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Anatomy of the Jihadist Threat in the Sahel

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Abstract:

The Sahel is undergoing an unprecedented security crisis, marked by escalating violence and the territorial expansion of jihadist groups such as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel). Institutional fragility in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has enabled the entrenchment of these insurgent actors, whose actions have overwhelmed local governments and exacerbated regional instability. By 2024, the region has reached record levels of violence. The withdrawal of international forces has created a power vacuum that extremist groups have exploited to expand their control, while state-led repressive responses have further aggravated the conflict. At the same time, the rivalry between these groups has intensified the lethality of their actions, trapping civilians in a vicious cycle of violence and poverty across increasingly vast areas that are slipping out of state control and falling under jihadist rule. The advance toward the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea exacerbates the fundamental governance and security challenges faced by the region, where borders are porous, intelligence gathering is failing, and government presence is minimal. This underscores the highly expansionist nature of the jihadist threat and the urgent need for comprehensive and coordinated responses that integrate security with development. Achieving this will require Europe's sustained attention and a deeper long-term commitment in the coming decades. Whether it will rise to meet these challenges remains to be seen.

Keywords:

Sahel, jihadism, expansion, violence, challenge.

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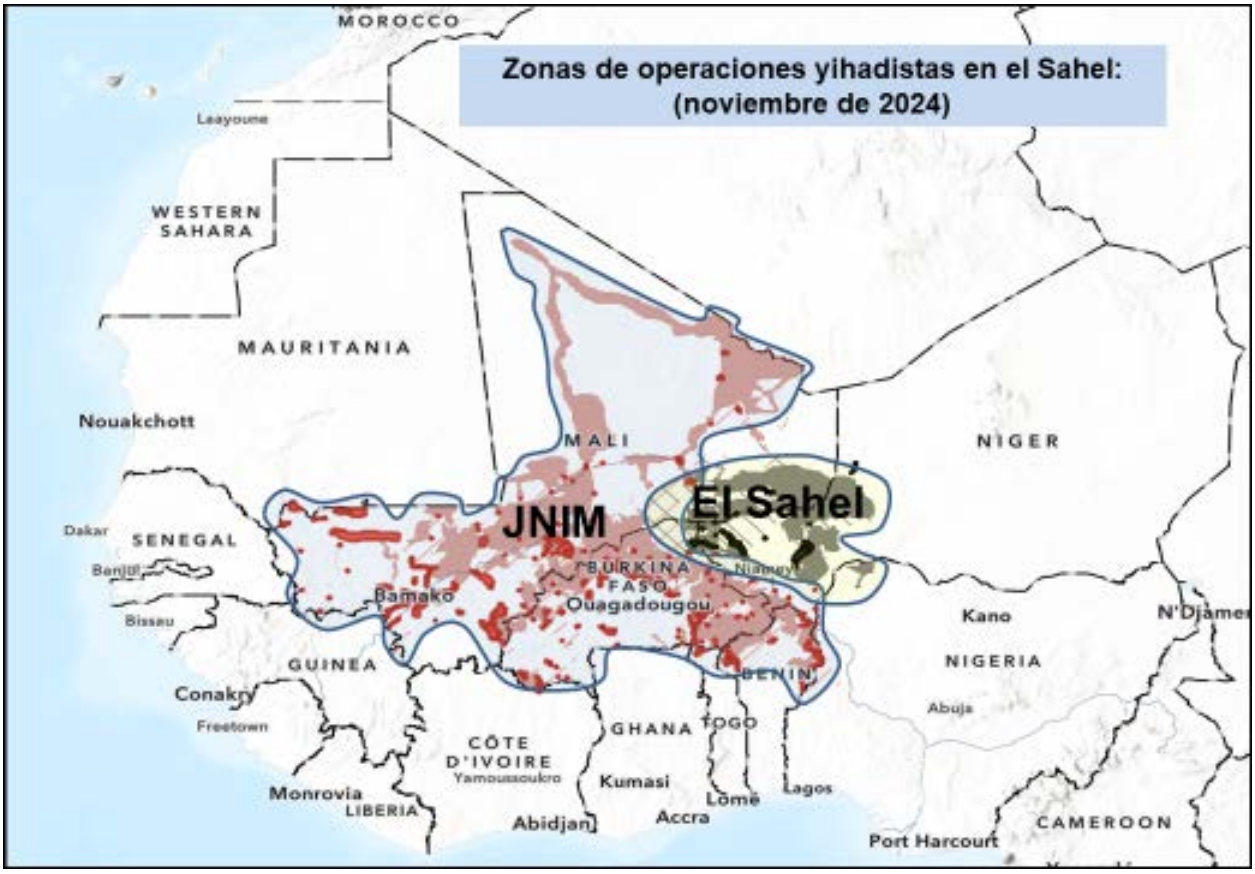
Introduction

At the Ordinary Summit of the Economic Community of West African States held in Bissau in June 2023, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, stated: "Insecurity remains a major concern for the stability of our sub-region. Terrorist attacks, inter-communal violence and organised crime continue to have disastrous security and humanitarian consequences across the sub-region". At the same time, he called for a concerted effort at national, regional and international levels to address the many challenges facing West Africa.

This statement merely reflected concern about a region where jihadist groups are increasing the geographic scope and intensity of their actions, while intensifying efforts to spread and preach their radical ideology among local communities. For their part, state forces react to the activity with harsh retaliations in an attempt to dissuade the civilian population from supporting the armed groups and Russian mercenaries and pro-government militias compete in the use of violence with the jihadists. The result is a civilian population trapped in a vicious cycle of brutality and poverty in areas increasingly less subject to state control and more under the control of terrorists.

While north of the Sahara, violence has dropped dramatically to one of its lowest levels since the end of Libya's second civil war in 2020 (220 deaths were recorded in the region in 2024, compared to 3,650 deaths a decade ago), south of the Sahara, violence has never been as intense since records have been kept. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), a research organisation that collects and evaluates data on political violence globally, deaths in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) countries reached a record 7,620 in the first half of 2024. Thar means an increase of 9% compared to the same period in 2023, 37% compared to 2022 and a staggering 190% compared to 2021[1].

[1] ACLED Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (database). 2024. https://acleddata.com
Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 27 February 2025.

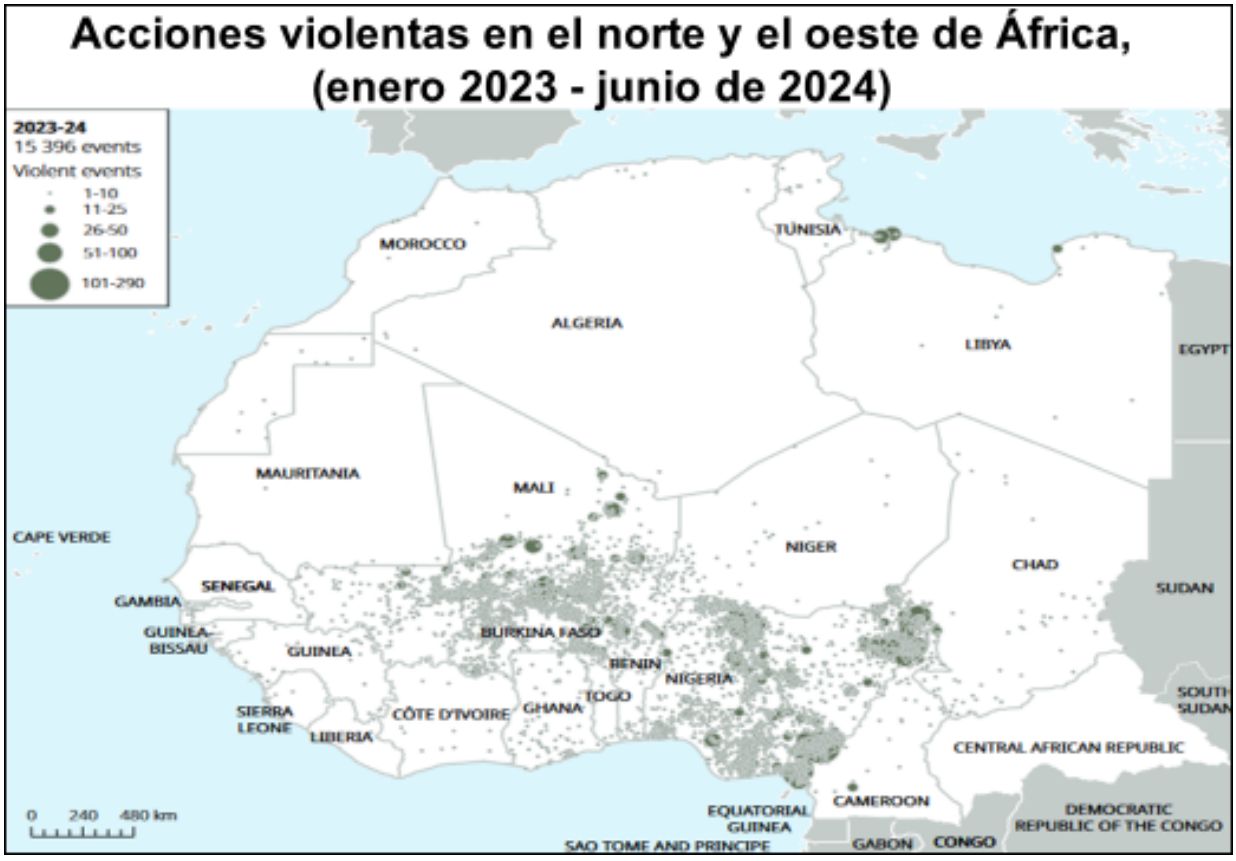


Source: own elaboration based on
https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/cd839b96361e4b818a22e45b52f43904

This proliferation of violence underscores the highly expansive nature of the threat and the urgency of comprehensive and coordinated responses. As the experience of the central Sahel in recent years shows, once violence takes root in a country, it becomes so deeply rooted that it is very difficult to eradicate it and to restore peace and security.

Conflict increases, instability spreads

As we move into 2025, the Sahel continues to experience high levels of violence, which is spreading geographically at the same pace as events are evolving. The central Sahel, which includes Mali, eastern Mauritania, western Niger, Burkina Faso and the northern Atlantic littoral countries, is the largest hotspot of violence in West Africa, with the most worrying development in Burkina Faso, where more than 13,000 people were killed in 2024. This numbers are almost as many as in Nigeria during the same period, despite having a population ten times smaller.



Source: Roads and Conflicts in North and West Africa @ OECD 2025. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/02/roads-and-conflicts-in-north-and-west-africa_4892fa2e/77474489-en.pdf

The predominant groups are Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM), which is an Al Qaeda affiliate and the main terrorist group operating in the central Sahel, and the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), formerly known as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. Both JNIM and IS Sahel have managed to gain a strong foothold in the local population by presenting themselves as protective elements against state forces, while continuing to expand into neighbouring countries in the African Atlantic arc[2].

JNIM is the result of an amalgamation of four Salafist-jihadist groups that merged in 2017: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al Din, the Macina Liberation Front, and Al Murabitoun[3]. A fifth group, based in Burkina Faso, Ansar al Islam, is a de facto member

[2] KARR, Liam. "Africa File November 2024: Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in the Sahel', *ISW* (Institute For The Study Of War). November 2024. Available at: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-november-2024-salafi-jihadi-areas-operation-sahel

[3] EIZENGA, Daniel and WILLIAMS, Wendy. "The Puzzle of JNIM and Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*. 2025. Available at: https://africacenter.org/publication/puzzle-jnim-militant-islamist-groups-sahel/

of the group despite not being formally part of the merger[4]. JNIM maintains a rigid top-down hierarchy that defines the strategy and coordinates the different sub-groups. However, it also allows them a wide operational freedom to act in their local contexts, integrating into social structures and implementing various forms of shadow governance through agreements with local leaders across the Sahel[5].

JNIM's control in these areas is characterised by the collection of the zakat tax, school closures, prevention of voting, and targeted abductions of local authorities with no government response. JNIM is currently the most active and powerful group in Mali and Burkina Faso, biut it is also present in Niger and is expanding into the northern Gulf of Guinea states. JNIM's attacks on military forces, militias and civilians have resulted in an increasing number of casualties, indicating its growing lethality.

As for El Sahel, this group was formed from a splinter of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) when it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015[6], although the Islamic State only recognized it in March 2022. IS Sahel is the most active in the tri-border region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and has strengthened significantly since the departure of French forces in 2022[7]. Its growth in capabilities and operational ambitions has reinforced its role as a regional group and increased the risk that this branch will end up supporting the Islamic State's global activity, including financial and logistical support for its actions in Europe[8]. Unlike other al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates worldwide, Sahel and JNIM maintained a gentleman's agreement not to fight each other until 2020, when they broke off hostilities in a fierce competition for regional jihadist primacy that continues to this day.

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Analogies and differences

For years, Mali was considered the epicentre of terrorism and it was there that Malian forces, supported by Russian mercenaries, launched an offensive in the second half of

[4] ESTELLE PEREZ, Emily. "How Ansar al-Islam Gains Popular Support in Burkina Faso", *Critical Threats.* 2025. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/how-ansar-al-islam-gains-popular-support-in-burkina-faso
[5] INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP. "Mali: Enabling Dialogue with the Jihadist Coalition JNIM", *Crisis Group*. 2025. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/Malí/Malí-enabling-dialogue-jihadist-coalition-jnim
[6] ZIMMERMAN, K. "Salafi-Jihadi Ecosystem in the Sahel", *AEI*. 2025. https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/salafi-jihadi-ecosystem-in-the-sahel/
[7] LE MONDE (French edition). "La France achève son retrait militaire du Mali", *Le Monde*. 15 August 2022. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2022/08/15/france-completes-military-pullout-from-Malí_5993649_5.html
[8] KARR, Liam. "Africa File Special Edition: One Year After Niger's Coup", *Critical Threats*. 2025. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-special-edition-one-year-after-nigers-coup#ISSP

2023 in the northern region of Kidal, which had been a traditional JNIM stronghold since the Ansar al-Din subgroup fought alongside separatist rebels during the Tuareg rebellion of 2012. Although jihadist militants sidelined the more secular Tuareg rebels during their 2013 offensive into central Mali, Tuareg separatists and jihadists have maintained contact after Ansar al-Din became part of JNIM in 2017, overlapping their areas of operations and coordinating operationally from 2021, to take on IS Sahel .[9]

In late 2023, Malian forces and their Russian auxiliaries took control of the city of Kidal and smaller bases in Aguelhok and Tessalit[10]. Nevertheless, they were unable to reduce JNIM's remote support areas in northern Mali, nor were they able to prevent JNIM from increasing its actions against security forces during the government offensive in Kidal in June and July 2024, despite a two-fold increase in attacks during this period compared to the first five months of 2024[11].

The result of this escalation of armed clashes in northern Mali was the resounding defeat suffered by Wagner group mercenaries and Malian troops (FAMa) near Tinzauten, Kidal region, in late July 2024, at the hands of Tuareg rebels of the Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA), allied with JNIM terrorists. The attack, which involved two suicide car bombs (VBIEDs), killed at least 100 Malian and Russian soldiers whose column was destroyed after Tuareg rebels forced them to withdraw from the town of Tinzauten, near the Algerian border[12].

This defeat, which was the biggest Russian military disaster on the African continent to date, was not only military, but also had an important symbolic and mediatic character, as it questioned the operational capacity of the Wagner group and the FAMa, which until then had seemed unbeatable. Moreover, the defeat was so severe that, in its aftermath, JNIM felt strong enough to launch a general offensive against the capital Bamako On September 17th 2024 its fighters attacked two very sensitive places in the Malian capital

[9] BACHÉ, David. "Mali: Iyad Ag Ghaly Rencontre les Groupes Signataires de l'Accord de Paix Près de Kidal", *RFI*. 30 January 2023. Available at: https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230130-Malí-iyad-ag-ghaly-rencontre-les-groupes-signataires-de-l-accord-de-paix-pr%C3%A8s-de-kidal
[10] VOICE OF AMERICA (VOA) AFRICA. "Malian Authorities: Troops Are Being Redeployed Towards Rebel Stronghold of Kidal", *VOA Africa*. 2023. Available at: https://www.voaafrica.com/a/Malían-authorities-troops-are-being-redeployed-towards-rebel-stronghold-of-kidal/7293237.html
[11] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). Armed Conflict Location and Event Database. Available at: www.acleddata.com
[12] REUTERS. "Mali Rebels Say They Killed 131 Soldiers, Russians, in July Clashes", *Reuters*. 1 August 2024. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/Malí-rebels-say-they-killed-131-soldiers-russians-july-clashes-2024-08-01

simultaneously: the national gendarmerie academy and the capital's international airport. The airport was particularly important in terms of security, as it is not only home to the Malian army's main air base, but Russian paramilitaries also used it to help the government fighting jihadist groups.

These two attacks are likely part of a concerted campaign by JNIM to challenge the Malian junta and undoubtedly represent a blow to the army, which has pursued a heavy-handed counter-insurgency strategy since it took power in the 2020 coup. The decision to target exclusively security forces and not civilians indicates that the main objective was to erode the junta's legitimacy and the morale of the security forces, demonstrating its capacity to act in the capital itself while claiming to protect the population from junta abuses[13].

The double attack casta doubt on the transitional authorities' decision to try to subdue jihadist groups by force alone, while questioning the dismantling of the international stabilisation system centred on France's Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA, the UN mission that withdrew in 2023 at the government's request. The Bamako authorities' intention to make Russia their privileged security partner starts to be called into question, as it is the Russian disinformation idea that its mercenaries are in a position to provide a comprenhensive security which Western forces were unable to give in the past.

But it is not only the activity of terrorist groups that is at stake. The greatest danger to Mali's territorial integrity is that the Tuaregs, who make up only 10 per cent of the population but are a majority in the north, will demand autonomy and even declare independence for the northern Azawad region, taking advantage of the position of strength they find themselves in after recent military successes. If this scenario materialises, Mali would lose the strategic regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, rich in natural resources, which would fall under the control of the Tuareg rebels grouped in the Strategic Framework for the Defence of the People of Azawad (CSP-DPA). This is a coalition of political and military movements in northern Mali formed in May 2021 with the aim of defending the Tuaregs' territorial aspirations.

Moreover, the emerging alliance between the Tuareg, the Tubus - a black ethnic group living mainly in northern Chad, but also in southern Libya, northeastern Niger and western

[13] CARTER, Brian *et al.* "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update: January 18, 2023", *Critical Threats*. 2023. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-january-18-2023

Sudan - and other rebel groups along the borders of Mali and Niger, introduces a new variable into the conflict and increases uncertainty over its eventual resolution. While this alliance currently has limited influence on the dynamics of violence compared to its jihadist regional counterparts, if consolidated it could pose a serious threat to military forces already facing numerous and dangerous adversaries.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the country is in the midst of escalating violence in an armed conflict that began in August 2015 and has resulted in the displacement of more than 2 million people and the deaths of at least 10,000 civilians and combatants. During 2024, JNIM launched a series of large-scale offensives in the regions of the North-Central and Eastern Sahel that resulted in high numbers of military casualties. There were also heavy casualties among the so-called Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP), an armed self-defence group created in January 2020 as an auxiliary to the Burkina Faso Armed Forces to fight jihadist insurgents[14].

With its strategy of territorial expansion, JNIM is deliberately trying to destabilise the military regime in Burkina Faso by means of attacks with a high strategic impact. This would be the case of the Barsalogho massacre in central Burkina Faso in August 2024, in which JNIM allegedly killed hundreds of civilians who were building trenches to protect the town[15]. The message the terrorists are sending to Burkina Faso's president, Ibrahim Traoré, is to make him responsible for the consequences of mobilising the civilian population in the fight against their jihadi militants.

At the same time, the strong presence of jihadist groups in the eastern regions of Burkina Faso has had important transnational implications, expanding their operations and consolidating their presence in the littoral states of Benin and Togo, with the consequent danger of instability spreading throughout the African Atlantic arc.

For its part, Niger also faces significant security challenges from various armed groups, with IS Sahel being of particular concern. This group has consolidated its presence along the Niger-Mali border in the north of the Dosso region and is reportedly infiltrating the northwestern Nigerian states of Kebbi and Sokoto by creating a new Islamist franchise

[14] SCHMAUDER, Anna and WILLEME, Annabelle. "The Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland", *Clingendael Institute*. 2025.
[15] NARANJO, José. "Un atentado causa más de un centenar de muertos y 140 heridos en Burkina Faso", *El País*. 25 August 2024. Available at: https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-08-25/un-atentado-yihadista-causa-mas-de-un-centenar-de-muertos-y-140-heridos-en-burkina-faso.html

known as Lakurawa (Hausa for "the recruits"). Their *modus operandi* would be the extortion of locals by taking cattle in exchange for "protection", a tactic commonly used by radical groups to exert control over populations and finance their operations.

Similarly, in Niger, JNIM, an IS Sahel rival, has remained very active in the Tillaberi area bordering Burkina Faso and Mali and has significantly expanded its operations southwards along the borders with Benin and Nigeria. Its activity has extended northwards where, in October 2024, it carried out its first attack in the Agadez region against Nigerian security forces. Still further north, JNIM claimed responsibility for an attack on a border post near Niger's border with Algeria, possibly in combination with Tuareg rebels[16], much as JNIM has done with the Tuaregs in Mali. After all, JNIM and Tuareg rebels in Niger and Mali have similar short-term economic and military objectives, as well as a common enemy in the Alliance of Sahel States.

Mutual ties with Tuareg rebels, with whom they also share ethnic affinity[17] , could facilitate the permanent settlement of JNIM cells in the northern Sahel, at the confluence of the borders between Niger, Mali and Algeria, precisely one of the major migratory routes from Niger to the Mediterranean. If consolidated, JINM could turn northern Niger into a rearguard zone in the face of increased pressure from Malian and Russian forces, while degrading the Nigerien government's ability to assist its Malian and Russian allies in any potential offensive towards the Algerian border.

Meanwhile, JNIM continues its violent campaign to consolidate its influence in Niger's southern border areas, especially in the Dosso region, where the group claimed its first operations in 2024. The presence of IS Sahel in the north-western part of Nigeria bordering Niger puts pressure on both Nigeria and Niger to take coordinated military action, which could provoke a response from IS Sahel militants who, covertly and overtly, have been infiltrating the region unhindered since at least 2018.

The result is a situation of instability that has become chronic in the border areas between Niger and Nigeria, which are becoming safe havens and retreats for both JNIM and IS

[16] KARR, Liam. "Africa File Special Edition: Russia's Deadly Blunder in Mali', *Critical Threats*. 2025. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-special-edition-russias-deadly-blunder-in-Malí
[17] LE BIHAN, Jeanne. "Face à Abdourahamane Tiani, Rhissa Ag Boula passe à la lutte armée", *Jeune Afrique*. 2024. Available at: https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1614030/politique/face-a-abdourahamane-tiani-rhissa-ag-boula-passe-a-la-lutte-armee

Sahel, which use their territorial control to exert coercive influence over local populations as they covertly fight for regional terrorist primacy.

Changes in operational strategies

Both IS Sahel, the regional branch of the Islamic State, and its Al Qaeda-affiliated rival JNIM have so far refrained from attempting to seize urban centres, contenting themselves with encircling them. This tactic would be aimed at avoiding the mistakes the jihadists made in 2012, when the crisis in northern Mali erupted and Al Qaeda-associated groups controlled the area's main cities for a few months. Their concentration in urban areas exposed them to attacks by the French Operation Serval that arrived in Mali in January 2013 (and which was the precursor to Operation Barkhane), causing heavy casualties and forcing them to leave the cities.

The preference for operating in rural environments means that most of Burkina Faso and a significant part of western Niger are now affected by intense and highly concentrated violence in the countryside and small towns, while the large regional centres and capital cities remain utouched. The ruralisation of violence in the Sahel is contributing to the creation of an archipelago of large towns that are increasingly under siege and between which communication is becoming more and more difficult for government forces.

This increasing isolation of urban centres is encouraging jihadists to pressure government forces with blockades or, less frequently, lightning attacks, without assaulting cities. However, this regional dynamic could change as rapid urbanisation and jihadists' strategic targeting of urban areas maximise the strategic impact of military action against them. The operational success of the attacks on the capitals Bamako and Niamey in 2024 demonstrate the increasing vulnerability of urban environments where overlap with rural areas creates complex security challenges, as militant groups use the normally less secure urban peripheries as access points to city centres.

Moreover, technological advances, particularly the increasing use of drones, are enabling both government forces and jihadist groups to generate violence remotely, posing an additional risk to human security and critical infrastructure. The use of drones by military forces, state actors such as Russian Africa Corps, terrorist groups such as JNIM and insurgent forces such as CSP-DPA represents a significant shift in the character of

warfare that has hitherto been characterised by rudimentary means. The fact that almost half of the fighting by the security forces of Mali with JNIM insurgents in the central Koulikoro region since early 2023 has been drone attacks illustrates the preference for such means, as does the lack of state control of the territory[18].

The use of modified commercial drones for military operations has become more sophisticated and widespread as all actors use them not only for surveillance and reconnaissance, but also for targeted attacks using drone-launched explosives, or even directly employing kamikaze drones. These new warfare capabilities represent a significant technical and tactical advance, allowing for precision strikes as well as improved surveillance and monitoring of large Sahelian spaces; although they are still emerging, their use can be expected to become more widespread in the near future, as they are refined and increase their operational reach.

IS - Islamic State in the Sahel gains a foothold in the three-border region

In the border region between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, IS Sahel appears to have gained the upper hand over JNIM, allowing it to consolidate its control over the areas around the regional capitals Gao and Menaka, and to expand its activities into Niger.

The fighting between the two jihadist groups began in the second half of 2022 after the withdrawal of French forces from Mali. It was decided by an IS Sahel victory that succeeded in driving JNIM out of the Menaka region and areas south of the city of Gao at the end of July 2023, at a human cost of more than 700 fighters between the two groups. This victory meant, according to UN reports, that IS Sahel doubled the area under its control between 2022 and the first half of 2023[19].

Since then, the Sahel and JNIM have continued to clash in the border area of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, but with less frequency and severity, resulting in a drastic decrease in fighting from 600 in 2022 to just over 100 in 2024[20]. This seems to confirm the consolidation of IS Sahel as the dominant group in the region. Its control is extending

[18] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). Armed Conflict Location and Event Database. Available at: www.acleddata.com
[19] LEDERER, Edith M. "Mali: Islamic State and al-Qaida Violence Escalates Amid UN Withdrawal", *AP News*. 2024. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/Malí-islamic-state-alqaida-violence-un-e841e4d5835c7fa01605e8fd1ea03fcf
[20] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). Armed Conflict Location and Event Database. Available at: www.acleddata.com

towards the northeastern Nigerien region of Tillaberi that connects with neighbouring Mali, as well as around the eastern flank of the capital Niamey, as demonstrated by the fact that, since the July 2023 coup, the economic extortion of zakat and religious imposition is becoming widespread in these areas[21].

Increasingly lethal attacks by IS Sahel against the Nigerian army have also multiplied, probably with the aim of keeping it out of these areas. Chief among these attacks was a major ambush by IS Sahel on Nigerian security forces in October 2023 that killed more than 100 soldiers, in which IS Sahel used advanced weaponry such as suicide vehicle explosives (SVBIEDs). All these factors indicate a greater operational capacity of this Islamist group, as well as greater sophistication in the means it employs[22].

This increased activity indicates that IS Sahel is expanding its area of operations by shifting its centre of gravity from northwestern Niger to southeast of the capital Niamey in the Dosso region, where the group enjoys freedom of movement and faces little resistance, indicating a significant degree of control over the area.

For its part, JNIM also has its sights set on Niger, where it is making inroads in the southwest of the country despite stiff competition from IS Sahel and strong government efforts to degrade its safe havens along the border with Burkina Faso. In early 2024, JNIM launched an offensive against security forces and militias near the Burkina Faso border, successfully driving them out of the area. However, the intensity of the campaign diminished as the year progressed, although it maintained some pressure to prevent them from re-entering the area.

Similarly, JNIM is reportedly disputing the Nigerian security forces' control of the area south of the capital, in the Ouro Gueladjo region, where IED attacks and ambushes against them have increased significantly in the last year. The aim would be to isolate them within the city, following the pattern of the group's activity around the Malian capital the previous year when, in September 2024, it prioritised attacking Bamako while limiting itself to consolidating supporting areas at distant distances north of the capital between

[21] Idem.
[22] MUIA, Wycliffe. "Mali Conflict: Latest Developments and Regional Implications", *BBC News*. 2024. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66991696

110 and 300 kilometres[23]. The continued pace of JNIM's attacks and its growing operational ambition indicates some success in its objectives, while also showing the difficulties security forces face in degrading the jihadists' capabilities in the area .[24]

Terrorism spreads to the Gulf of Guinea

In recent times, we are witnessing a new phenomenon, which is the shift of some of the jihadist violence from the central Sahel to the southern periphery, in the direction of the Gulf of Guinea. This is a novel phenomenon in West African history, where most of the jihad that has developed since the early 18th century has been largely concentrated in the Sahel region[25] . However, recent events belie this historical assumption by suggesting that there can hardly be an enduring 'jihad zone' today without eventually affecting the coastal states.

Evidence suggests that, in recent years, JNIM and IS Sahel have begun to operate in the border regions of the Gulf of Guinea states[26], without the containment strategy of European partners to isolate the west coast against the jihadist spread from the Sahel, yielding results[27]. Gradually, JNIM and, to a lesser extent, IS Sahel are expanding southwards, taking advantage of endemic problems such as poor governance or communal tensions, to integrate themselves into and to control local communities[28].

[23] KARR, Liam. "Africa File, September 19, 2024: JNIM Strikes Bamako; Hungary Enters the Sahel; Ethiopia-Somalia Proxy Risks", *Critical Threats*, 2024. https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/africa-file-september-19-2024-jnim-strikes-bamako-hungary-enters-sahel-ethiopia-somalia
[24] KARR, Liam, GIANITSOS, Matthew and FISCHER, Josie Von. "Africa File, April 11, 2024: Kremlin's Africa Corps Nears Niger; Ethiopia-Somalia Rift Widens; Al Qaeda Affiliates Strengthen in the Sahel and Horn", *Critical Threats*. 2024. https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-april-11-2024-kremlins-africa-corps-nears-niger-ethiopia-soMalía-rift-widens-al-qaeda-affiliates-strengthen-in-the-sahel-and-horn.
[25] MILES, W. F. "Jihads and borders. Social networks and spatial patterns in Africa, present, past and future", in Walther O. and W. Miles (eds.), *African Border Disorders. Addressing Transnational Extremist Organizations*. Routledge, London, 2018, pp. 187-205.
[26] CARTE, Brian. "Africa File: Salafi-Jihadi Groups May Exploit Local Grievances to Expand in West Africa's Gulf of Guinea", *Critical Threats*. 2025. https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-salafi-jihadi-groups-may-exploit-local-grievances-to-expand-in-west-africas-gulf-of-guinea
[27] CHRISTIANSON, John, STILES HERDT, Courtney, and NADOLNY, Ginny. "The Global Fragility Act: Unlocking the Full Potential of Interagency Cooperation", *CSIS*. 2025. https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-fragility-act-unlocking-full-potential-interagency-cooperation
[28] ESTELLE PEREZ, Emily. "The Underestimated Insurgency: African States at Risk for Salafi-Jihadi Insurgencies", *AEI*. 2025. Available at: https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-underestimated-insurgency-african-states-at-risk-for-salafi-jihadi-insurgencies/

Source: own elaboration based on: Roads and Conflicts in North and West Africa @ OECD 2025. Available in: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/02/roads-and-conflicts-in-north-and-west-africa_4892fa2e/77474489-en.pdf

The spread of violence from the Sahel to the north of the coastal countries is not random, but follows the lines of national borders, particularly in northern Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, areas characterised by low population density and an abundance of natural parks that provide very favourable conditions for extremist groups to hide and expand southwards. These interior regions have historically been marginalised by their states, both economically and politically, a circumstance that jihadist groups skilfully exploit, using the grievances of local communities to their advantage.

Moreover, in these countries of the African Atlantic strip, it seems logical that jihadists expand more rapidly in areas that share similar structural characteristics to those of the Sahel region, such as weak security forces, alliances with like-minded local groups, ease of financing through illegal activities, and political instability that favours the penetration of religious extremism.

As jihadists move into previously unaffected areas, so does control of resources transiting through the region, or produced locally. That includes agricultural crops, gold and, especially, livestock, which are particularly easy to move and resell. The revenues generated have made extremist organisations more self-sufficient and resilient[29].

Of the jihadist groups, JNIM has been the most active, directing its attacks in western Mali towards the Senegalese region of Kayes, where the number of attacks has doubled annually since 2022. Thus, the group carried out 21 attacks in 2023 and 25 in 2024, after having carried out only 10 attacks in 2022[30].

JNIM has also expanded its areas of action east of Burkina Faso into the border region with Benin and Togo, where expansion has been very rapid. To achieve it, ithas been replicating the pattern of siege tactics used regularly by jihad groups in Burkina Faso and Mali to isolate areas harbouring or cooperating with state security forces[31] . The success of this tactic has forced an almost complete reliance on drone strikes to disrupt jihadists moving freely through wooded or rural areas.

Local communities have tried to negotiate with the jihadists to lift the sieges in exchange for certain concessions, but the leader of the Burkinabe junta, Ibrahim Traoré, whose counterinsurgency strategy relies heavily on mobilising the civilian population to confront the jihadists, has rejected any attempt at negotiation. The result has been increased violence against civilians perceived to favour the insurgents[32], resulting in massive inflation, collapsing health services, deteriorating infrastructure and worrying food insecurity.

Since early 2023, JNIM has targeted the roads around Bamako as part of a broader campaign to degrade Mali's lines of communication and disrupt its fragile economic structure[33]. The group has taken advantage of the porous borders that exist in West Africa to establish new rearguard support areas that might be used to expand further inland into

[29] EIZENGA, D. and GNANGUÊNON, A. "Recalibrating Coastal West Africa's Response to Violent Extremism", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2024. https://africacenter.
[30] Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). *Armed Conflict Location and Event Database*. Available at: https://www.acleddata.com
The New Humanitarian. "'We Accept to Save Our Lives': How Local Dialogues with Jihadists Took Root in Mali", *The New Humanitarian*, 2022. https://www.
[32] FRANCE 24. "General Mobilisation Declared in Burkina Faso After Series of Jihadist Attacks", *France 24*. 2023. https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230413-general-mobilisation-declared-in-burkina-faso-after-series-of-jihadist-attacks
[33] CARTER, Brian *et al.* "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update: April 5, 2023", *Critical Threats*. 2023. Available at: https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-april-5-2023

the Kayes region bordering Senegal. Similarly, in 2024, JNIM carried out its first attacks in the vicinity of the Guinean and Senegalese borders.

In Benin, jihadist attacks seem to be a consequence of JNIM's ambitions to control territory in eastern Burkina Faso. If in early 2022, the objective seemed to be to diminish the capacity of the Beninese security forces to threaten JNIM's Burkinabe bases, this objective seems to have changed to that of creating a giant buffer zone by taking advantage of the abundant forests that populate the region[34]. However, it is still unclear whether the expansion through Benin could extend into northwestern Nigeria. In any case, the lack of an appreciable trend of escalation indicates that the jihadists are still in a build-up and recruitment phase. It is also possible that they consider littoral countries more useful as rear bases and buffer zones than as military targets and should therefore be left out of attacks.

Further west, northern Togo also faces an increase in jihadist activities, as evidenced by the fact that in July 2023, a suspected JNIM attack killed at least twelve soldiers on patrol in the village of Sankortchagou, near the border with Burkina Faso[35]. While following the same pattern as the other coastal countries, including banditry, smuggling of gold, drugs, arms and fuel, Togo seems to function mainly as a transit zone for jihadists[36].

As far as Ghana is concerned, the country has so far been safe from terrorist attacks. The presence of some jihadist cells seems to relate mainly to their military activities in Burkina Faso, as insurgents see the country mainly as a safe haven and a smuggling route too useful to destabilise with direct attacks[37] . The fact that Ghana is Anglophone may diminish JNIM's recruitment prospects there, reflecting the hypothesis that Francophone West Africa is more susceptible to jihadist infiltration than other parts of the region[38].

[34] BRUIJNE, K. "Conflict in the Penta-Border Area: Benin's Northern Jihad from the Perspective of its Neighbours", *Clingendael*. 30 November 2022.
[35] LEPIDI, P. "Au Togo, au moins douze soldats tués dans une nouvelle attaque dans le nord", *Le Monde*. 20 July 2023.
[36] KAS (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung). *The Jihadist Threat in Northern Ghana and Togo: Stocktaking and Prospects for Containing the Expansion*. 7 April 2022.
[37] TANKO, E. and COURTRIGHT, J. 'Could Ghana be Jihadists' Next Target? 14 May 2024.
[38] MOODY, J. "Jihadist attack on Togo highlights threats to neighbouring Ghana", *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 20, no. 15, 2022.

Finally, Côte d'Ivoire enjoys a "relative calm" that should not hide the continuing jihadist activities in terms of involvement in gold mining and other illegal economic activities in the interior of the country[39].

The future of jihadism in the Sahel

Since the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in recent years, the new leaderships have severed ties with Western partners, and have adopted, with the help of small contingents of Russian mercenaries, counter-insurgency strategies that have failed to solve their security problems, but have instead contributed to spreading indiscriminate violence that further fuels insurgencies.

The situation in the Sahel is increasingly worrying, as jihadism is thriving especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, where governments are losing control of large swathes of their territory to terrorist groups. This would be the case in the Malian regions of Gao and Menaka, and in Burkina Faso, where almost half of its territory is reportedly in the hands of terrorist groups.

More worrying from a European security perspective is its spread across the countries of the African Atlantic Arc, with the most vulnerable region being the wide belt stretching inland from Guinea to Benin. This vast periphery has few cities and low population densities and is dotted with national parks that can provide safe havens for jihadists. Moreover, unlike the largely Christian coastal areas, in the interior the local population is Muslim and well connected to the Sahel, both culturally and economically, which facilitates the penetration of jihadist groups into its social fabric.

It seems logical, in this context that jihadists try to exploit the lack of national integration between the north and south of the littoral countries, pushing the local population into their arms, in a manner similar to what has been observed for years in central Mali. Their main interest is to consolidate territorially creating local alliances through persuasion, threats or violence against marginalised communities. This phenomenon, still a minor one, is growing in countries such as Benin and Togo. If consolidated, it could end up becoming a serious threat to the national security of African littoral countries and, given

[39] ASSANVO, W. "La Côte d'Ivoire doit couper les liens entre terrorisme et marchés illicites", *Institute for Security Studies*. 18 September 2023.

the easy access to the Atlantic Ocean, also to the major maritime communication routes to Europe.

However, several factors complicate the progression of jihadist groups further south, starting with the difficulty of building stable alliances with local communities. Jihadist groups are numerically small and rarely in a position to maintain control of territory. In this feature, they differ from the jihadists affiliated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) who moved from northern Algeria to the Sahel in the early 2000s and developed extensive networks with local tribes in northern Mali. This process, which took years, seems unlikely West African coast will replicate as it is a region different from the Sahel on economic, social, linguistic and religious perspectives. As jihadist groups move southwards, their operating environment becomes more complicated and they lose much of their ability to move undetected among a local population where Christian and Muslim identities are mixed and state control is stronger.

Therefore, the most likely scenario for the coastal countries of West Africa is a diffuse and marginal presence of isolated jihadist groups, acting through attacks of opportunity against soft and poorly defended targets, rather than a steady territorial expansion as it is currently observed in the central Sahel. This scenario of progressive expansion into the rural areas of the littoral countries, without consolidating control of any significant urban areas, will potentially contribute to a fragmented insurgency, but not to the creation of a singlewide zone of territorial dominance.

Ultimately, the expansion of jihadist groups into the Atlantic will depend on the set of initiatives taken by coastal countries, whose security structures are comparatively more resilient and capable of combating insurgents militarily than those of the Sahel countries. Recent years show that this process of state reaction is underway in the region from Côte d'Ivoire to Togo; West African littoral states have adopted political, legislative and operational frameworks to improve synergies between security forces, organisations representing civil society and local authorities.

The aim is to establish a coordinated response to transnational terrorism by countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, which Mali and Niger could join. The Accra Initiative, established in 2017 between these countries, is a step in the right direction, as is the UN-backed Integrated Border Stability Mechanism for West Africa, which

seeks to improve the ways in which West African governments build and train their security forces, interact with civilians and coordinate their counterinsurgency efforts at the regional level.

Ousted from the central Sahel, Europe has much to say in helping the countries of the African Atlantic Arc balance military and social responses to prevent and contain violent extremism. It is not just a matter of placing the centre of gravity of Western security concerns in the African Atlantic arc, but of preventing the continued strengthening of jihadist insurgents in the Sahel from threatening to overwhelm its containment strategy and eventually affect Europe. This requires correcting the serious strategic planning and execution errors of the past, which have contributed so much to the rapid growth in the capabilities, territorial outreach and population control of the ever increasingly ambitious and audacious Jihadist groups.

The ultimate goal of any comprenhensive strategy must be to prevent the consolidation of a threatening security situation in West Africa that challenges governments, economies, societies and regional food and water resources in an area crucial to Europe's current and future security. Achieving this will require greater and more sustained attention and greater and more demanding engagement over the coming decades. It remains to see whether this time Europe will be up to the task.

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