

Who is Ansar Dine?



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Ansar Dine is the new power player in northern Mali, and the United States is worried.

The Islamist rebel group, which in June took de facto control over a swath of the Sahara the size of Texas, is raising diplomatic eyebrows across the globe for its **destruction of U.N. World Heritage Sites** in Timbuktu, the threat that it could pose to U.S. and global security interests, and the humanitarian crisis manifested by an **estimated 420,000 displaced** persons.

With Ansar Dine operating in a largely ungoverned expanse of the Sahara, the United States and other countries are concerned that, like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia before it, northern Mali could become an out of the way haven for affiliates of al Qaeda. Yet despite the potential threats it poses, Ansar Dine's newness, coupled with constantly shifting alliances in the region, have made a clear understanding of the group hard to come by. With that in mind it's worth asking what Ansar Dine is, what it wants, and how the rest of the world is responding.

Ansar Dine, which roughly translates to "defenders of the faith," is a rebel group that emerged in Mali in March 2012 that seeks the installation of a strict interpretation of sharia law. It gained partial control over the northern stretches of Mali alongside another rebel group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL), on March 22, when the government in Bamako was overthrown in a military coup.

Ansar Dine is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, the former **senior commander** of a rebel military group in Mali in the 1990s who has also formerly served as a negotiator for the release of Westerners kidnapped by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), of which his cousin is a commander. Known as a powerful, if informal, powerbroker in northern Malian politics for decades, reports indicate that Ag Ghaly created Ansar Dine after his failed attempts to wrest control of the MNL for himself.

Though based in Mali, Ansar Dine is a truly transnational outfit. Ag Ghaly allegedly received Salafist religious training from Pakistani "missionaries" in northern Mali in the 1990s, views that were abandoned then rekindled during his diplomatic service in Saudi Arabia years later. Ansar Dine is **believed to be financially backed by Qatar**, and the group is believed to draw its membership from a range of nations including Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Afghanistan and Algeria. Global in reach, Ansar Dine recently brought its efforts online by releasing a **propaganda video** and establishing a presence in **jihadist chat rooms**.

So, what does Ansar Dine want? The group's stated goal is the imposition of strict sharia law throughout Mali. After having taken control of the three major cities in the north,

including Kidal, Timbuktu, and for the most part, Gao, Ansar Dine has banned alcohol, smoking, Friday visitations to cemeteries, watching soccer, and women are now required to wear veils.

But part of the challenge in gaining a broader understanding of Ansar Dine lies in the fact that the group's allegiances are constantly shifting amongst at least four other main players in northern Mali: the MNLA, AQIM, the West African jihadist group MUJAO, and the Malian army. To that end, a Malian newspaper described the north of the country as “total confusion; **it is difficult to know who controls what!**”

Ansar Dine can't be understood without mention of the MNLA. The MNLA is composed primarily of nomadic Tuaregs, the historic inhabitants of northern Mali, who have periodically rebelled against Malian authority over the north of the country. When Malian president Amadou Touré was ousted in a putsch in March 2012, the MNLA consolidated power in the vacuum left in the north. Ansar Dine then brokered a parasitic alliance with the MNLA that Mali expert **Jeremy Keenan describes** as the MNLA taking over a town, and upon its seizure, Ansar Dine entering behind them and “start[ing] bossing everyone around about sharia law.” Allied with Ansar Dine, in April the MNLA proclaimed the creation of a new state called the Islamic Republic of Azawad, a claim the African Union rejected as “null and of no value whatsoever”.

That marriage ended in a quick and messy divorce: Ansar Dine's vision for the installation of *sharia* didn't mesh with the MNLA's desire for secular statehood. On June 26 and 27, Ansar Dine made public proclamations that it had **chased out remaining MNLA elements** from all major northern Malian cities, and was in control of the entirety of the region. For its part, the MNLA currently **denies any affiliation** with Ansar Dine, and has **accused the Western media** of portraying more of a connection between the two groups than actually exists. At present, the MNLA claims that its departure from northern Mali was strategic and was made so as to “**prepare our new war strategies.**”

An important ally of Ansar Dine is the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

(MUJAO). Appearing in March as a self-proclaimed offshoot of AQIM, MUJAO's goal is to provide "all kinds of material and military support for young Muslims determined to raise the banner of Islam." Many residents of **MUJAO-occupied towns like the group** because it has provided social services not offered by either the MNLA or the Malian state. The group draws its membership from across West Africa, and it was reported that MUJAO's Gao branch recently **welcomed some 200 recruits** from countries including Burkina Faso, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast. Other reports condemn MUJAO for recruiting children.

Primary amongst the other local actors Ansar Dine deals with is AQIM, **which has real (if nebulous) associations with both Ansar Dine and MUJAO**, as well as the cadre of South American drug traffickers using West Africa as a cocaine trafficking alleyway to Europe. Ansar Dine is further having to confront the remaining soldiers loyal to the Malian army, some of whom are now defecting and siding with Ansar Dine. For their part, some Malians in occupied areas **have rebelled against Ansar Dine's presence**. Their protests have largely been directed against the harsh application of sharia law.

Looking forward, Ansar Dine's hold on the north shows no signs of easing. The current Malian government, in a shambles in the aftermath of the March overthrow, is unlikely to have the ability to force a military solution to the problem.

Another approach for ousting Ansar Dine could come in the form of a transnational African military coalition. **Led by calls from Benin's President Boni Yayi**, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has considered deploying an intervention force, though others worry that a West African-led intervention would have a **greater destabilizing effect throughout the region** than the crisis itself.

As the United States contemplates how to deal with Ansar Dine, the reality is that a U.S. or Western allied military intervention would be exceedingly difficult and potentially injudicious. Though the U.S. has recently said that "all options are being considered," such an incursion would likely only add fuel to Ansar Dine's ideological fire. Despite its

hazards, the best option is to support Mali and West African regional organizations such as ECOWAS as they craft a solution that has the potential for long term stability, and one that is in the best interests of the people of the region.