

Introduction

The Sahel is currently one of the main sources of strategic instability for European security. Russia's geopolitical ambitions on the African continent are compounded by growing risks: irregular migration, reduced imports of critical resources (gas, uranium, lithium), arms and drug trafficking, and the likelihood of a resurgence of jihadist terrorism capable of extending its reach towards the Mediterranean.

Far from being a peripheral region, the Sahel is a theatre where state fragility, transnational criminal networks and the expansion of groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Daesh converge, creating a hybrid network with a direct impact on Europe's energy, economic and social security.

This article analyses the convergence between terrorism and organised crime in the central Sahel, focusing on the jihadist groups Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) and *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM), and examines their expansion into the coastal states of the Gulf of Guinea.

The Sahel is undergoing a structural crisis marked by poverty, rapid population growth, territorial exclusion and institutional weakness, which facilitates the recruitment and consolidation of non-state actors.

The vacuum of authority has enabled groups such as ISSP and JNIM to offer services as a substitute for the state, reinforce their legitimacy and consolidate patronage networks rooted in illicit economies.

The theoretical framework guiding the analysis is Tamara Makarenko's (2004) *Crime-Terror Continuum*, which allows for an examination of the various forms of interaction between terrorism and organised crime without presupposing a linear trajectory or a complete fusion between the two phenomena.

The *Crime-Terror Continuum*

Tamara Makarenko (2004) proposes that the relationship between terrorism and organised crime does not imply a rigid separation, but rather a *continuum* of interactions

within which groups position themselves according to their needs and context¹. The model identifies several stages: tactical alliances, in which terrorist and criminal groups cooperate on an ad hoc basis (access to smuggling routes, expert knowledge for money laundering or the manufacture of explosives); operational motivations, in which each type of actor develops the other’s capabilities internally to reduce external dependencies (terrorist groups financing themselves through crime, criminal networks employing terror tactics to protect their businesses); and convergence or hybridisation, in which an organisation simultaneously acquires traits of both actors, potentially evolving towards the opposite end of the spectrum.

Makarenko also introduces the ‘black hole’ thesis. This concept refers to an advanced phase in which, in weak or collapsed states, crime, terrorism and armed conflict merge within the same space, creating ‘black holes’ of governance that attract transnational networks and facilitate their cooperation. The *continuum* is neither linear nor mandatory, but rather an analytical tool for capturing the blurred boundary between these phenomena.

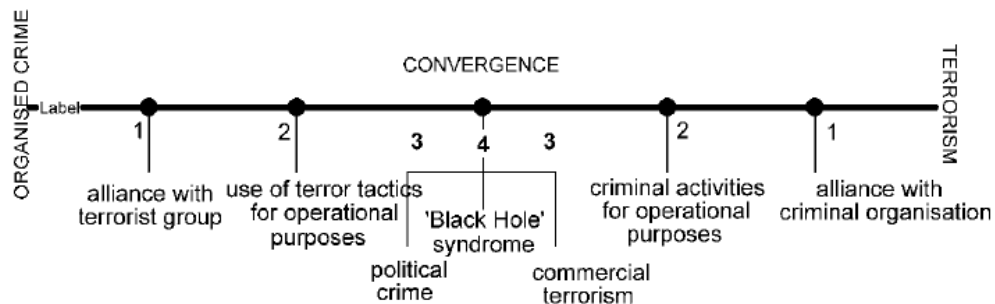


Figure 1. Link between organised crime and terrorism²

Subsequent literature qualifies the model by emphasising that convergence varies according to context and does not require shared goals, but rather common methods,

¹ MAKARENKO, Tamara. ‘The crime-terror continuum: Tracing the interplay between transnational organised crime and terrorism’, *Global Crime*, 6(1). 2004, pp. 129–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1744057042000297025>

Note: All hyperlinks are active as of 7 April 2026.

² GIL, José Luis. *Islamist terrorism and organised crime in the European Union. The illicit trafficking of weapons of war*. IEEE Opinion Paper 63/2021.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2021/DIEEEO63_2021_JOSGIL_Armas.pdf

which are intensified in situations of state collapse . It also warns against the tendency to overemphasise the nexus.

Applied to the Sahel, the framework allows us to distinguish between groups that maintain their ideological agenda and are financed through criminal means, and those that have deepened their hybridisation to the point of operating with a predominantly parasitic logic.

Organised crime as the substrate of *the continuum* in the Sahel

Historically, the Sahel has served as a trade corridor linking the Mediterranean, the Maghreb and West Africa. With the modernisation of caravan routes through the use of off-road vehicles, GPS and satellite telephony, jihadist groups initially established themselves as service providers (guides, protection, escorts) before gradually moving towards controlling sections of the route, imposing tolls and participating directly in the logistics chain³ . The illicit economy diversified: from tobacco smuggling and kidnappings in the 2000s to activities of greater volume and transnational scope⁴ .

Four corridors now structure this criminal ecosystem: the cocaine corridor, which, since the mid-2000s (in response to increased pressure in the Atlantic), connects the Gulf of Guinea with the Sahel, the Maghreb and Europe⁵ ⁶ ; the arms corridor, intensified following the collapse of Libya in 2011, which supplies armed groups from Libya to Niger and Mali⁷ ⁸ ; the migration route, which, from Agadez to Algeria and Libya, was driven

³ ASENJO, Rubén. 'JNIM and the Islamic State in the Sahel: anatomy of the world's deadliest jihadist insurgency', *LISA News*. 2025. Available at: <https://www.lisanews.org/especial-sahel/jnim-y-el-estado-islamico-en-el-sahel-anatomia-de-la-insurgencia-yihadista-mas-letal-del-mundo/> (accessed 14/3/2026).

⁴ GUERRERO, Lucía. *The Sahel, epicentre of drug distribution... also to the Middle East*. IEEE Opinion Paper 67/2024. <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/el-sahel-epicentro-de-distribucion-de-drogas%E2%80%A6-%C2%BFtambi%C3%A9n-hacia-oriente-medio-> (accessed 15 March 2026).

⁵ BIRD, Lucia. 'West Africa's cocaine corridor', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime. 2021. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/west-africas-cocaine-corridor/> (accessed 16 March 2026).

⁶ UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *World Drug Report 2025 – Maps*. Available at: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2025-maps.html> (accessed 14 March 2026).

⁷ MURRAY, Rebecca. 'Southern Libya destabilised: The case of Ubari', *Small Arms Survey*. Briefing Paper, April 2017. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/southern-libya-destabilized-case-ubari> (accessed 11 March 2026).

⁸ MANGAN, Fiona and NOWAK, Matthias. 'The West Africa-Sahel connection: Mapping cross-border arms trafficking', *Small Arms Survey*. Briefing Paper, December 2019. Available at: <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/west-africa-sahel-connection-mapping-cross-border-arms-trafficking> (accessed 11/3/2026).

underground by the Nigerien legislation of 2015, thereby increasing its danger^{9 10} ; and the gold corridor, which links artisanal mines in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger with Atlantic ports and Dubai, and is particularly lucrative due to the portability, high value and ease of laundering of the gold¹¹ .

These corridors share common patterns: dependence on logistics hubs, armed protection, the ability to adapt to state pressure, and the generation of revenue through tolls and territorial control, which together form a transit infrastructure that bolsters the financing and resilience of armed actors.

The convergence with local elites and peripheral administrative actors reveals a functional capture of routes and rents at the intersection of insurgency, organised crime and informal governance¹² . This ecosystem establishes the material conditions of the *continuum*, in which groups move from the instrumentalisation of criminal networks to their integration into them, and violence becomes established as a mechanism for the economic regulation of the territory.

On the global financial front, the fall of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq, together with the pressure arising from the ‘war on terror’, drove al-Qaeda and Daesh towards decentralised models, in which regional affiliates self-finance through local illicit economies and, on occasions, generate surpluses that are redistributed to other branches of the network or to the central leadership¹³ . Within this framework, ISSP and JNIM operate with relative financial autonomy, which increases their resilience in the face of international pressure from financial persecution.

⁹ ENAME, Abraham. ‘On Shifting Sands in Africa’s Sahel Region: Tensions between Security and Free Movement. Migration’, *Policy Institute*. 2025. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sahel-migration-trends> (accessed 13 March 2026).

¹⁰ UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *Smuggling of migrants in the Sahel. Transnational organised crime threat assessment Sahel*. 2022. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html (accessed 14 March 2026).

¹¹ UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME. *Gold trafficking and illicit financial flows in the Sahel. Transnational organised crime threat assessment: Sahel*. 2023. Available at: https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/Tocta_Sahel.html (accessed 14 March 2026).

¹² BØÅS, Morten. ‘The mystery of resource mobilisation’, *Política Exterior*. 2021. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/el-misterio-de-la-movilizacion-de-recursos/> (accessed 20 March 2026).

¹³ FINANCIAL ACTION TASK FORCE. *FATF Annual Report 2024–2025*. Available at: <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfgeneral/FATF-Annual-report-2024-2025.html>

ISSP and JNIM on the Crime-Terror Continuum

ISSP: convergence towards criminal hybridisation

The ISSP has inherited Daesh's reputation for extreme violence, as evidenced by massacres in villages, beheadings and complex attacks on military positions, which constitute its defining characteristics. Its main theatre of operations is the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border region, where it took advantage of the withdrawal of the French Operation *Barkhane* in 2022 to consolidate territory¹⁴.

From 2023 onwards, a transition was documented in the group's strategy from 'indiscriminate violence' to 'structured governance': the establishment of *wilayas* with local hierarchies, Islamic courts and religious police, as well as the administration of strategic resources¹⁵. This pattern brings it closer to a quasi-state insurgent actor than to a mobile terrorist group.

Financially, the ISSP relies entirely on local illicit economies: it imposes taxes (*ushr*) on agriculture and livestock, collects tolls from smuggling convoys, levies taxes on artisanal gold mining — this being one of its most lucrative sources — and participates in the black market for arms¹⁶ ¹⁷. Unlike JNIM, it does not restrain its predatory nature, going so far as to loot villages and, between 2022 and 2023, carry out massacres of Tuareg civilians in Ménaka linked to disputes over routes¹⁸. In drug trafficking, unlike its predecessors (MUYAO and AQIM), which charged for escorting cocaine convoys across the desert, it outsources logistics to local networks and limits itself to taxing transit, fitting into the category of a tactical alliance on the *continuum*¹⁹. Kidnappings for ransom, inherited from

¹⁴ NSAIBIA, Héini. *Newly restructured Islamic State Sahel aims for regional expansion*. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. 2024. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/report/newly-restructured-islamic-state-sahel-aims-regional-expansion> (accessed 10 March 2026).

¹⁵ DRIESEN, Marta. 'The Intensification and Expansion of the Jihadist Threat in the Sahel: Implications for Spain and the European Union', *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2025. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/intensificacion-y-expansion-de-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-el-sahel-implicaciones-para-espana-y-la-union-europea/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

¹⁶ PSC REPORT. 'Illicit activities fuel extremism in the Sahel's conflict zones', *Institute for Security Studies Africa*. 2025. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/illicit-activities-fuel-extremism-in-the-sahel-s-conflict-zones> (accessed 12 March 2026).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ GAYE, Serigne-Bamba. 'Connections between jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel', *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa*. 2018. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/14176> (accessed 17 March 2026).

¹⁹ GAYE, Serigne-Bamba. 'Connections between jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel'. *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2018. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/14176> (accessed 17 March 2026).

AQIM—which generated around 60 million euros in ransoms between 2006 and 2012—remain a supplementary source of income, albeit of lesser significance²⁰.

Externally, the ISSP maintains doctrinal links with global Daesh, but operates with full tactical and financial autonomy²¹. With local criminal networks—Tuareg tribes, Arabs and Fulani groups—it maintains pragmatic alliances based on the exchange of protection for tribute and intelligence. Its relationship with JNIM has been one of active enmity since 2019, albeit with occasional truces—and even cooperation on kidnappings—in the face of common enemies, which demonstrates that the calculation of survival takes precedence over ideological differences.

This allows us to conclude that ISSP largely embodies the convergent profile of *the continuum*. It maintains Daesh’s narrative and ideological objective, but its means of survival, as well as its indiscriminate use of violence, resemble those of an armed criminal organisation rooted in local illicit economies. Its evolution towards territorial control and the provision of services brings it closer to Makarenko’s ‘black hole’ in areas of state collapse.

JNIM: symbiosis and adaptive hybridisation

JNIM combines a ‘winning hearts and minds’ insurgency with selective terrorism. It alternates complex attacks on high-profile targets, such as the 2016 attack on the Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou²², with a sustained campaign of rural guerrilla warfare and an active pursuit of social legitimacy.

A key element of its strategy is to secure the support—or at least the acquiescence—of marginalised communities, particularly Fulani herders in conflict with farmers and members of other ethnic groups: by presenting itself as a provider of security and justice

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ NSAIBIA, Héini. ‘Newly restructured Islamic State Sahel aims for regional expansion’, *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project*. 2024. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/report/newly-restructured-islamic-state-sahel-aims-regional-expansion> (accessed 10 March 2026).

²² ALTUNA, Sergio. ‘The reconfiguration of security structures in the Sahel: failure of the Western approach, changing partners and turbulence on the horizon’, *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2024. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-reconfiguracion-de-las-estructuras-de-seguridad-en-el-sahel-fracaso-del-enfoque-occidental-cambio-de-socios-y-turbulencias-en-el-horizonte/> (accessed 17 March 2026).

in the absence of the state²³. In regions of Mali under the influence of Katiba Macina, it has set up mobile Islamic courts, resolved agrarian disputes and expelled corrupt officials, filling the security and administrative gaps that the state fails to cover.

Financially, JNIM calibrates its sources so as not to erode social support: it combines kidnappings for ransom, targeting since 2017 local hostages of lesser importance, a parallel tax system (*zakat*, *ushr* and transport levies) presented as legitimised by the provision of security and justice, and selective extortion of NGOs and companies^{24 25}.

Artisanal gold mining, accounting for around 50% of Sahelian production according to the UNODC²⁶, constitutes another key pillar: it controls and taxes informal operations and manages their export routes, enabling communities to operate in areas off-limits to the state and reinforcing its local legitimacy.

With regard to organised crime, its strategy is to act as a facilitator and protector rather than a direct operator. It provides safe environments for smuggling networks, collects tolls and offers escorts, arbitrating the criminal ecosystem without directly carrying out operations²⁷. It tolerates such activity provided it does not harm the population under its protection or challenge its authority, retaliating against those who cross these lines.

In terms of external interactions, JNIM, like ISSP, maintains ideological links with the central organisation and, furthermore, has so far avoided carrying out attacks outside West Africa so as not to provoke a more intense Western response²⁸.

²³ PALACIOS, Tammy. 'Preventing another al-Qaeda-affiliated quasi-state: Countering JNIM's strategic civilian engagement in the Sahel', *New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy*. 2024. Available at: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/nonstate-actors/preventing-another-al-qaeda-affiliated-quasi-state-countering-jnims-strategic-civilian-engagement-in-the-sahel/> (accessed 17 March 2026).

²⁴ GAYE, Serigne-Bamba. *Connections between jihadist groups and smuggling and illegal trafficking rings in the Sahel*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Peace and Security Centre of Competence for Sub-Saharan Africa, 2018. Available at: <https://collections.fes.de/publikationen/ident/fes/14176> (accessed 17 March 2026).

²⁵ BEEVOR, Eleanor. 'JNIM in Burkina Faso'. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/jnim-burkina-faso/> (accessed 16 March 2026).

²⁶ PSC REPORT. 'Illicit activities fuel extremism in the Sahel's conflict zones', *Institute for Security Studies Africa*. 2025. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/illicit-activities-fuel-extremism-in-the-sahel-s-conflict-zones> (accessed 12 March 2026).

²⁷ BEEVOR, Eleanor. *JNIM in Burkina Faso*. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2022. Available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/jnim-burkina-faso/> (accessed 16/3/2026).

²⁸ ALTUNA, Sergio. 'The reconfiguration of security structures in the Sahel: failure of the Western approach, changing partners and turbulence on the horizon', *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2024. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-reconfiguracion-de-las-estructuras-de-seguridad-en-el-sahel-fracaso-del-enfoque-occidental-cambio-de-socios-y-turbulencias-en-el-horizonte/> (accessed 17 March 2026).

Its relationship with governments is ambivalent: although it is formally classified as a threat, some officials have explored discreet channels, given its local roots (such as the talks with the Malian government in 2020). Following the withdrawal of Barkhane and MINUSMA (2022–2023), JNIM expanded its operations and reoriented its narrative to present itself as a guarantor of order in the face of state chaos.

The logistical blockade campaign in Mali, launched in late 2025, illustrates its capacity for coercion. It was based on sustained attacks on tanker convoys on the main roads connecting to Bamako, triggering a national supply crisis. The strategic impact of the prolonged disruption to economic flows exceeded that of conventional attacks.

In this case, JNIM also falls within the convergence spectrum, moving towards symbiosis; it maintains its political-religious agenda intact and relies heavily on criminal methods. This is the most complete manifestation in the Sahel of the convergence of crime and terrorism with an intact political objective, corresponding to what Shelley and Picarelli (2002) would call a mutualistic relationship between terrorist and criminal actors.

Comparative position on the continuum and the black hole thesis

The comparative analysis confirms that both groups have traversed different sections of *the continuum*. ISSP occupies a position further along the continuum towards full convergence, as it exercises territorial control through the systematic exploitation of criminal economies and predatory violence that reduces its dependence on social legitimacy. JNIM maintains a more adaptive hybridisation, by calibrating its predatory to preserve community support and alternating between insurgency, territorial control and criminal facilitation, without renouncing its ideological agenda.

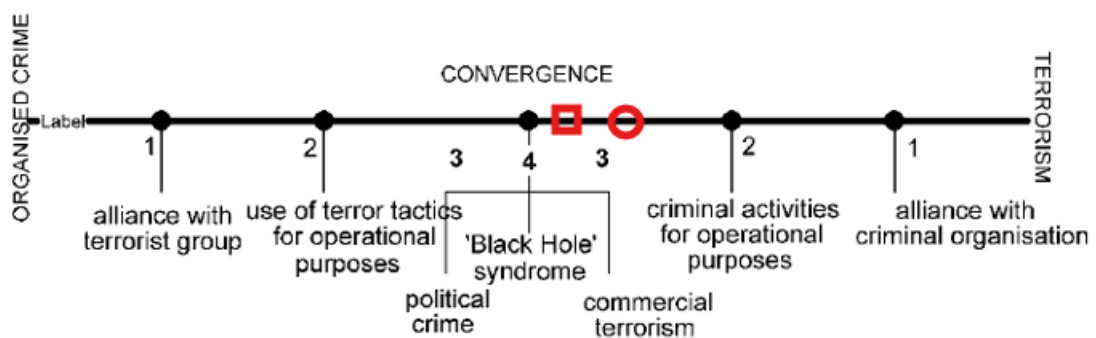


Figure 2. Position of ISSP and JNIM on the *continuum*. The red square refers to ISSP and the red circle to JNIM²⁹

Far from being one-dimensional entities driven solely by religious fanaticism, both incorporate pragmatic motivations and patronage networks typical of organised crime. This convergence has provided them with resilience, by diversifying their sources of funding and strengthening their local roots, but it also exposes vulnerabilities: their involvement in criminal activities generates internal ideological tensions and may undermine their legitimacy among certain Muslim populations.

The application of the *'black hole thesis'* is particularly relevant in the Liptako-Gourma region (the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area), where state authorities control only fragmented urban centres, whilst insurgents maintain transnational logistical corridors; in northern and central Mali, where JNIM exercises quasi-state functions across vast rural areas; and in the eastern regions of Burkina Faso and the border with Niger, which are subject to the converging advance of ISSP and JNIM. The existence of these 'black holes' does not imply a complete or homogeneous merger: distinct identities, objectives and cost-benefit calculations persist among the various actors.

In practice, ISSP and JNIM constitute a hybrid security challenge. They are, at once, terrorist cells requiring classic counter-terrorism responses and illicit economic- e actors demanding tools for combating organised crime, which necessitates avoiding rigid categories and replacing them with dynamic, temporal and situated analyses.

The expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea

Since the late 2010s, the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel has expanded its sphere of influence into the Gulf of Guinea states. Groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and Daesh exploited porous borders and military pressure in Mali and Burkina Faso to seek refuge and new areas of influence in neighbouring Gulf of Guinea countries³⁰.

²⁹ Own compilation.

³⁰ NARANJO, José. 'Jihadist groups in the Sahel extend their operations to four other African countries', *El País*. 2020. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-05-27/grupos-yihadistas-del-sahel-extienden-sus-operaciones-a-otros-cuatro-paises-africanos.html> (accessed 18 March 2026).

By 2018, jihadist cells linked to the Sahel had already been detected in northern Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin: gold from mines under their control in Burkina Faso was being sold in Togo and Benin, whilst the motorcycles used in attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso were entering from Nigeria via Benin³¹. In 2019, the murder of a Spanish missionary on the border between Togo and Burkina Faso and the kidnapping of French tourists in Pendjari National Park confirmed the ‘spread’ southwards³². The year 2021 marked a turning point: Togo suffered its first attack claimed by a jihadist group, and JNIM established permanent sanctuaries in the cross-border parks of W and Pendjari, using the nature reserves as a refuge and clandestine corridor³³. By 2023, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin and Togo were facing a low-intensity insurgency in their northern territories.

³¹ Ibid.

³² NARANJO, José. ‘Two Western hostages released in Mali’, *El País*. Available at: <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-03-14/dos-rehenes-occidentales-son-liberados-en-Mali.html> (accessed 18/3/2026).

³³ LABRADO, Elena María. ‘The spread of jihadism from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea: After Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo, is Ghana next?’, *Revista Ejército*. <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/focus/terrorismo/la-expansion-del-yihadismo-del-sahel-al-golfo-de-guinea/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

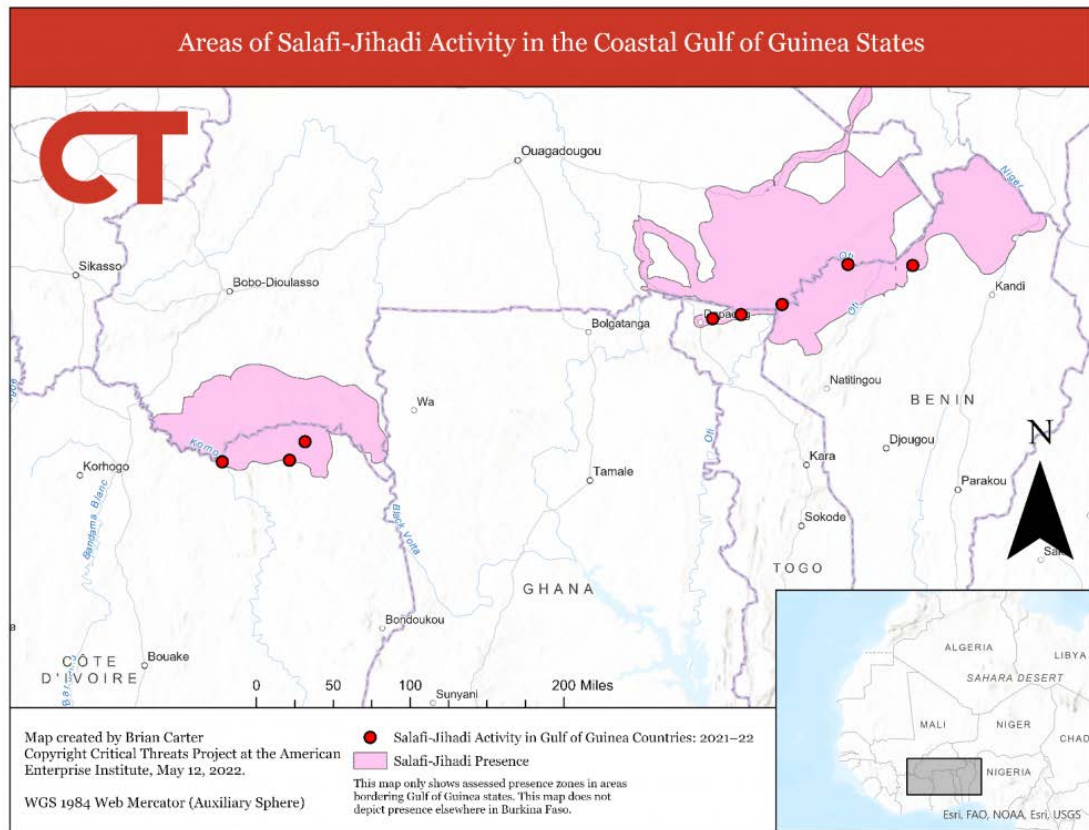


Image 3. Map illustrating the activity and presence of jihadist groups in the coastal countries of the Gulf of Guinea (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin)³⁴.

Ghana remained the only country without consistently claimed attacks, although its authorities detected recruitment activities, arms trafficking and the transit of militants³⁵. This difference suggests that expansion is not automatic, but is conditioned by variables of operational opportunity: earlier preventive containment and a still-incipient phase focused on logistics and recruitment rather than direct attacks.

The figures dramatically illustrate the scale of the expansion. Violent acts attributed to jihadist groups in Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire rose from five in 2020 to 160 in 2024

³⁴ CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT. "Africa File: Salafi-Jihadi Groups May Exploit Local Grievances to Expand in West Africa's Gulf of Guinea", *Critical Threats Project*. 2022. Available at: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-salafi-jihadi-groups-may-exploit-local-grievances-to-expand-in-west-africas-gulf-of-guinea> (accessed 20/3/2026).

³⁵ LABRADO, Elena María. 'The spread of jihadism from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea: After Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo, is Ghana next?', *Revista Ejército*. <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/focus/terrorismo/la-expansion-del-yihadismo-del-sahel-al-golfo-de-guinea/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

(+3,200%)³⁶. Benin recorded the largest proportional increase in jihadist attacks across Africa during that period. This wave of violence has been driven mainly by JNIM, which accounts for approximately 98% of recorded incidents, although the ISSP has also launched incursions, with at least five attacks in Benin between 2022 and 2024³⁷.

According to ACLED analysts, in early 2024 the groups entered ‘a new phase of expansion’ towards the coast, opening an active southern front in the border regions of Niger-Nigeria-Benin and Burkina Faso-Togo, which turned the Dosso (Niger)-Alibori (Benin) region into a critical hotspot, with dozens of attacks recorded since 2023³⁸.

This expansion is the result of a combination of deliberate strategic decisions and the exploitation of favourable structural conditions. From a strategic perspective, it represents an adaptive response to sustained military pressure in the Sahel (particularly following French and allied operations since 2013–2014): the groups opted for decentralisation and territorial dispersion aimed at preserving capabilities, reducing vulnerabilities and opening up new, less defended theatres^{39 40}.

³⁶ DRIESSEN, Marta. ‘Intensification and expansion of the jihadist threat in the Sahel: implications for Spain and the European Union’, *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2025. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/intensificacion-y-expansion-de-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-el-sahel-implicaciones-para-espana-y-la-union-europea/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ NSAIBIA, Héini. *New frontlines: Jihadist expansion is reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria borderlands*. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2025. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/report/new-frontlines-jihadist-expansion-reshaping-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands> (accessed 18 March 2026).

³⁹ TISSERON, Antonin. ‘Jihadist threat: The Gulf of Guinea States up against the wall’, *Institut Thomas More*. 2019. Available at: <https://institut-thomas-more.org/2019/3/04/jihadist-threat-%E2%80%A2-the-gulf-of-guinea-states-up-against-the-wall/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

⁴⁰ NSAIBIA, Héini. *New frontlines: Jihadist expansion is reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria borderlands*. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2025. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/report/new-frontlines-jihadist-expansion-reshaping-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands> (accessed 18 March 2026).

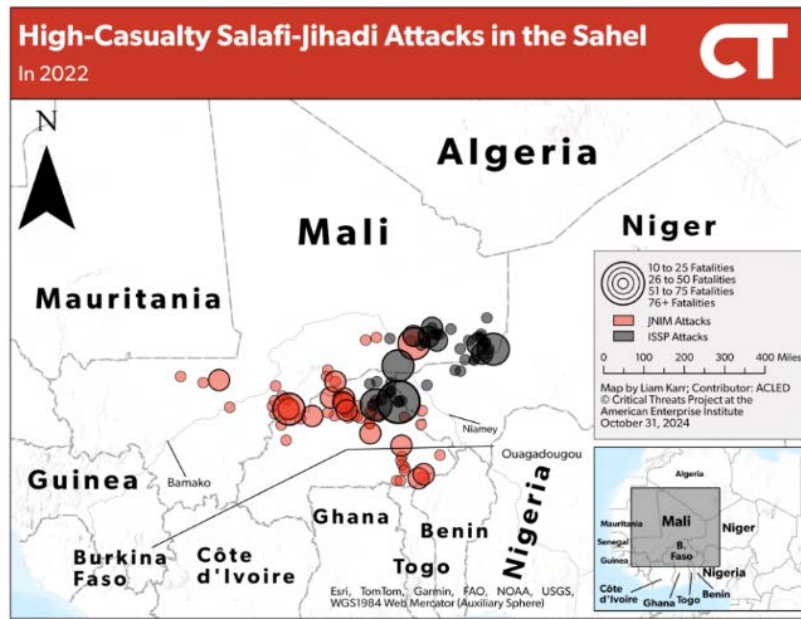


Figure 4. Jihadist attacks resulting in high casualty figures in the Central Sahel in 2022⁴¹

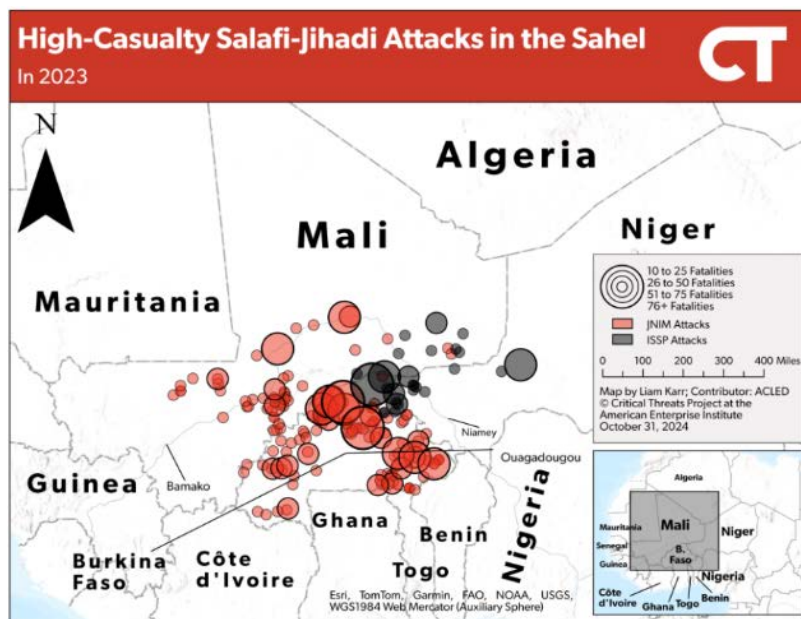


Figure 5. Jihadist attacks resulting in heavy casualties in the Central Sahel in 2023⁴²

⁴¹ KARR, Liam and CARTER, Brian. 'Salafi-Jihadi Areas of Operation in the Sahel', *Critical Threats Project*. 2024. Available at: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-areas-of-operation-in-the-sahel> (accessed 20 March 2026).

⁴² Ibid.

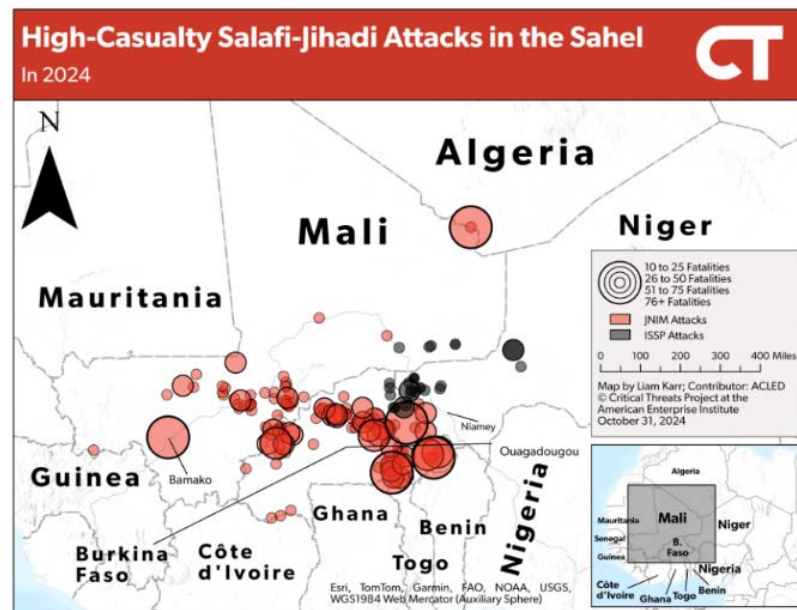


Figure 6. Jihadist attacks with high casualty counts in the Central Sahel in 2024⁴³

The choice of the Gulf of Guinea is no coincidence. In the northern regions of these countries, socio-economic vulnerabilities persist, characterised by impoverished rural areas, limited state presence, service deficits and the marginalisation of communities such as the Fulani, which facilitate recruitment and social penetration⁴⁴.

Governance gaps between the more developed south and peripheral regions create areas of low surveillance where the insurgency operates with relative impunity, replicating patterns seen in the central Sahel. Added to this are transnational corridors connecting the Sahel with the Atlantic coast, facilitating the movement of fighters, weapons and illicit resources—particularly gold—and expanding sources of funding through emerging criminal economies^{45 46}.

By early 2026, the threat remains latent and is gradually growing, with Benin and Togo facing insurgencies concentrated in their northern provinces, whilst Côte d'Ivoire, in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ BERNARD, Aneliese. 'Jihadism is spreading to the Gulf of Guinea littoral states, and a new approach to countering it is needed', *Modern War Institute at West Point*. 2021. Available at: <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/jihadism-is-spreading-to-the-gulf-of-guinea-littoral-states-and-a-new-approach-to-countering-it-is-needed/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ VERVAEKE, Alice. 'Gulf of Guinea: Pirates and other tales', *EUISS Alert No. 19*. European Union Institute for Security Studies, June 2017. Available at: https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_19_GoG.pdf

addition to armed incursions, is concerned about possible sleeper cells and the return of radicalised fighters⁴⁷. Coastal governments have stepped up their responses through border military operations, the declaration of states of emergency in northern provinces, the deployment of counter-terrorism forces and community support campaigns.

International cooperation has intensified. Côte d'Ivoire signed agreements with the United States for the deployment of unmanned surveillance along its northern border, and the Accra Initiative incorporated Nigeria in 2025, in recognition of the shared nature of the threat⁴⁸. However, experts warn that the root of the problem is domestic and that extreme poverty in border areas, the marginalisation of communities and a weak state presence provide fertile ground for these groups to take root⁴⁹.

Conclusions

The convergence of organised crime and terrorism in the Sahel constitutes a structural pattern based on state fragility, illicit economies and governance vacuums. In this ecosystem, ISSP and JNIM combine an ideological-political agenda with a logic of material accumulation, exploiting the absence of authority in vast rural areas to exercise quasi-state functions, impose taxes and capture rents linked to illicit economies, often through pragmatic alliances with pre-existing criminal networks.

The application of Makarenko's *Crime-Terror Continuum*, in dialogue with subsequent revisions by other authors, is particularly relevant to the Sahelian case, as it allows for the capture of non-linear and context-dependent trajectories.

The results show that, on the one hand, ISSP is situated at an advanced stage of convergence: it retains the 'brand' of Daesh, but its sustainability depends largely on local

⁴⁷ LABRADO, Elena María. 'The spread of jihadism from the Sahel to the Gulf of Guinea: After Benin, Ivory Coast and Togo, is Ghana next?', *Ejércitos magazine*. Available at: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/focus/terrorismo/la-expansion-del-yihadismo-del-sahel-al-golfo-de-guinea/> (accessed 18/3/2026).

⁴⁸ BELTRÁN, Ana. 'The silent advance of jihadism in West Africa', *Delta 13 News*. 2025. Available at: <https://delta13news.com/el-avance-silencioso-del-yihadismo-en-africa-occidental/> (accessed 19 March 2026).

⁴⁹ DRIESEN, Marta. 'Intensification and expansion of the jihadist threat in the Sahel: implications for Spain and the European Union', *Elcano Royal Institute*. 2025. Available at: <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/intensificacion-y-expansion-de-la-amenaza-yihadista-en-el-sahel-implicaciones-para-espana-y-la-union-europea/> (accessed 18 March 2026).

illicit economies and the coercive capture of rents, which is associated with a greater propensity for predatory practices and indiscriminate violence.

On the other hand, JNIM exhibits a more social and adaptive hybridisation: it modulates the use of violence, seeks legitimacy through the selective provision of services, and presents itself as a hybrid actor capable of alternating between insurgency, territorial control and criminal facilitation without diluting its political purpose.

This comparison reveals that ideologically similar groups occupy different points on *the continuum* depending on their community integration, financial architecture and governance strategy.

This convergence manifests itself as a political economy of violence in which control over routes, hubs and illicit revenues—cocaine, artisanal gold, human trafficking and arms trafficking—strengthens insurgent capabilities and acts as a lever of local power.

The expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea is a deliberate and multi-causal process: it responds to tactical motivations (to evade military pressure and secure safe havens), strategic motivations (to diversify fronts, preserve capabilities and expand territorial influence) and ideological motivations (to extend the jihadist project beyond its Sahelian core).

The central Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea are increasingly taking shape as an integrated operational theatre, with identifiable penetration corridors and tactical enclaves, and with a growing threat to Benin, Togo and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as plausible pressures on Ghana.

The expansion towards the Gulf of Guinea is not merely a geographical shift of the problem, but an adaptive reorganisation of the jihadist insurgency in interaction with illicit markets and governance vacuums, which demands interpretative frameworks and operational responses that are equally comprehensive and context-sensitive.

The main risk for coastal states and, by extension, for Europe, lies in the consolidation of an Atlantic corridor where jihadist networks, narcotics and irregular migration converge, raising the likelihood of regional destabilisation and a greater spread of illicit flows and terrorism towards the European space. Without addressing structural factors such as

corruption, exclusion and governance deficits, these areas will continue to be occupied by armed actors.

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