.[222]

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219 "Morocco: Marrakesh bomb strikes Djemaa el-Fna square," BBC, April 28, 2011.

220 See "AQIM denies responsibility for fatal Marrakesh bombing," France 24, May 7, 2011, and Bruce Crumley, "Arrested Suspects Increase Speculation Of Al Qaeda Involvement In Marrakech Bombing," *Time*, May 6, 2011.

221 While it has not explicitly targeted civilians, some caveats do apply. For instance, JNIM did launch a suicide bombing against The Development Initiative (TDI), a mine-clearing NGO, in November 2018 in Gao. The July 2018 suicide bombing against French troops in Gao also resulted in civilian casualties, but civilians were not the actual target of the bombing. See Heni Nsaibia, "#Mali: Reported SV-BIED attack against the compound of mine clearance operator …," Menastream, Twitter, November 12, 2018, and Weiss, "JNIM claims suicide bombing on French troops in Gao."

222 Jenny Percival, "Algeria hit by two more fatal terror bombings," *Guardian*, August 20, 2008.

More acutely, the lack of targeting of civilian spaces during the Sahelian campaign is likely informed by the September 2013 directives issued by al-Qa`ida's overall leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, for members of his international network entitled the "General Guidelines for the Work of a Jihadi."[223] In these orders, the al-Qa`ida head implores his men to avoid directly targeting civilians in its operations, though with caveats based on specific targets. This seminal document has allowed al-Qa`ida to draw a distinction between itself and its more extremist rival and off-shoot, the Islamic State. AQIM and its later Sahelian incarnation JNIM, much like other al-Qa`ida branches,[224] have largely abided by al-Qa`ida's guidelines set forth in al-Zawahiri's directives.

However, as noted previously, it might also be the case that the contemporary lack of AQIM's lack of soft targeting also relates to the nature of its primary enemy: militaries and governments of the Sahel and broader international community. Indeed, were they not so heavily pursued, their targeting efforts toward civilian spaces might evidence different patterns.

4.4: Comparing AQIM's Failures Across Campaigns

The database used for this report also captures instances in which AQIM's suicide attackers fail. To that end, this report delineates two genres of failure—failure to detonate (failure type 1) and failure to kill (failure type 2)—and describes AQIM's evolution as regards each.[225] Understanding these different kinds of failure can also inform policymakers and scholars about which stage of suicide terrorism is most difficult, from a perspective of both operational sophistication and strategic design.

Genres of Suicide Attack Failures

Failure Type 1: Failure to Detonate

The first way that suicide attacks can fail occurs when attackers are deployed to attack, but fail to detonate their explosives at all. These failures to detonate at all can be caused by technical failure within the explosives themselves, by unintentional user error on the behalf of the attacker, or because the would-be attacker was apprehended or otherwise stopped before detonation could occur.

Failure Type 2: Failure to Kill

The second way that suicide attacks can fail occurs when attackers are deployed and detonate their explosives, but fail to kill anyone but themselves. While it may well be argued that even causing physical, non-lethal destruction to a building might render an attack a success even if no kills accompany it, in the authors' logic, the loss of a human attacker's life simply to damage property should not be considered a success. There are various reasons why an attacker may detonate with no kills: most commonly, it is the case that detonations with no kills occur when attackers detonate prematurely, which often occurs when they are under duress as a result of being under scrutiny (and thus likely apprehension) by security services. Below, this report presents statistics on AQIM suicide attackers' tendencies to fail via failure type 1 (non-detonation), failure type 2 (non-kills), or to conduct successful attacks.

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223 Ayman al-Zawahiri, "General Guidelines for the Work of a Jihadi," As-Sahab Media, September 14, 2013, accessible at Jihadology.

224 Katherine Zimmerman, "Al Qaeda's Strengthening in the Shadows," Statement before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence on "The Persistent Threat: Al Qaeda's Evolution and Resilience," July 13, 2017; Sajjan M. Gohel, "Deciphering Ayman Al-Zawahiri and Al-Qaeda's Strategic and Ideological Imperatives," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11:1 (2017); Carla E. Humud, "Al Qaeda and U.S. Policy: Middle East and Africa," Congressional Research Service, August 11, 2016.

225 These types of failures are common; sources are quick to note if a bomber was thwarted, captured, or killed before his or her explosives were detonated. In cases where a bomber is shot, triggering a detonation, these are included as a Type 1 failure. Distinctly, the authors note Type 2 failures are instances where a bomber detonates to avoid capture, before they reach their target, or when no source indicates that a detonation wrought any casualties.
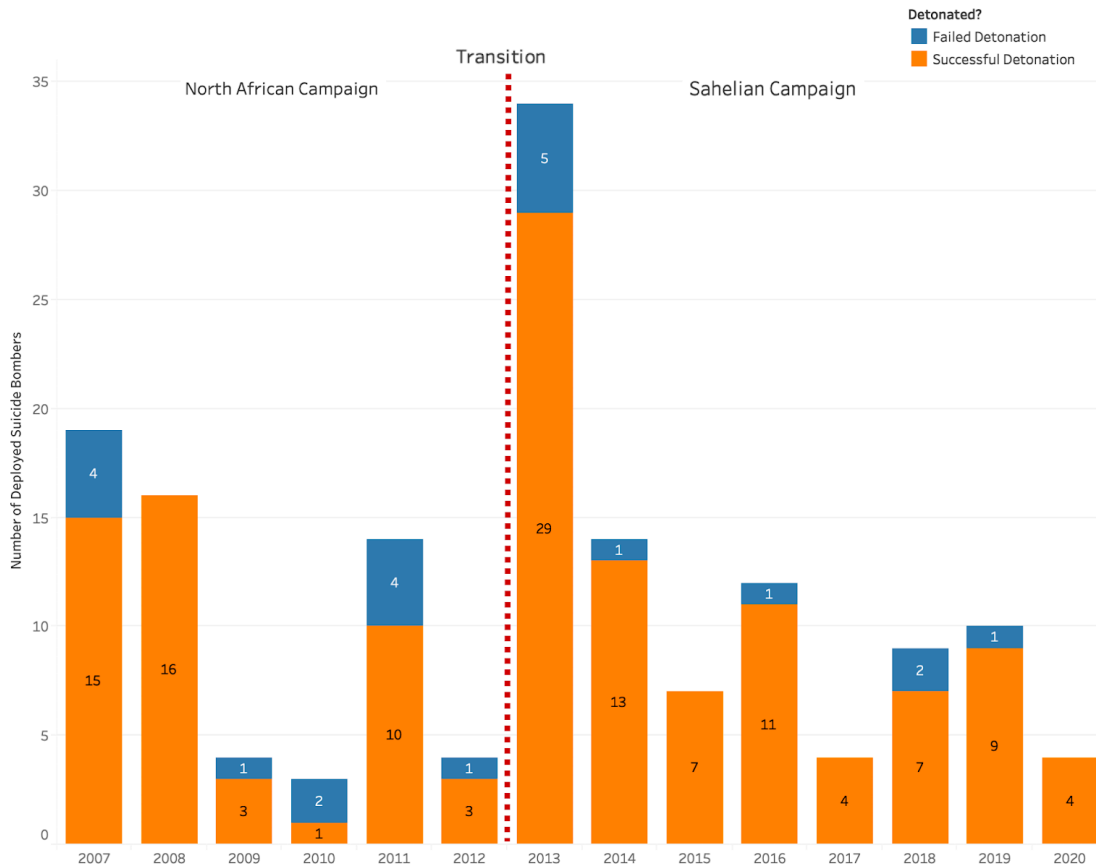
Assessing Failure Type 1: Non-Detonation: A Pervasive Trend, Mitigated by AQIM's Southward Moves

As concerns AQIM suicide attackers' failures to detonate, it bears noting that a reasonably large percentage (21.8%) of deployed AQIM suicide bombers failed to detonate at all. Unsurprisingly, the two countries with the largest AQIM suicide presence generally also saw the largest percentages of AQIM suicide failures: Algeria saw 18.8% of its deployed bombers fail to detonate, while Mali saw only 10% fail to detonate. Other countries like Morocco, which saw very low numbers of AQIM bombers at all, had surprisingly high rates of suicide bombers' deployments but non-detonations.

When it comes to the question of AQIM's evolution in the tendency of failures by non-detonation, evidence suggests that in its shift from the North African campaign to the Sahelian campaign, AQIM has been able to improve its tendencies for deployment and non-detonation. Whereas 20.0% of all attacks in the North African campaign saw deployment with non-detonation, only 10.6% of attacks in Sahelian campaign saw the same.

The lower rates of non-detonations in the Sahel appear to be linked to the nature in which suicide bombings have been used in the region. In North Africa, of those failed bombers who actually reached their target, (four—two in Algeria and two in Morocco) sought to attack government institutions, U.N. locations, and an internet cafe. In the Sahel, all but one instance of failed bombings via non-detonation have been directed toward French or U.N. bases in Mali. This finding matches the overall targeting choices for each of AQIM's campaigns in that the Sahel has seen more of an explicit focus on local and international military targets. Additionally, the overall use of suicide bombings in the Sahel has been more commonly found as part of larger assaults indicating its tactical use by the group against these military targets. Coupled with the wider targeting preferences in North Africa, this likely accounts for smaller non-detonation rates in the Sahel.

Figure 13: AQIM Suicide Bombing Failures of Detonation

Assessing Failure Type 2: Detonations But No Kills: AQIM's Contemporary Challenge in Mali

In the case of AQIM's suicide attackers, the second genre of failure (detonations but no kills) occurs somewhat frequently as well, in 22.7% of bombers who detonated their explosives. In this category of failure, Mali, not Algeria, had the greatest number of instances of detonations but no kills at 16. For its part, Algeria only saw five of this type. For their parts, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, none of which has ever been a primary location for AQIM's suicide attacks, each had instances of detonations with no kills.

As concerns the evolution of AQIM's tendency to have suicide attackers detonate but fail to kill, two interesting trends come to light. First, the group has always had some challenges with this issue since its inception, a common trend for most groups: for instance, of Boko Haram's deployed bombers with successful detonations, 140 had non-lethal detonations (25.6%), as compared to 18 of al-Shabaab's 219 deployed bombers (8.2%). Second, and more germanely, it is the case that in many of its most recent attacks after January 2019, AQIM's suicide attackers detonated with no kills, all in Mali. In an attack on the French base located in the Gao, Mali, airport in July 2019, the attacker injured French and Estonian troops, but ultimately, no one was killed.[226] Similarly, in an attack on the E.U. training mission near Bamako in February 2019, suicide bombers were launched as a part of a broader attack, though no one was killed in the assault.[227] Recently though, JNIM's bombings have shown more promise in

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226   Fergus Kelly, "Suicide car bomb targets French military base in Gao, Mali," Defense Post, July 22, 2019.

227   Ministère de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile, "Le Ministre de la Sécurité et de la Protection Civile informe l'opinion nationale et internationale que ce jour 24 février 2019 ...," Facebook, February 24, 2019; "EU training mission comes under attack in Mali," Associated Press, February 24, 2019.

successfully incurring casualties; a December 2019 detonation on a Nigerien military base in western Niger, as well as an assault outside of Timbuktu and a set of VBIEDs in Dinangourou all proved fatal to their targets.[228] With this data point in hand, policymakers should reassess the efficacy of AQIM's suicide attack efforts, as they learn new tactics and expand outside their geographic reach.

*Figure 14: AQIM Suicide Bombings Failures of Lethality*
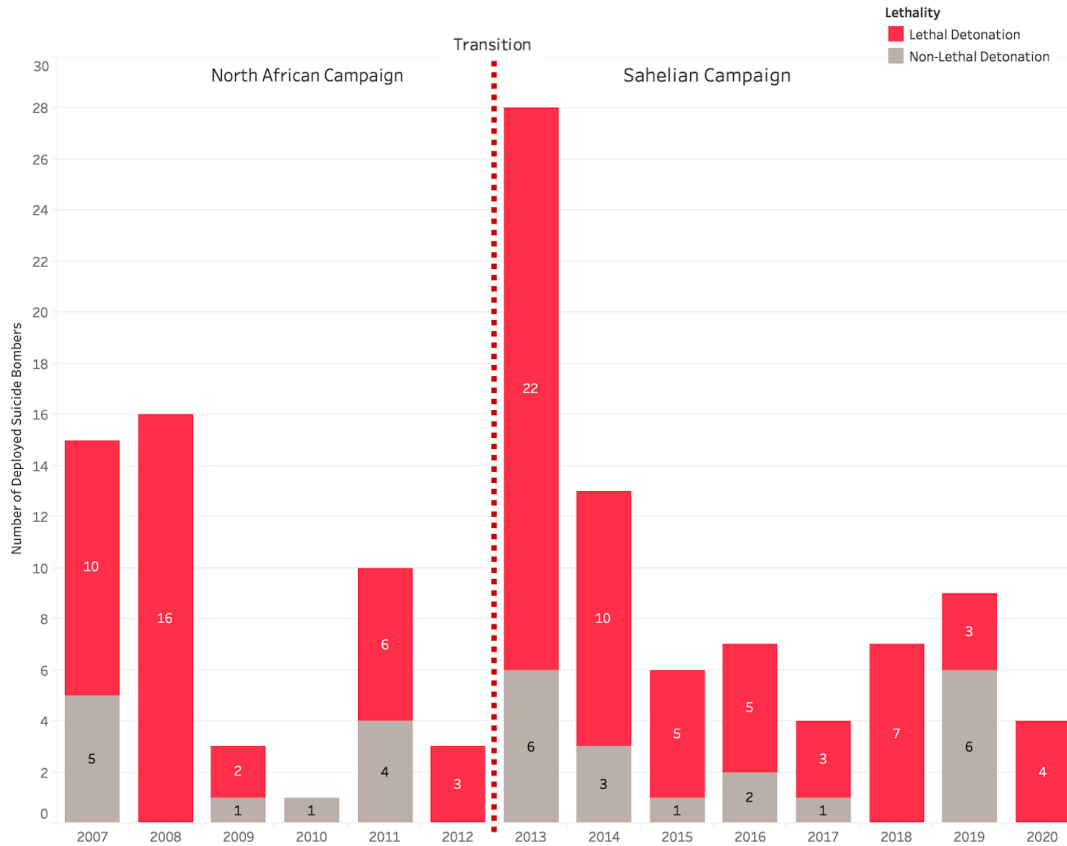
A Moderately High and Geographically Widespread Tendency for Failure Overall

With the two genres of failure presented above, in summary, AQIM has a relatively high degree of suicide attack failure in general, as detailed in Figure 15. These failures have also occurred in a wide array of places: in the eight countries in which AQIM has ever launched suicide attacks, it has launched failed attacks in seven, including Algeria, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Libya, Niger, and Tunisia. The only place in which AQIM has not failed is Burkina Faso, a location in which it has exerted very little effort for suicide bombing operations in general with just a single suicide bombing. Had more attacks been attempted in Burkina Faso, the authors would also reasonably expect to see a higher number of failures.

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228 "Insécurité: au moins 2 soldats tués et 5 autres blessés dans l'attaque d'une position militaire à Agando (Tahoua)," ActuNiger, December 9, 2019.

Figure 15: AQIM Suicide Bombing Successes and Failures Over Time
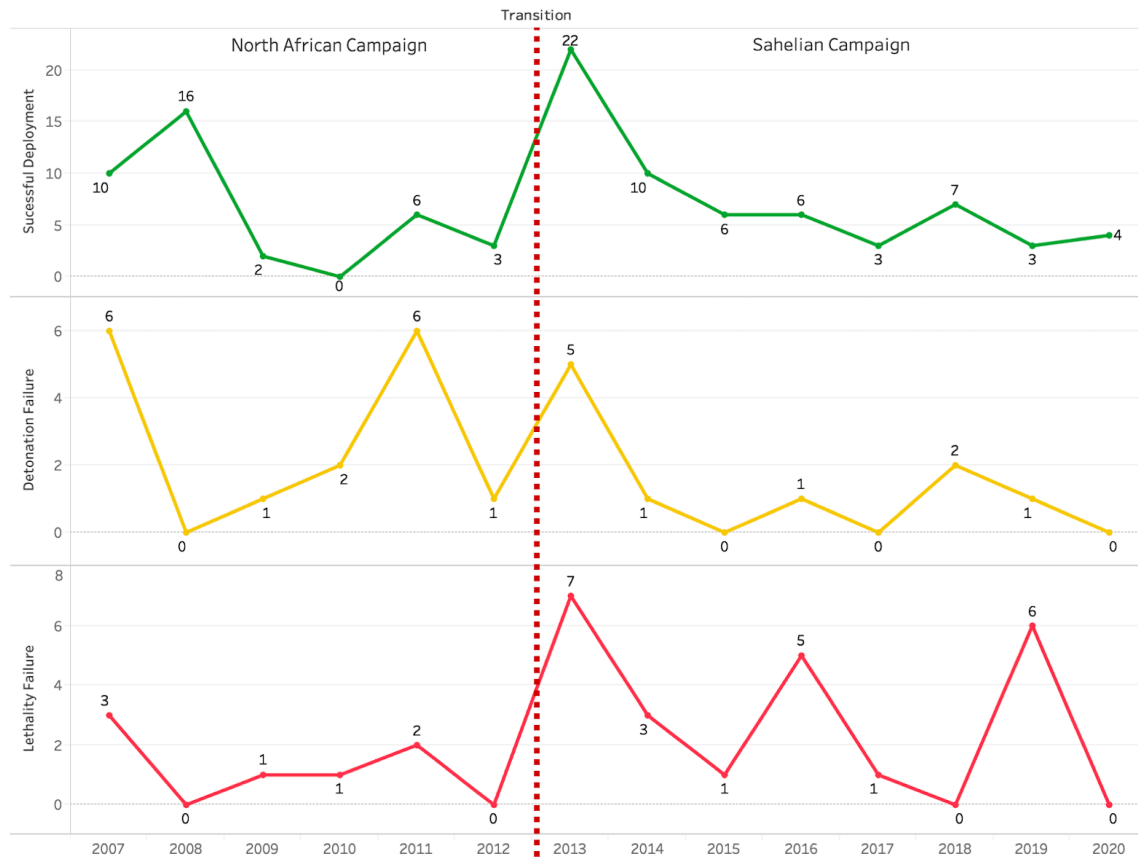
4.5: Comparing AQIM's Team Tendencies Across Campaigns

When terror groups deploy suicide attackers, they often deploy them in "teams"—groups of two or more suicide attackers that, together, take part in a single attack, or bombings in which a suicide attacker deploys embedded in a group of assailants using a variety of methods. Descriptions of the genres of "team" attacks, and AQIM's tendencies to employ such attacks, follow below.

Types of "Teams" of Suicide Attacks

In general, scholars have delineated four primary methods of "teamed," or "linked" suicide attacks.[229] The first genre are referred to as "simultaneous" attacks and occur when one or more suicide attackers detonates in the same location at the same time, simultaneously. The second genre is referred to as "sequential wave" attacks, which occur when one attacker detonates in a given space, and after a short amount of time (typically after first responders have come to address the aftermath of the first attack), a second attacker detonates in a second attack. The third genre is referred to as "non-proximate" attacks, and occurs when two or more suicide attackers affiliated with the same group undertake suicide attacks on the same day in the same polity, but not in actual physical proximity to one another; for instance, one might see a suicide attack occurring at a market on one side of town while another suicide attack occurs at a bus stop on the other side of town, each attack being undertaken by members of the same terror group. A fourth genre of team attack is referred to as a "mixed-method"

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229 Warner, Chapin, and Matfess, pp. 25-57.

attack, and occurs when a suicide attacker is paired with a non-suicide attacker to conduct an attack; for instance, a suicide attacker might detonate at the gates of a military installation, after which his 'teammate' might enter the building with a firearm. Outside of these four genres of teams, there are, of course, suicide attacks that simply involve one individual.

AQIM's Suicide Attack Teams: An Enduring Tendency to Use Teams Across Time

In general, AQIM's suicide bombing strategy has had a somewhat strong reliance on using teams of suicide attackers. In total, 35.7% of its attacks have been carried out by more than one attacker. In broad terms, AQIM-affiliated groups have continued their tendency to use teams of attackers from the North African campaign throughout the Sahelian campaign. While the North African campaign saw 36.6% of total AQIM attacks occur with a "team" element, that percentage stayed stable in the Sahelian campaign, with 38.3% of bombings being carried out by teams.

Indeed, unlike other African jihadi groups, AQIM has had several years in which a greater percentage of its suicide attacks occurred *in teams rather than outside of them*. For example, 2007 saw 60% of all AQIM suicide attacks deploying a team, while 2018 and 2019 each boasted 66.7%. In 2020, 100% of deployed bombings had a team element. To the latter point, data suggests that AQIM's current suicide attack strategy prioritizes the use of teams over the use of single attackers.

The authors posit, in line with previous literature on linked suicide attacks, that AQIM deploys linked suicide attackers for a greater possibility of hitting targets, greater degrees of lethality, and the engendering greater fear among the public relative to the use of single bombers.[230] For example, inside Mali, the use of teams on fortified bases in Gao,[231] Tarkint,[232] and Aguelhok[233] has allowed for the group to inflict greater casualties on Malian and Chadian troops, respectively. By using teams in these assaults, it theoretically increased the chances of penetrating the base's perimeter to inflict higher rates of casualties. Elsewhere, in Algeria, teams have been used to strike at multiple different targets simultaneously in Algiers[234] or used in follow-on attacks on emergency personnel after a prior detonation such as in Kabylie.[235] In both of these examples, this method could bring an additional demoralizing effect to both the targeted military and civilian populace. At the same time, targeting multiple different locations simultaneously could provide extra propaganda for the group in attempting to portray itself as a larger, more capable organization.[236] The use of teams can also allow for a greater probability of success, as additional bombers increase the likelihood the intended target will be reached.[237]

However, despite some years having a majority of suicide attacks conducted by teams, many other years also saw AQIM not use a single teamed bomber at all. These wholly non-teamed years occurred in 2009 and 2010.

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230 Ibid.

231 Weiss, "JNIM targets Malian base in suicide assault."

232 Weiss, "JNIM claims suicide assault on Malian military."

233 Thomas Joscelyn and Caleb Weiss, "Attack on UN base in Mali carried out according to Zawahiri's guidelines, JNIM says," FDD's Long War Journal, January 20, 2019.

234 Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda strikes in Algiers," FDD's Long War Journal, April 11, 2007; Bill Roggio, "Al Qaeda hits UN offices, courts, police station in Algiers," FDD's Long War Journal, December 11, 2007.

235 Bill Roggio, "AQIM suicide bombers kill 4 in Algeria," FDD's Long War Journal, July 16, 2011.

236 Warner and Matfess.

237 Warner and Chapin.

Figure 16: AQIM Suicide Bombings: Linked Versus Unlinked
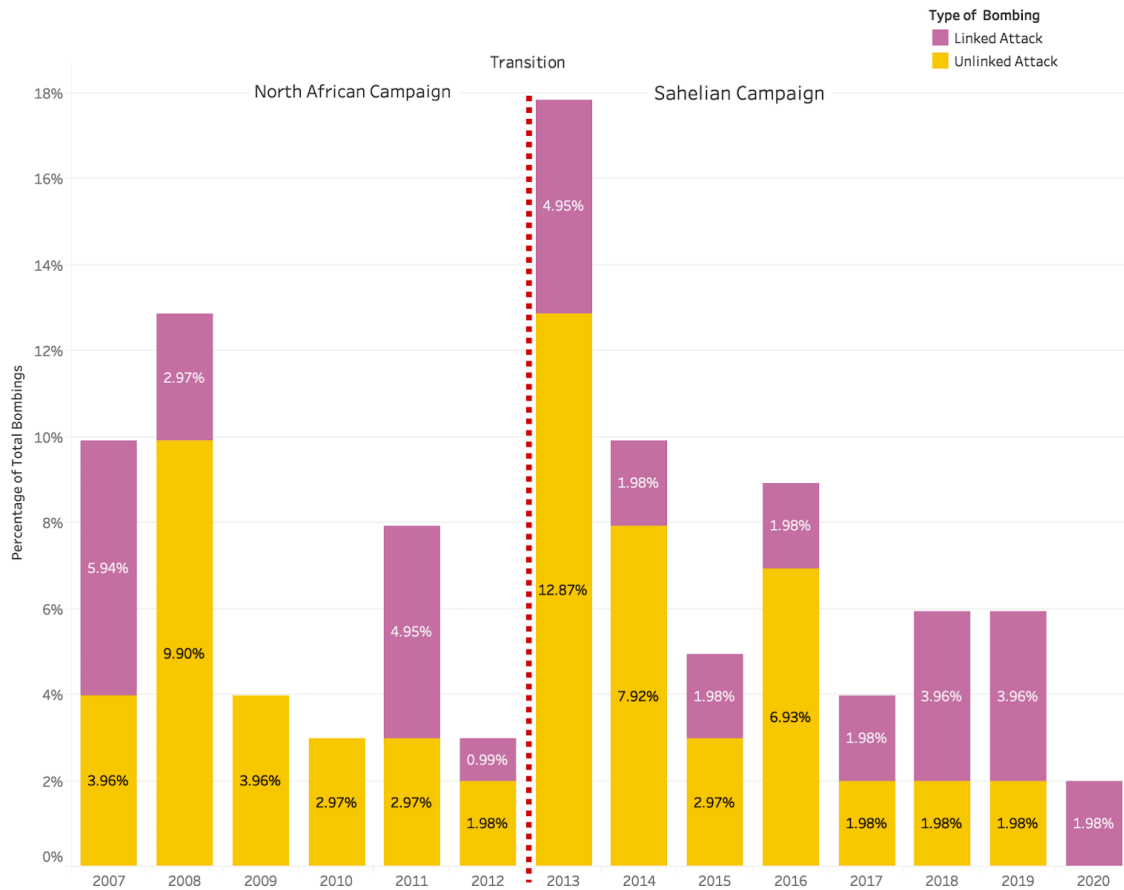
A Slight Preference for "Simultaneous" Teamed Attacks

As concerns AQIM's tendency to employ such genres as teams of attackers, as Figure 17 shows, AQIM's preferences for teamed attacks are simultaneous attacks (11), sequential wave attacks (9), and mixed-method (9). Of interest, there has only been four instances of AQIM undertaking a "non-proximate" team suicide attack.

Figure 17: AQIM Suicide Attacks by Type of Linked Attacks
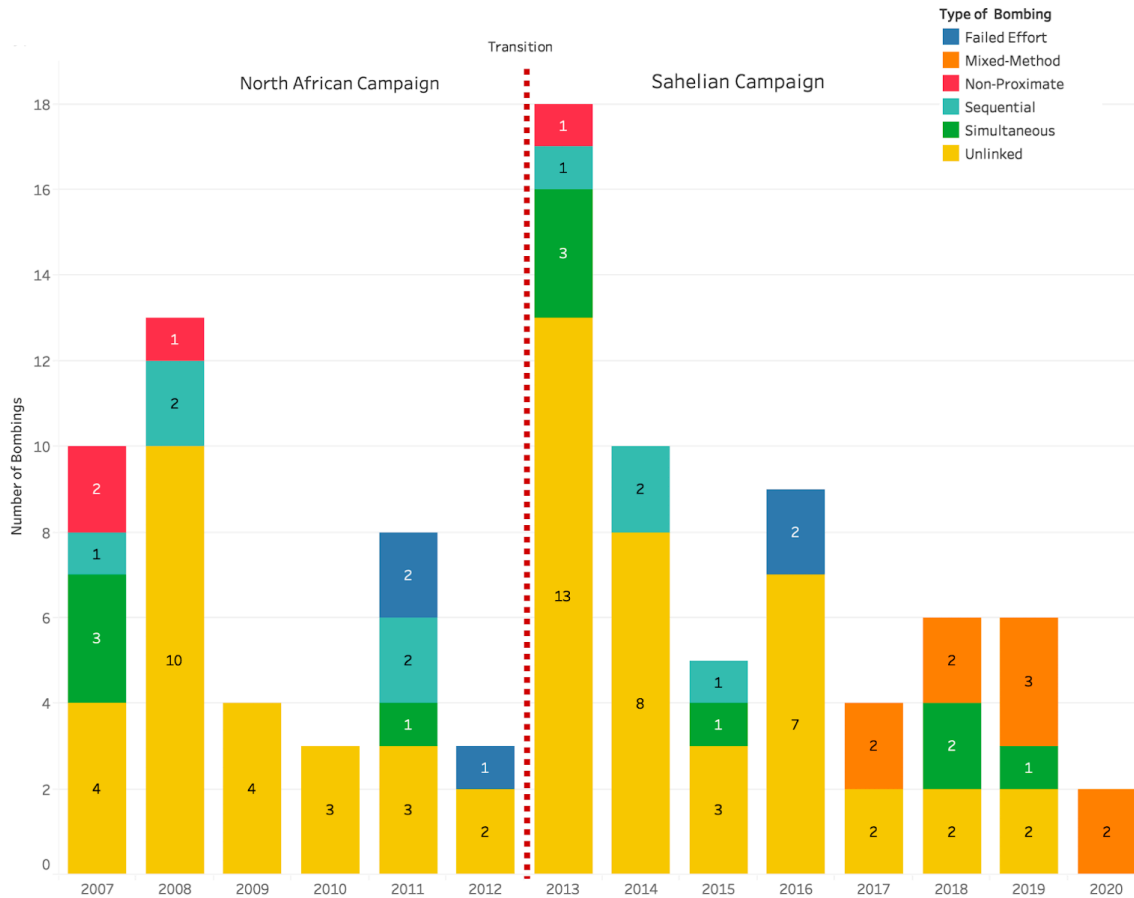
Sizes of Teams: A Slight Growth Over Time

Over time, the size of AQIM's suicide bomber teams have grown slightly. During the North African campaign, the majority of AQIM's teamed attacks were teams of two (12 in total), with two teams of three bombers and one team of four bombers. In contrast, the Sahelian campaign had eight teams of two bombers, but also many larger teams: one team of three bombers, four teams of four bombers, and one team of 10 bombers, in addition to other mixed-method attacks in which bombers were deployed in a larger assault.

This shift to larger team sizes is likely correlated to the nature of the targets of AQIM's attacks themselves. As AQIM shifted its suicide bombing efforts to the Sahel, its targeting preferences have also largely shifted to attacking both local and international military bases. As previously stated, joint French and U.N. bases in Mali tend to be better guarded and fortified than typical Malian bases.[238]

As such, AQIM can greatly increase its chances of success and overall effectiveness by using larger teams. For example, the group has used teams of three and four to penetrate heavily fortified French bases in Gao[239] and Timbuktu,[240] respectively. It is likely that these defenses have forced AQIM to re-

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238 Bryche; Michael Shurkin, "What Mali Really Needs," RAND Corporation, January 23, 2017; Charlie Pinkterton, "Long days, dust and heavy rains: That's life for Canadians in Mali's Camp Castor," iPolitics, August 24, 2018; Bundeswehr Exclusive, "Lagerleben | MALI | Folge 6," YouTube, October 23, 2017.

239 Weiss, "JNIM hits French base with suicide assault."

240 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM claims four suicide bombers used in Timbuktu attack," FDD's Long War Journal, April 27, 2018.

quire larger teams in its attacks. Additionally, the vast nature of the Sahel's geography has also likely made larger teams an attractive tactic for the group. For example, by utilizing a team of 10, al-Qa`ida's fighters were able to strike near simultaneously at a military barracks and uranium mine, which are situated nearly five hours apart, in Niger in May 2013.[241]

241 "Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'masterminded' Niger suicide bombs."

Part Five: Conclusion

This section offers a recapitulation of the findings of the report, and suggests implications of these findings for the international community.

In the main, this report has sought to shed light on the emergence, evolution, and ultimately, contemporary decline of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts. As it has shown, suicide attacks attributed to AQIM proper and its network throughout North and West Africa generally occurred in two campaigns: the North African campaign (2007 to 2012) and the Sahelian campaign (2013 to 2020). While Algeria and Morocco, and especially police and governmental targets within them, were the most common targets in the North African campaign, as AQIM as a whole moved southward toward northern Mali in 2012, the geographies, geopolitical contexts, targets, and claiming groups of AQIM's suicide attacks had changed by 2013.

After a hiatus in suicide bombing activity between July 2012 and January 2013, 2013 was the most active year for AQIM-claimed suicide attacks, which, during the Sahelian campaign (2013 to present), have inordinately focused on Mali and especially Malian military targets and international and U.N. targets. While the early years of AQIM's Sahelian campaign saw a multiplicity of AQIM-affiliated groups undertaking attacks, the merger of these groups under the umbrella of JNIM in March 2017 signaled a new phase for the group. Since then, JNIM has had a near-monopoly on AQIM-claimed suicide attacks, with AQIM's efforts being focused almost exclusively in Mali since 2015. Importantly, despite AQIM's rising profile in the Sahel overall, its suicide attack efforts do not match. As detailed in the next section, since its Sahelian shift AQIM and its affiliates have seen a decline in the overall number of suicide bombings carried out year over year, as well as a declining deadliness. Though they have been increasingly shown to deploy in teams, these teams are often ineffective.

For the international community, this study on AQIM's suicide bombers illuminates the fact that although AQIM and its network are increasingly looked on as some of the preeminent security threats on the African continent today, since JNIM's assumption of the group's mantle, suicide attacks are not its strong suit. AQIM-affiliated groups' deployment of suicide bombers has experienced a general decline in numbers over time, and its efficacy at killing has been low, perhaps as a result of its tendency to target military and U.N. installations when it does attempt to undertake such attacks. Importantly, given its historic and contemporary lack of targeting civilians and its relative lack of use of "non-traditional" demographics of women and children, the scope of recruitment, targeting, and efficacy of AQIM's suicide bombing efforts is rather narrow. Yet, simply because AQIM affiliates tend not to use suicide bombings frequently or efficiently at the moment, a retrospective look at the group's history suggests that its use of the tactic has occurred in waves, and thus, the group is likely to resume its use of the tactic once strategic goals dictate. Nevertheless, while the international community remains rightfully concerned about the threat of AQIM-affiliated groups generally,[242] such groups' contemporary suicide bombing efforts should engender comparatively little concern.

This is not to say that JNIM's overall activities should engender little concern. Indeed, JNIM and its rival the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara have contributed to an overall increase in violence over the past three years. For instance, the United States Department of State noted in its most recent edition of its yearly "Country Reports on Terrorism" that Burkina Faso alone saw a "250% increase in terrorist activity" from 2018 to 2019.[243] And in central Mali, JNIM's Katibat Macina contributes greatly to what

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242 "'Unprecedented terrorist violence' in West Africa, Sahel region," UN News, January 8, 2020; *"We Found Their Bodies Later That Day:" Atrocities by Armed Islamists and Security Forces in Burkina Faso's Sahel Region* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 2019); "Jihadist violence putting 'generation at risk' in Africa's Sahel: WFP," Reuters, November 19, 2019; "Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali," Human Rights Watch, February 10, 2020.

243 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2019," United States Department of State, June 2020.

Human Rights Watch calls "the epicenter of violence" in the Sahel.[244] While JNIM is by no means the main armed group perpetuating violence in central Mali, a region that has seen ethnic massacres performed by a multitude of various militias and armed groups,[245] JNIM's overall strategy in these areas might contribute to why one has seen a decline in the use of suicide bombings in recent years.

In the face of these community-based conflicts and the challenges of several counterterrorism campaigns in the Sahel, JNIM appears to be pursuing a mixed-methodology approach to its strategy. While the group continues to sporadically target French and U.N. forces—such as a rocket barrage on a MINUSMA camp in Menaka, Mali,[246] or an IED on Chadian peacekeepers near Aguelhok, Mali,[247] both in May 2020—the majority of its attacks are now on local Malian, Burkinabe, or Nigerien troops. In this vein, several of JNIM's most recent major assaults have been conducted on Malian military bases in Dioungani in January 2020,[248] Tarkint in March 2020,[249] and Bamba in April 2020;[250] and on Burkinabe military installations such as in Solle also in April 2020.[251] In all of these attacks, dozens of jihadis (or possibly even over 100 in the Dioungani battle[252]) were utilized to assault the bases from various directions. This tactic, one of overwhelming force on often poorly defended bases, may not necessitate the use of a suicide bombing much like JNIM's traditional assaults on French or U.N. forces. The heightened focus on local security forces may also be indicative of JNIM having to adapt in order to weather stronger and more effective counterterrorism campaigns conducted by France and the G5 Sahel, which has been able to neutralize several key JNIM leaders across Mali in the past three years.[253]

Concurrently, JNIM has attempted to position itself as a community defender to Fulani, Muslim Dogon, and other ethnic communities in Mali and Burkina Faso as a means to build further public support.[254] For instance, in Mali's central Mopti region in July 2018, JNIM took part in five separate ethnic-based clashes alongside Fulani militants against local Bambara or Dogon communities.[255] Local Malian authorities have often played into the ethnic massacres, committing their own extrajudicial executions in the region.[256] JNIM has subsequently exploited this fear of the central government or rival communities, which in turn helps recruit new soldiers and widen its support base across central Mali.[257] In many respects, this very same situation is playing out across various areas of Burkina Faso to the benefit of JNIM.[258] Thus, the decline in the use of suicide bombings may be a reflection of JNIM's challenges facing a multitude of hostile actors, reduced infrastructure or resources, as well

244 "Mali: Militias, Armed Islamists Ravage Central Mali."

245 "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?" International Crisis Group, July 6, 2016.

246 Menastream, "#Mali: #JNIM claimed a rocket barrage that targeted the #MINUSMA/#FAMa camp in #Menaka on Friday afternoon, nearly a dozen projectiles reportedly fell …," Twitter, May 22, 2020.

247 Menastream, "#Mali: Three peacekeepers killed and four severely wounded by IED explosion near Aguelhok, #Kidal, #JNIM claimed responsibility …," Twitter, May 10, 2020.

248 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM targets military bases in central Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, January 27, 2020.

249 Caleb Weiss, "JNIM kills dozens in Mali base attack," FDD's Long War Journal, March 22, 2020.

250 Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda, Islamic State strike across the Sahel," FDD's Long War Journal, April 19, 2020.

251 Ibid.

252 "At least 20 Mali soldiers killed in JNIM attack on Sokolo camp," Defense Post, January 27, 2020.

253 See, for instance, Caleb Weiss, "Senior JNIM leader reportedly killed by France," FDD's Long War Journal, November 6, 2019; Caleb Weiss, "JNIM confirms deaths of co-founder, senior leaders in French raids," FDD's Long War Journal, March 4, 2018; Caleb Weiss, "French military claims senior JNIM leader killed," FDD's Long War Journal, February 22, 2019; and Caleb Weiss, "AQIM emir confirms death of jihadist commander in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, December 12, 2018.

254 Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda's West African branch seeks French withdrawal, then negotiations," FDD's Long War Journal, March 10, 2020.

255 Caleb Weiss, "Analysis: Jihadist exploitation of communal violence in Mali," FDD's Long War Journal, July 17, 2018.

256 "Mali: Unchecked Abuses in Military Operations," Human Rights Watch, September 8, 2017.

257 Aaron Ross, "Where state is weak, Mali militants broker talks between rival clans," Reuters, August 28, 2020.

258 *"We Found Their Bodies Later That Day."*

as a diminished desire to inflict wanton violence as its focus increasingly switches to involvement in local and community-based conflicts.

In conclusion, though AQIM and JNIM rightfully remain closely watched sources of instability for the moment, their suicide bombing efforts do not rise to the level of threat of the groups as a whole.

Combating Terrorism Center

AT WEST POINT