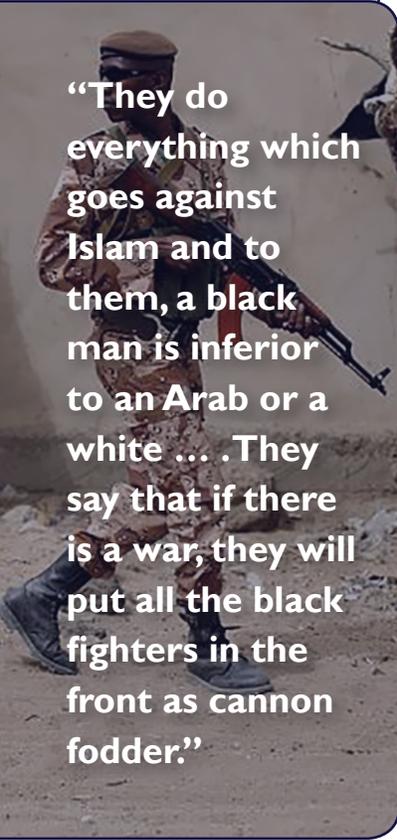


CASE STUDY ON RACE-BASED AL QAEDA DEFECTIONS IN MALI

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The narrative of one fighter's experience with an al Qaeda (AQ)-associated organization in northern Mali reveals some of the group's intrinsic weaknesses. His brazen defection from the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which itself originated as a defection from al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), provided the opportunity to analyze an important aspect to the internal dynamics of this emerging AQ-connected threat in Africa. It is directly tied to the case study subject's main complaint: the little-mentioned issue of race within AQ in Africa and beyond.



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Al Qaeda (AQ) and its associated movements thrive in ungoverned spaces, which describes much of Mali after a military coup in March 2012. By June, the Salafi-jihadists operating in Mali's chaotic north—al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the lead, along with the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith)—had hijacked the Tuareg rebellion and pushed the secular secessionists out of key strongholds to run Mali's vast north according to their radical Islamist rules. Western news stories told of a seemingly race-based, selective application of harsh Islamic law by MUJAO in the city of Gao: “According to Gao residents, the victims of sharia punishments were from Mali's black African ethnic groups, while the jihadis were mostly lighter-skinned Arabs—both Malian and foreign—and Tuaregs” (Hilsum 2013).

An event in November 2012 indicated possible deep racial tensions, discontent, and, above all, fear within MUJAO's own ranks. Hicham Bilal (a *nom de guerre*), the first black African commander of one of MUJAO's *katibas* (battalions), defected with a few dozen of his fighters and returned home to Niger just across the border. Bilal was so disillusioned with the entire multi-ethnic jihadist enterprise in Mali that he expressed his disgust, in uncompromising language, with the hypocrisy and racism that he witnessed. “These lunatics from MUJAO are not children of God. They are drug traffickers,” he told the Agence France-Presse (AFP). According to Bilal, “they do everything which goes against Islam and to them, a black man is inferior to an Arab or a white They say that if there is a war, they will put all the black fighters in the front as cannon fodder” (AFP 2012).

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE OF MUJAO

What sort of AQ franchise did Hicham Bilal join? MUJAO was a new group in Africa's "arc of instability" that did not even exist before the Libyan civil war. In a December 2011 video in the typical "mujahideen-in-the-field" style, MUJAO's members brandished their weapons, exhibited their Western hostages kidnapped for ransom, and made their threats. AFP noted that in this first communiqué from the group, "young black fighters were shown calling for 'pure and tough' Islam" and announcing their intention "to impose sharia across the whole of west Africa" and to export jihad wherever necessary ("Al-Qa'ida Maghreb Splinter Group ..." 2012). The movement declared its liberation as defectors from AQIM, the dominant regional AQ affiliate from Algeria.

MUJAO may have promised to bring a unique form of sharia in their video manifesto, but they were far from innovative in their funding. They followed the same illicit path as other AQ-associated groups throughout Africa to become well financed and well armed. As a result, MUJAO was a player and possible competitor in the Sahara-Sahel region's "terrorist economy," which involved smuggling, drug trafficking—taxing the Colombian-originated caravans of cocaine destined for Europe—and kidnapping for ransom (Malagardis 2012; Freeman 2013).

MUJAO, for all its similarities to the standard AQ group formation, distanced itself from AQIM with a new West African identity that merits attention. MUJAO's determination to

carve out a separate identity—one that appeared not to be Algerian driven or Arab dominated—that would open up new horizons for jihad in West Africa stands in stark contrast to its subsequent actions in Mali. It was this dichotomy between words and deeds that lay behind the confusion over MUJAO's true purpose and made the group's attitude toward race such a matter of contention. It also made it ripe for defections and potential exploitation of those weaknesses.

MUJAO, during its initial months, drew heavily upon North African leadership and ethnic Arabs for its core membership. As the operational demands in northern Mali increased, MUJAO started to diversify and expand its recruiting base both locally and internationally. MUJAO specifically targeted the Songhai, a West African people of the Gao region, for recruitment and produced a video with symbols that recalled the once mighty Songhai empire of the 15th and 16th centuries and its warrior past. The campaign paid off, at least according to MUJAO's own publicity. By early 2013, the group announced the formation of a new brigade comprising mainly Songhai fighters. One Western news report, however, offered the contradictory view that few black Malians were willing to join MUJAO given its harsh policies and race-based double standards (Hilsum 2013).

As mobilization increased in mid-2012, MUJAO spokesmen began to talk about the "scores" of mainly West African recruits coming to their two camps in Gao for military training and religious instruction. It is possible that MUJAO's decision to make Hicham Bilal a commander of a *katiba* around

this time was an effort to broaden the group's racial appeal. In one of his initial interviews, Bilal predicted that more black Africans would be placed in MUJAO leadership positions: "the world is the same for Muslims [who are] black, white, or other colors" (Daniel 2012b).

THE SUDDEN DISAPPEARANCE OF HICHAM BILAL

On November 7, 2012, following numerous defections from MUJAO's ranks, the group's leader in Gao threatened to kill any fighters who attempted to leave. He warned that win or lose, "we will fight this war together," and then proceeded to enforce cohesion over the next few weeks by fighting the Tuareg rebels. A source inside Gao described the movement in early November as "desperate and on alert, trying by all means to retain recruits" (The Fight 2012).

Hicham Bilal was the leader of the defectors and represented their fears, but, in the end, he was speaking only about his own reasons for his sudden departure. Like many others before him who "joined the caravan" and followed the path to jihad, simply going home again to Niger and returning to a normal life was difficult—if not impossible—given that Nigerien security services would be vigilant and likely aware of his movements. Indeed, he quickly ended up in the hands of the authorities in Niamey. Whether he surrendered through an amnesty deal or, more likely, was captured after a Malian tip-off is unclear. While the details

are unknown, it is probable that Bilal provided, either by debriefing or interrogation, valuable insider information on MUJAO's operations—especially its tactics, techniques, and procedures, organizational structure, and plans—that Niger and other partner countries put to good use. Nigerien and Malian security sources confirmed Hicham Bilal's defection story with AFP, saying that he was highly critical of those for whom he had worked (AFP 2012).

What is known for certain is what Bilal thought about MUJAO, as told to the French language press. He spoke with Radio France Internationale (RFI) before and after his defection. He mentioned that he missed his country and his family, and he pointed to the un-Islamic behavior in MUJAO: "They kill, rape, and steal" (Radio France Internationale 2012). He called them madmen who looked at blacks as inferiors and planned to use them as "cannon fodder" in the case of a war with international forces. Hicham Bilal, however, was not always so critical of MUJAO or of fighting for them. He once believed in an Islam without borders. "I am not a Nigerien, I am a Muslim," he told RFI. Moreover, he explained that MUJAO's plans aimed far beyond Mali. Its goal was the unification of all West Africa, like the empires of old ("Bilal Hicham, Rebelle ..." 2012).

Bilal was full of tough talk in July 2012 over the possibility of a foreign military intervention and scoffed at the idea of its success, yet he assured the reporter that it was his dream to "die a martyr" ("Bilal Hicham, Rebelle ..." 2012). With the

arrival of the sub-Saharan fighters, he expressed surprise at the number of recruits and sensed a renewed unity and purpose among Islamists: “Since all of them want to go to war,” Bilal said, “the fighters are no longer divided into separate Islamist movements. We are all mujahedeen,” he declared. “Here, there’s no more [MUJAO, Ansar Dine, or AQIM]” (Daniel 2012a).

Bilal’s belief in MUJAO’s unity and purpose did not last. There are at least three possible explanations for Bilal’s escape from Gao. First, it could have been a smokescreen for a falling out he had with MUJAO’s leadership. They may have accused him of wrongdoing (e.g., taking an unauthorized share of the drug profits), and he may have decided to make a preemptive strike and exact revenge by tarnishing the group’s image. AQ does not exactly advertise its role in the drug trade or the fact that some of its members feel they are regarded as lesser Muslims.

Second, it should at least be considered that Bilal’s role in MUJAO was not what it seemed because he could have been an infiltrator who was sent by a foreign intelligence service to gather information, provoke the group into self-destructive behavior, and sow dissension within MUJAO’s ranks. However, the timing of his departure and his blatant attention-seeking with the media suggest that the defection was more about his wounded pride and personal safety in the face of an impending invasion. By remaining in Gao and further disrupting MUJAO’s operations, Bilal could have ensured that they would not fight effectively well into the future, if that were indeed his real intent.

The final, and most likely, explanation is that Bilal was a true believer in MUJAO’s mission and AQ-styled rhetoric, at least in the beginning, but was shocked by the ugly reality of an AQ movement from the inside. He was not a professional jihadist, but rather an agronomist by training. Evidently, the Islamic extremism in Mali proved too extreme for him, and so he went home.

Ultimately, what Hicham Bilal and the other fighters most feared led to the rapid collapse of the proto-Islamist state in northern Mali. MUJAO’s capture of Konna, where eyewitness accounts reported that a force of mostly black fighters took over the town, triggered the French military intervention in January 2013. After French and Malian forces liberated the former strongholds and after the jihadists, as expected, retreated back to their Saharan hideouts, the ethnic and racial tensions in Gao brought reprisals as its citizens hunted down MUJAO members and suspected collaborators. In one case of vigilante justice, a mob tore “a jihadi fighter limb from limb” (Hilsum 2013). The BBC’s reporting summed it all up by noting that “a sinister atmosphere still haunts Gao” (Fessy 2013).

MUJAO’S FAILED RACIAL NARRATIVE

Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow John Campbell notes that “throughout the Mali crisis, the role of racism in shaping the conflict has not received much emphasis, at least in U.S. commentary. Yet, it plays an important role on the ground” (Council of Foreign Relations Africa

in Transition Blog 2012; Council of Foreign Relations Africa in Transition Blog 2013). Hence, there is the need for further research into the role of racial tensions within AQ-linked groups and their impact, if any, on its operations in West Africa and elsewhere. This question—whether racism within AQ associates in general or the impact of Arab racism on AQ operations in Africa—has not been dealt with in great detail in terrorism literature because perhaps they are considered taboo topics to pursue, particularly by non-Muslims (The New Statesman’s Blog 2010). Nevertheless, the significance of race’s impact upon AQ effectiveness, given what transpired in Mali, is a topic that is too important to ignore. The Salafi-jihadists’ experiences in northern Mali fit the paradigm of previous failed jihads but do provide lessons unique to a group like MUJAO and its overt attempts and subsequent failures at ethnic and racial unity.

Is anything to be gained by pursuing the racism narrative through counter-messaging? The U.S. government has, in fact, already gone on record that AQ is racist. In July 2010, President Obama was interviewed by the South African Broadcasting Corporation and used the occasion of the AQ-associated group al Shabaab’s suicide bombings in Uganda to broach the subject. Al Shabaab’s attack—its first outside Somalia—targeted spectators watching the broadcast of the World Cup final in South Africa and killed 74 people. Obama specifically charged that according to AQ organizations’ own statements, “they do not regard African life as valuable in and of itself.

They see it as a potential place where you can carry out ideological battles that kill innocents without regard to long-term consequences for their short-term tactical gains” (ABC News Blog 2010).

White House aides wanted to make clear to the media that Obama “was [making] an argument that the terrorist groups are racist.” To drive home the messaging, one official elaborated on AQ’s racial bias in terms that presaged Hicham Bilal’s remarks more than 2 years later: “Al Qaeda recruits have said that al Qaeda is racist against black members from West Africa because they are only used in lower level operations. In short ... al Qaeda is a racist organization that treats black Africans like cannon fodder and does not value human life” (ABC News Blog 2010).

While the Obama administration’s remarks generated a brief yet intense discussion on AQ racism within the United States, particularly among conservative commentators, Americans were not the intended audience for his remarks. They were meant for AQ’s potential recruits throughout sub-Saharan Africa to emphasize that the world’s leader in the fight against Islamic extremists also understood what Africans already implicitly understood and have experienced from AQ.

Such a high-level strategic communication effort has not been repeated with Mali. Instead, the United States has used more routine counter-messaging approaches by using the AQ racism narrative to make sure that the Gao defections got wider exposure. U.S. Africa Command’s public media website, *Magharebia.com*, is part of

the Pentagon's Trans-Regional Web Initiative that publishes in English, French, and Arabic and is aimed at foreign audiences in Northwest Africa. Not surprisingly, *Magharebia* was at the forefront in online coverage of the story of MUJAO's creation and the defection of Hicham Bilal. Using both wire and commissioned reports from writers in the region, the website ran stories on the "racist practices" and amplified the message of MUJAO's ethnic and racial divisions that resulted in defections: "racism has been a key factor pushing many young Africans of non-Arab descent to defect and return to their normal lives in their countries of origin" (Guèye 2012; Oumar 2012).

The most significant implication of the Mali defection narratives for counter-messaging is not to do too much from too high a platform, but, rather, let AQ-linked groups such as MUJAO continue to harm themselves through their own practices and glaring mistakes on the ground and capitalize upon these errors in the background. The aim is not to build up the threat to be larger than it is by talking too much about the group in any terms, following the "any publicity is good publicity" rule of thumb for terrorist organizations. Moreover, when West Africans face racism from an organization dominated by Arab extremists, the messengers that reinforce AQ's unsuitability should not be outsiders but moderate Muslims within the region who can properly frame the issues and speak firsthand of the injustice of AQ's practices and the insincerity of their words.

As is often the case with AQ-associated groups, real-world events do the best job of advertising AQ's weaknesses and hurting its recruitment efforts. MUJAO's narrative failed of its own accord. The same jihadist forum in which members showed elation at AQ's progress in Mali in 2012 turned to frustration and dejection once the "French crusaders" appeared in early 2013 and once the lack of Muslim outrage and desire to join this failed jihad became apparent. One member expressed frustration that Muslim media continued to show *Star Academy* (an export version of *American Idol*) "while France kills Muslims in Mali" ("Early Perspectives on the Mali Crisis ..." 2013).

The "stay on the couch and enjoy Western-style entertainment instead of the horrors of war" message has long been advocated as a standard anti-radicalization approach (Stout, Huckabey, and Schindler 2008¹). Unfortunately, multitudes of young, grievance-fueled Muslim men of many races and backgrounds still identify with the Salafi-jihadist cause and get off their couches to go fight in distant lands because they still believe in the main AQ narrative of overthrowing apostate governments and establishing a global caliphate. Niger's Hicham Bilal was evidently of that mindset. Once experiences clash with expectations, some of these sudden or accidental jihadists can quickly self-deradicalize when reality sets in. In Bilal's case, he did not have to travel too far in West Africa on the path to jihad or spend too much time in MUJAO before the narrative soured and he returned home to tell a different story of life fighting for AQ in Mali.

¹ See the chapters on strategic communication and recruitment.

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