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Edited by Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde

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DIIS · DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



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JIHAD**
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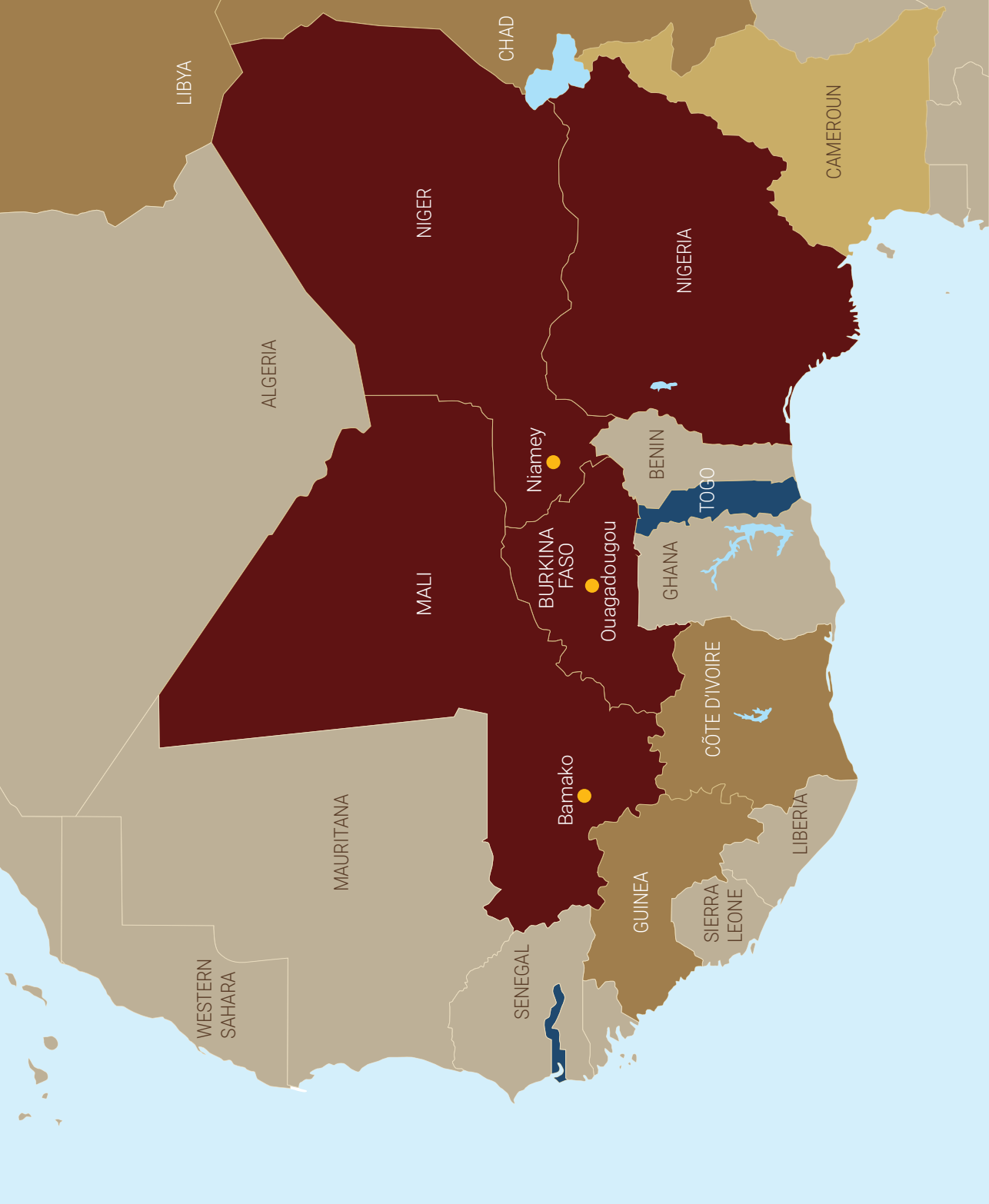
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ACRONYMS

ACSS	Africa Center for Strategic Studies
AES	Alliance of Sahel States
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
BH	Boko Haram
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FAMA	Malian Armed Forces
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defense Group
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
HTS	Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham
IS	Islamic State
ISCAP	Islamic State's Central Africa Province (DRC/Mozambique)
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS and ISSP refers to the same movement at different phases. ISGS (2015–2022) changed to ISSP after 2022. From 2019 to 2022, ISGS was placed under ISWAP's command structure.
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
IS-Sahel	Islamic State in the Sahel (an analytical and not official designation for ISGS/ISSP)
ISSP	Islamic State Sahel Province (formerly ISGS)
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province. The movement is active around the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Chad, etc.)
JAS	Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNJTF	Multi-National Joint Task Force
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MPA	Azaouad People's Movement
MPLA	People's Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
SADR	Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices



Source: Global2p (<https://www.global2p.org/countries/mali/>), Layout by Ravnkilde Design.

INTRODUCTION: SAHEL AND THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL JIHAD

**Mona Kanwal Sheikh
Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde**

In the early hours of April 25, 2026, Mali was struck by the most coordinated jihadist offensive the country had seen since 2012. Armed groups simultaneously hit key locations across the country – military bases on the outskirts of Bamako, the international airport, the central hub cities of Mopti and Sévaré, and the symbolically loaded northern city of Kidal. Images of Russian soldiers abandoning Kidal on pickup trucks circulated globally, as Mali's Defence Minister Sadio Camara lay dead – killed by a suicide car bomb at his home in the garrison town of Kati.

In the days that followed, JNIM announced a siege on the capital. As this book goes to press, the situation remains fluid. But the recent events are not an aberration. They mark the culmination of a decade-long jihadist insurgency that has made the Sahel the global epicenter of jihadist violence – and whose dynamics and drivers this book sets out to explain.

Over the past decade jihadist militancy on a global scale has become more dispersed, deadlier per incident, and increasingly centred in Africa – especially in West Africa's Sahel region.¹ The jihadist landscape in Sahel is thus to be understood as part of a wider global pattern with fewer but deadlier attacks, transnationally networked affiliates (IS and al-Qaeda), and tactical innovation that travels across geographies, accelerated by new digital information infrastructures that enable the scalability of the insurgencies (Norman, Ford & Cold-Ravnkilde 2024). These trends illustrate a rapidly developing insurgency model with the potential to spread and consolidate in and beyond the Sahel.

Illustrating the continued transnational reach of jihadist networks, the Global Terrorism Index for 2025 shows how Islamic State (IS) affiliates remained active

across the Middle East, Africa, Asia and in parts of Europe (Institute for Economics & Peace 2025). Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia together constitute most incidents accounted for in the index, indicating a clear concentration in the South, even as their reach and communication remain transnational. Despite territorial losses in Iraq and Syria and an overall setback in its Middle Eastern heartland, through local affiliates, IS has expanded its regional footprint and it remained the world's deadliest terrorist organisation at the end of 2024. The evolution and presence of IS and al-Qaeda branches is, among other factors, maintained through media, finance and operational innovations (Shtuni 2025).

A report from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) shows approximately 18,900 fatalities linked to militant Islamist violence in Africa in 2024. Sahel alone has been the continent's most lethal theatre for four consecutive years, responsible for more than half of all deaths from militant jihadist violence, and a disproportionate share of civilian casualties (CEMAS 2025).

Spiralling violent conflict from northern Mali into Burkina Faso, Niger and coastal West Africa has led to the rise of community-based militias and complex state–insurgent dynamics. Alongside these developments, jihadist groups have expanded and consolidated, deploying new tactics such as the adoption of low-cost, weaponised commercial drones by JNIM since late 2023,² and the use of digital communication strategies.

Evolving dynamics of armed jihadist groups in the Sahel have predominantly been studied through analyses that emphasise the material and strategic dimensions of their expansion. Highlighting the often frantic and changing alliances between armed groups, researchers have argued that jihadist mobilisation and governance practices are mostly driven by contingent strategic interests rather than ideological motives (Strazzari 2015; Bøås & Dunn 2017; Raineri & Martini 2017). Other studies have analysed jihadist groups as an 'effective source of assistance, protection and dispute resolution' (Raineri & Strazzari 2015), and how they produce 'hybrid orders' through complex relationships to criminal organisations and local populations (Rosato 2016; Thurston 2020). Focusing on local drivers, several authors emphasise local grievances and people's need for protection against state and proxy militia abuse and racketeering, as well as for mechanisms to regulate resource-related conflicts, as reasons for local groups to join jihad (Raineri, 2020a Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022a).

This can help explain why the region has transitioned from a peripheral theatre of regional jihad in the early 2000s (Thurston 2020) to a central driver of global jihadist violence that works both as an operational hub and as a space for narrative constructions that can sustain transnational mobilisation (UNDP 2023). Against this backdrop, the book argues that the Sahel represents a paradigmatic case for studying contemporary jihadist insurgencies. It brings together several dynamics that are often studied separately: weak and contested state authority, cross-border insurgent networks, competition over natural resources and governance, and the presence of multiple international military interventions. The convergence of these dynamics makes it possible to observe how locally embedded insurgencies connect to wider transnational jihadist movements and how these interactions shape patterns of mobilisation, violence, and governance.

Several cross-cutting themes emerge from the chapters of this book:

- Fluidity and unity: The way jihadi movements navigate their quest for unity in a fragmented space and how transformations take place.
- Ideology and adaptability: The way jihadi movements navigate the requirements of ideology and pragmatic change.
- Governance and access to resources: The significance of access to and control over resources in understanding the development of jihadism.
- State failure and foreign intervention: The significance of weak governance and foreign interventions in understanding the mobilisation potential of jihadi movements.

Before elaborating on these four cross-cutting themes, we briefly outline the current context of global geopolitical rivalry in the region and its impact on the local conflict dynamics in which jihadist groups operate. This sets the stage for the following section, which analyses Sahelian jihadism through the lens of 'bundled conflicts' (Sheikh 2022), before turning to an elaboration of the four themes. The chapter concludes with an overview of the contributing chapters to follow.

A REGION IN FLUX: GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY AND LOCAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Building on broader analyses of the Sahel's entangled crises (Bonnecase & Brachet 2013), the current wave of jihadist conflict is best understood in a broader context

of layered security dynamics. Jihadist groups have their organisational roots in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, out of which AQIM later emerged in the early 2000s. The current crisis engulfing the broader Sahel was accelerated by the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, which destabilised the region, triggered a coup in Mali, and created an opening for Al Qaeda-affiliated groups to seize control of the north (Lecocq et al. 2013).³ The French counterterrorism operation Serval, deployed in 2013 alongside Malian and regional African forces, succeeded in its immediate military objective of halting the jihadist advance, yet this did not solve the underlying crisis. As Serval expanded into the regional Barkhane force and was joined by the UN stabilisation mission, MINUSMA, and a range of EU security programmes, the result was a 'security traffic jam' (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen 2020). However, violence only deepened and spread. Since 2015, jihadist groups have expanded into Burkina Faso and Niger, exploiting grievances rooted in impoverishment, ecological stress, and state neglect (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021), while governments responded with military violence, disinformation, and the mobilisation of local armed groups – dynamics that further polarised Sahelian societies rather than stabilising them (De Bruijn et al. 2025).

The Sahel region has since become a critical zone where global rivalries and local insurgencies merge- and where shifting alliances, foreign interventions, and jihadist movements collide in increasingly complex ways. Since its formation in 2023, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) – comprising Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – has deliberately broken with Western partners, withdrawing from the earlier Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and expelling French and UN missions (Obiezu 2025). In their place, the AES governments have forged closer ties with Russia, China, Turkey and Iran, whose security and economic support come with fewer political conditions. While some of these alliances, including with Russia, are longstanding, this geopolitical realignment has not only altered regional governance but has also reshaped the conflict economy: Russia conducts influence operations that frame Western counterterrorism as a failure while appealing to anticolonial sentiments across the region to legitimise regime support in return for lucrative payments in gold (Audinet 2025). China's steady economic expansion, particularly in mining and infrastructure, deepens its leverage in the region, and Turkey continues to provide cheap Bayraktar armed drones (De León Cobo 2024).

These rivalries are increasingly intertwined with the global crises of the 2020s. The wars in Ukraine and Syria affected the development in Sahel: Ukraine has reportedly provided indirect intelligence support to anti-Russian rebel formations in

Mali, while Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine prompted it to withdraw military advisors from Burkina Faso. This has exposed the fragile balance of its African engagements. However, the Russia–Mali bilateral cooperation continues, expanding into educational and industrial sectors. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria further undermined Russia's regional logistics network, intensifying its reliance on footholds such as Mali. Meanwhile, Russian information campaigns actively shape public sentiment, amplifying anti-French narratives and celebrating Moscow as an alternative partner (Wilkins & Mwabia 2025). In Burkina Faso, rising Russian influence has coincided with a marked surge in anti-French rhetoric across domestic media and social networks (Stronski 2023).

Amid these geopolitical changes, jihadist movements have entrenched themselves more deeply. In August 2023 a UN panel of experts on Mali reported that the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel) had doubled the territory it controlled, while al-Qaeda's Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) continued expanding operations across the tri-border region (UN, Panel of Experts on Mali, 2023). In September 2025 JNIM disrupted fuel convoys supplying Mali's capital, Bamako, causing widespread shortages, electricity outages and transport disruptions. The military government was forced to implement emergency measures, which illustrated JNIM's capacity to affect daily life and state functioning without seizing territory. The incident also reflects JNIM's expansive strategic ambition of moving southward into key economic hubs to entrench control over supply routes on which Bamako depends, sustaining pressure on an already strained government that struggles to project authority beyond the capital.

These groups have capitalised on state fragility, the collapse of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement brokered by Algeria between the Malian state, Tuareg separatists, and pro-state militias, and the proliferation of war economies – particularly gold mining, now a critical revenue source for both state and non-state actors (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2023). In Niger, which remains the world's seventh-largest producer of uranium, jihadist violence has surged to record levels, threatening supply chains vital to global nuclear and energy ambitions, including China's rapidly expanding nuclear sector (Parens 2023).

IMPROVING THE ANALYSIS OF JIHADI MOBILISATION AND RESONANCE

The literature that seeks to explain the emergence and mobilisation capacity of jihadist actors draws on various disciplines, ranging from the narrow field of Terrorism Studies to the broad field of Peace and Conflict research (e.g. Gerges 2005; Svensson 2007). Within these, we find scholarship on rebel governance (e.g. Weinstein 2007; Mampilly 2011); as well as contributions from Area Studies that focus on countries or regions and thus capture the locally-embedded conflict drivers and the narratives that sustain them in a detailed manner. Inspired by social movement theory and norm translation in IR (e.g. Wiktorowicz 2004; Acharya 2004), scholars examining ideology and ideological resonance increasingly emphasise the importance of local reception, interpretation and adaptation of global jihadist ideological repertoires. They explore how global jihadist discourses are localised, reinterpreted and made meaningful within particular political, historical and cultural contexts, often as part of broader struggles over legitimacy, authority and moral order (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022b; Hegghammer 2010).⁴ In other words, why they resonate. Recent work has also highlighted that transnational Islamist mobilisation does not necessarily equate to 'global' mobilisation but may instead unfold through regionally-embedded networks and conflict dynamics (Valbjørn, Gunning & Lefèvre 2024).

While the role of ideology in mobilisation lies at one end of the explanatory spectrum, structural explanations highlight inequality (including access to and control over resources), unemployment, the absence of legitimate state authority and predatory state behaviour, particularly in regions where state presence is contested.

In practice, these explanatory logics rarely operate in isolation. The Sahel illustrates precisely how jihadist insurgencies emerge from the interaction of layered dynamics, constituting what Sheikh describes as 'bundled conflicts' (2022: 225). This concept captures constellations of common conflict variables in which conflict, scarcity and grievance cannot neatly be delineated from one another. Bundled conflicts are not simply large-scale conflicts as defined by statistical analysts, measured in terms of high numbers of fatalities or a high level of violence. Such measures capture neither the ideological reach nor the conflict complexity that characterise the Sahelian jihadist insurgencies. What the bundled conflict framework makes visible instead is the simultaneous involvement of multiple actor-types (local, regional and global), dynamic territorial and regional conflict extension, and the interaction of both material enablers (weapons, technology, resources) and non-material enablers such as ideology, theology and collective memory. Sahelian jihadism emerges exactly from the intersection of multiple overlapping conflicts: local struggles over

governance and resources, regional insurgent dynamics, global jihadist ideological projects, and international military interventions.

These dynamics do not operate as separate explanatory domains but interact and reinforce each other, producing complex conflict constellations in which local insurgencies become embedded in transnational and regional jihadist networks. Understanding the Sahel, therefore, requires analysing how these different conflict logics converge and mutually shape processes of mobilisation, expansion, and violence.

Fluidity and unity

Similar to other conflict contexts, such as Syria and Iraq, the Sahelian conflict context is characterised by a myriad of actors and their transformation over time, pointing to the fluidity of the jihadi movements. Jihadi groups frequently merge, fragment and reconfigure as their objectives shift in response to changing alliances and the broader regional political and security dynamics (Thurston 2020). Analysing recent developments in the jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, several insights contribute to existing literature on global jihadism. First, that fragmentation within the jihadi movement is not just a difference between al-Qaeda on the one hand and the Islamic State on the other. Fragmentation and rivalry are also traits within the movements, as illustrated in the Islamic State's competing factions.

Although communication and recruitment materials of jihadi movements often present a unified global struggle, a closer look at the practices and evolution of these groups over time reveals leadership disputes and strategic divergences that often lead to the emergence of rival factions. The Islamic State movement (ISIL) emerged from al-Qaeda and reflected an internal disagreement about strategic direction. Within the 'umbrella brands', there can also be differences or transformations in positions: al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM has, for example, maintained a changing relationship with Tuareg rebel factions, ranging from cooperation to conflict, and at times engaging in coordinated tactical operations against state forces. Despite fragmentation, jihadi actors occasionally succeed in creating unity or alliances when there is a sufficient overlap in what they want to achieve.

Rigid ideology and pragmatic adaptability

In the decentralised and semi-autonomous regions of the trans-Saharan borderlands, jihadist actors have developed governance structures that are often more effective than state institutions at addressing local grievances. Practices of 'care', including the provision of security, health services, and judicial mechanisms, are often blended with practices of 'control', including direct violence, targeted assas-

sinations of suspected collaborators, and the enforcement of harsh punishments. Within these governance practices, jihadist actors navigate a delicate balance between their ideology and pragmatism to win hearts and minds while asserting sufficient control to secure territory, recruits and resources.⁵

On one hand, ideology and worldview shape jihadist visions of alternative statehood in Africa. On the other hand, the establishment of Islamic courts and police forces has enabled jihadist groups to gain public support and legitimacy in areas long plagued by lawlessness and state predation – such as in the case of the ‘Azawad Emirate’(Skretting 2022).⁶ In many areas under jihadist control the introduction of Islamic governance practices such as zakat collection is not merely tactical but reflects deeper moral and redistributive principles. In this sense, ideological commitments to justice, fairness and religious obligation are translated into concrete governance practices on the ground. In other instances, too much pragmatism in terms of bending what their communities consider to be core Islamic principles can affect the movements’ ability to recruit.

While structural factors such as inequality, marginalisation and weak state presence create enabling environments for jihadist mobilisation, these conditions alone do not explain the emergence and persistence of insurgencies.⁷ Crucially, it is the agency of ideologically-driven actors, often referred to as ‘jihadist entrepreneurs’, that plays a central role in shaping both strategic direction and governance practices (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022b). The importance of being aware of actor agency is further illustrated by AQIM’s early presence in northern Mali, which was not merely an external infiltration but a strategic partnership between Algerian jihadists and local allies, each benefiting from the collaboration (Thurston 2020). As several contributions in this book demonstrate, while strategic guidance may come from IS or AQ central, it is Sahelian actors who are the true architects of successful jihadist insurgencies, adapting creatively to local contexts. In the case of JNIM, as Cold-Ravnkilde and Gernigon argue in their chapter, by offering a unifying religious repertoire, AQIM’s merger into JNIM in 2017 under Iyad Ag Ghali’s leadership helped overcome ethnic and social divisions.

Governance and access to resources

The case of Sahel is also illustrative of the increasing significance of jihadist governance practices. In areas like the Inner Delta of Mali’s Mopti region, conflict over access to and control of resources and the corrupt or contested state practices have long shaped conflicts between ethnically diverse populations. Historically, natural resource conflicts have emerged when, for instance, farmers begin cultivating land

traditionally reserved for pasture. Following the large-scale Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, governments, supported by international donors, responded with misguided environmental policies and programmes that tapped into the local grievances contemporary jihadist groups have since exploited and escalated (Raineri 2020b). In central Mali, like in many other regions in the Sahel, development policies favouring agricultural expansion have been implemented at the expense of pastures and livestock corridors, contributing to a wider marginalisation of pastoralists in Mali (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021). In evolving conflict settings stretching from the Inner Delta in Central Mali to the Niger borderlands, jihadist actors effectively tap into resource disputes to strengthen their position among local communities whose livelihoods depend on access to water and land (see, for example, Eduorodo, this issue). Jihadist success is often attributed to their adaptable way of governing in these areas, through the implementation of Islamic-based jurisdiction, which some local populations consider a more legitimate alternative to that of abusive, corrupt state measures.

The focus on the importance of governance also touches upon the question of the economy of jihadist groups, reflected in broader debates on rebel governance (Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011). The illicit economy of the Sahel is a complex phenomenon, with nuanced moral boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate trade in cross-border areas (see Scheele 2012; Brachet 2013). Though challenging to study empirically, the control of trade flows, the role of zakat, and the spoils of war are important for understanding the consolidation and expansion of jihadist movements.

Since Mali's 2020 coup d'état, the subsequent military takeovers in Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), and the reshuffled geopolitical alliances, the region's strategic resources – gold, uranium, lithium, oil, and gas – have once again become central to great power politics, national power struggles, and the narratives that seek to contest and legitimise. As for the jihadist insurgencies, not only local people's access to and control over resources, but also strategic minerals such as gold and control of oil and gas have become central to their fight against the Malian state. The competing logics of resource appropriation have thus produced divergent positions among social actors, fuelling tensions, conflicts, and military operations in areas where state authority has long been contested (Sylla & Cold-Ravnkilde, forthcoming).

State failure and foreign interventions

Another final cross-cutting theme concerns the role of the state, its use of violence and repression, its relationship with international security partners, and the way foreign interventions have shaped jihadist insurgency. Rather than serving as a corrective to state failure, international military and stabilisation efforts have

frequently compounded local grievances, providing jihadist actors with both material opportunities and ideological resources to strengthen their fight. The French counterterror operation Serval, accompanied by African forces to support the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), halted the jihadist advance and facilitated the Malian state's return to areas abandoned during the jihadist insurgency between 2012 and 2013.⁸

However, the gradual return of the state with support from international security forces was accompanied by extrajudicial killings targeting local communities, including Fulani pastoralists. This violence drove recruitment into Katiba Macina, whose control and expansion across the tri-border area between 2015–2018 laid the groundwork for the subsequent territorial expansion into the region's coastal countries – Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana and Togo – with more recent attacks in Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal.

Soon, French counterterrorism operations were joined by an array of international security interventions, including the UN stabilisation mission, MINUSMA, the EU CSDP mission as well as various regional initiatives. One of MINUSMA's main tasks was to mediate between the central government and Tuareg separatists, which culminated in the 2015 Algier peace agreement. Crucially, jihadist groups were excluded from the peace process, which transformed them into spoilers. They started targeting UN forces, framed as proxies for French counterterrorism, denouncing them as infidels and 'occupiers on Sahelian ground' – a framing that proved effective in a context already marked by deep resentment of foreign military presence and which also resonated with a broader global jihadi audience.

These dynamics complicate the conventional strategic debates within the global jihadi movement, particularly the longstanding distinction between focusing on the 'near' versus the 'far' enemy. In the Sahel, this distinction carries less analytical weight. Foreign forces arrived not as invaders but as an 'intervention by invitation' by the state, effectively bringing the far enemy onto local battlegrounds in ways that have strengthened jihadist mobilisation. At the same time, the heterogeneity of external actors, including Russian forces and European and UN missions, has complicated efforts to sustain a coherent 'far enemy ideology'.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE BOOK

The book consists of four essays: two on the al-Qaeda-related Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and two on Islamic State-affiliated groups, primarily

Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP, formerly ISGS). The four contributions collectively advance two interconnected analytical agendas. First, they deepen our understanding of Sahelian jihadism as a paradigmatic case of 'bundled conflicts' (Sheikh 2022) – constellations in which local grievances, regional insurgent dynamics, ideological projects and international interventions are mutually constitutive rather than separate explanatory layers. Second, they push beyond the global versus local binary by engaging with how transnational networks, norms and rivalries interact with locally-embedded conflict dynamics. Krause, for example, shows how JNIM sustains transnational ideological legitimacy while remaining locally-grounded, fitting uneasily into both global and purely local frames. Cold-Ravnkilde and Gernigon trace how bundled conflict logics enabled JNIM's strategic localisation, embedding transnational jihadist networks into pre-existing ethnic, pastoral and governance conflicts. Baldaro illustrates how IS-Sahel moved from peripheral insurgency to proto-state governance precisely by exploiting bundled local disputes over land, mobility and authority. Stoddard, Berlingozzi and Raineri show how ISWAP and ISSP have developed divergent operational logics that reflect regional and local conditions far more than global directives, complicating any straightforward reading of transnational jihadist command.

Within this overall framework, the chapters present rich empirical descriptions of recent developments that contribute to our understanding of jihadist mobilisation, resonance and modes of operation:

Krause's chapter offers a systematic analysis of JNIM propaganda, based on 578 statements (2017–2023). He shows how JNIM blends local grievances with a global jihadist worldview, framing the Sahel as part of a wider confrontation with a Western-led 'Crusader alliance'. Three core themes dominate in their narratives: the implementation of sharia, unity against a 'war on Islam', and resistance to injustices such as corruption and exploitation. While JNIM adapts its rhetoric to new actors like the Wagner Group, its continued commitment to transnational jihad and rejection of borders severely limits prospects for negotiation. Krause concludes that this dual orientation – local pragmatism coupled with persistent global references – poses a major obstacle to negotiated settlement. Although some of JNIM's complaints about corruption or foreign domination might be negotiable, its rejection of national borders and continued invocation of transnational jihad drastically reduce the bargaining space. The chapter therefore highlights both the adaptive capacity and the ideological rigidity that sustain JNIM as a central node of global jihadism in the Sahel.

Cold-Ravnkilde and Gernigon describe JNIM as a paradigmatic case of 'glocal jihad' shaped by the interaction of global jihadist ideology and local conflict dynamics. The movement is portrayed as the embodiment of a new generation of Al-Qaeda insurgency – adaptive, locally-grounded and digitally networked, thriving in a geopolitical vacuum created by foreign intervention failures, state fragility and technological transformation. Tracing its roots to AQIM and the 2012 Mali crisis, they show how figures like Iyad Ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa built a socially-embedded movement capable of governing, mediating conflicts, and expanding across ethnic lines. JNIM's strategic localisation – combining coercion, negotiation and service provision – has strengthened its legitimacy, while digital propaganda and shifting geopolitical alignments (including Russia's growing role) have further embedded it in transnational conflict systems. The chapter hence illustrates how Sahelian conflicts are increasingly entangled with global crises such as the Russia–Ukraine war.

Baldaro's chapter examines the evolution of IS-Sahel (ISSP/ISGS) across three phases: emergence (2015–2019), integration under ISWAP (2019–2022), and autonomy with expanding governance (since 2022). The group has capitalised on state collapse, local grievances and mobility conflicts to entrench itself in the tri-border region, while increasingly featuring in Islamic State's global strategy. Baldaro's analysis exemplifies how jihadist insurgencies use ethnic marginalisation, disputes over land and mobility, and the collapse of state authority. The movement's growing prominence in Islamic State propaganda and coordination with ISWAP underscores the Sahel's new strategic centrality in the Islamic State's global architecture.

The final chapter by Stoddard, Berlingozzi and Raineri compares ISWAP and ISSP as two key IS provinces. ISWAP has developed more institutionalised governance and seeks legitimacy through service provision, whereas ISSP relies more heavily on coercion, though it is gradually introducing governance structures. Both groups derive resilience from local embedding and state weakness, while remaining linked to IS central. By 2025 both functioned as proto-state actors, exercising taxation, justice and territorial control, marking a shift from insurgent networks to embedded political orders. The authors underscore that the endurance of both factions derives from their ability to embed within local networks and exploit state weakness, rather than from direct central direction by IS. Nevertheless, symbolic alignment and sporadic communication with IS-central continues to shape their rhetoric, targeting priorities and internal organisation. The groups' respective conflicts with al-Qaeda's JNIM, national armed forces, and international actors (formerly French and UN missions, now increasingly Russian-backed forces) define the shifting battlefronts of the Sahel and Lake Chad.

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Mali Timbuktu, Bamba, Man of Sonrai tribe with cattle walking on deserted land. January 2000.
Photo: Frans Lemmens / Alamy.com.

FROM THE SAHEL TO THE UMMAH: NARRATIVES IN JNIM'S PROPAGANDA

Dino Krause

Existing scholarship has found Islamist groups that propagate transnational ambitions to be largely unavailable for peace negotiations. However, the reality often looks complex: Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l Muslimeen (JNIM) is known to formulate national, regional and global ambitions simultaneously. To date, little systematic analysis has been conducted to examine how the group combines these levels in its public discourse. This chapter leverages a unique dataset of 578 documents published by JNIM between 2017–2023 to analyse how the group

integrates Sahel-oriented narratives with references to global developments in its propaganda. JNIM embeds region-specific political dynamics within a global worldview that depicts an alleged alliance of 'Crusader states' waging war on Muslim populations, both worldwide and in the Sahel. Although many of JNIM's formulated grievances would theoretically be negotiable, the group's continued proclamation of expansionary, transnational goals provides serious obstacles to future peace negotiations.

Since its inception as an al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent coalition in March 2017, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l Muslimeen (JNIM) has gradually extended the scope of its armed struggle. Already in late 2017, the group expanded operations from Mali into Burkina Faso, where it now controls significant territory. In addition, it has regularly claimed attacks in Niger and, from 2020 onwards, in Benin and Togo. JNIM is thus waging a transnational, regional insurgency in Western Africa. At the same time, the group is affiliated with the global al-Qaeda organisation that comprises affiliates across multiple continents. The devastation caused by the conflicts involving JNIM has led to growing calls in favour of exploring the possibility of peace negotiations with the group (ICG 2021; ICG 2024). However, the existing conflict resolution literature has repeatedly identified transnationally oriented Islamist groups such as JNIM to be largely unavailable for peace negotiations, arguing that the expanded scope of their ambitions decisively reduces the bargaining space (Nilsson & Svensson 2020: 391; see also Krause 2024). In other words, it is difficult to negotiate peace with groups that seek to rebuild the caliphate (Zenn & Fox 2020, 173; Matesan 2022). But how far do JNIM's ambitions reach? While a growing scholarly consensus has emerged that views the group as a 'glocal' actor (See the contribution by Gernigon and Cold-Ravnkilde in this report; Bencherif 2021) that is both deeply embedded in regional conflict dynamics and committed to a global agenda (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022: 1; Guichaoua & Bouhlef 2023: 18), there is surprisingly little research on how JNIM combines these multiple levels in its public discourse. As a result, what the group would potentially be willing to negotiate about remains poorly understood. To shed light upon these questions appears all the more timely, given the evolution of al-Qaeda's former Syrian affiliate, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and its leader Ahmad al-Shara'a, from a globally-oriented group towards a diplomatically engaged actor focused on Syria, which has shown that – at least theoretically – globally affiliated jihadist groups may re-nationalise their agenda.

Leveraging a novel dataset of 578 documents released between 2017 and 2023 by JNIM's so-called 'al-Zallaqa Media Foundation', the group's official propaganda outlet, in the coming pages I carve out how JNIM links regional narratives oriented towards

the Sahel region with global grievances across three sets of grievances, namely (1) transforming the state, (2) uniting Muslims and (3) fighting injustice. As this chapter illustrates, JNIM frames its regional struggle in the Sahel as part of a larger conflict, evoking the image of a global, anti-Muslim conspiracy led by an alliance of Western 'Crusader' states. Crucially, the findings underscore JNIM's continued rejection of national borders and the modern nation-state order. Moreover, JNIM has repeatedly expressed expansionary aims beyond Mali and Burkina Faso, vowing to 'expel the very last occupying soldier [...] from the entire Sahel and Sahara' (Unknown author 2018c). While its global claims must be understood as largely rhetorical expressions of solidarity with jihadist groups elsewhere – given JNIM's absence from conflict theatres outside the Sahel and the fact that the group does not plot terrorist attacks abroad – its Sahel-oriented claims largely match with the group's actions on the ground. Given its operational presence in several regional countries, any potential political settlement with the group would thus ideally require an unprecedented regional dialogue involving multiple, partially rivalling, governments, or a re-nationalisation of JNIM's political agenda, both of which appear currently unlikely.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on an analysis of 578 documents released between March 2017 and December 2023 by JNIM's official propaganda outlet, the so-called al-Zallaqa Media Foundation, accessed by the author predominantly via SITE Intelligence. The original data coding procedure through the software NVIVO, to identify different grievances, which is described in detail in Krause (forthcoming), involved a dual approach. On the one hand, I drew upon an a priori list of grievances in jihadi propaganda developed by Droogan and Peattie (2017). Additional grievances were inductively coded if not covered by the initial list. The full coding cycle was completed twice to allow for consistent coding of all grievances. Once the coding was completed, I grouped all grievances into six overall themes containing similar grievances. For the present chapter, I selected the three themes with the most frequently raised grievances. Subsequently, I selected the two most frequently raised grievances in each of these three themes, analysing how JNIM connects grievances across regional and global levels.

Before proceeding to the analytical section of this chapter, it is crucial to reflect upon some of the implications of studying the propaganda of extremist groups. Most importantly, propaganda material is produced with a specific purpose and targeted at distinct audiences. It may not fully reflect leaders' genuine beliefs or strategic

intentions, but rather be driven by the desire to influence a particular target audience. In the case of JNIM, this means that the group may seek to appear less compromising on some key issues than it actually is. However, with this caveat in mind, what is communicated publicly is always significant because it reflects how JNIM wants to be perceived. What the group publicly declares also establishes audience costs vis-à-vis its supporters. For example, if the group repeatedly claims to be seeking to implement the Sharia – one of its key demands – then its supporters will likely hold it to account based on how it actually governs in its controlled territories.

With these methodological considerations in mind, the following analysis turns to the three most prevalent grievance themes identified in JNIM's propaganda: transforming the state, uniting Muslims, and fighting injustice. Each theme illustrates how the group interweaves regional concerns rooted in the Sahel with broader references to global struggles, thereby positioning its regionally-rooted insurgency within an imagined worldwide confrontation between Islam and its alleged enemies.

TRANSFORMING THE STATE

Ending the occupation

Until the recent French troop withdrawals from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger between 2022–2024, the issue of foreign occupation stood out as the single most frequently voiced grievance by JNIM. In 2018 the group even claimed that 'we did not take up arms but to expel the Crusader occupiers and foil their projects and those of their agents on the land of Muslim Mali' (Unknown author 2018b). JNIM has portrayed the French presence in the region as part of a global, so-called 'Crusader' alliance that has joined forces to subjugate Muslim lands. Sahelian governments are generally described as 'agents of the occupiers' (Kufa 2020) or 'puppet government[s]' (Unknown author 2019b) who have betrayed their people in return for material, personal enrichment, through both moral as well as financial corruption. The contrast between the 'Muslimness' of the allegedly occupied lands and the Christian identity of the occupiers is crucial in this regard. To underscore this point, historical analogies are drawn to past interventions by Christian governments in other Muslim contexts. In several of its publications, JNIM zooms in on France's historical presence in places such as Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, or Lebanon, depicting its contemporary presence in the Sahel as a continuation of its colonial past. Other external actors such as the European Union, MINUSMA and the

United Nations are framed as ‘invaders’ (Unknown author 2020d) or ‘subsidiaries’ (Unknown author 2020c).

Following the departure of French forces from the region and the arrival of the Russian Wagner Group⁹ from 2022 onwards, JNIM did not apply the anti-occupation narrative to Russia to the same extent as it had done previously regarding France, at least not until December 2023, which marks the end of the timeframe for this study (Krause, forthcoming). One possible reason could be that Russia lacks a comparable colonial past in the African context, while its status as an irregular force, rather than an official state military, may equally play a role. JNIM’s apparent difficulties with situating Russia in its larger worldview are also illustrated by previously depicting it as both, on the one hand, ‘atheists’ and in direct contrast to ‘Crusader France’ or the ‘Buddhist Chinese’ (Kufa 2020), and, on the other hand, as part of a ‘Crusader–Jewish–pagan alliance’ (Unknown author 2017).

Implementing the Sharia

In 2021, JNIM claimed that ‘the real reason for the French invasion of Mali is hatred for [...] the religion of Allah and His Shari’ah’ (Unknown author 2021a). JNIM’s main line of argumentation is that concepts such as democracy, elections and secularism are alien to the Sahelian context, imported by France and implemented by its ‘puppet governments’ to facilitate French occupation and exploitation of the region. According to JNIM, the Sharia constitutes the alternative that promises freedom, wealth and justice. Again, the main narrative lies in positioning JNIM and its ideology as rooted in the region and in line with local traditions, whereas its opponents are portrayed as foreign intruders. To support this line of argumentation, JNIM draws analogies to other conflicts, for example Algeria during the 1990s, where it is argued that ‘the Muslim Algerian people who desired to live in the shade of [the] Islamic Shari’ah’ (Unknown author 2020a) rebelled against a military regime backed by France. Further examples include references to contemporary Palestine and Afghanistan, where the struggles of militant groups are framed as heroic acts of resistance against foreign occupation and for the implementation of the Sharia.

UNITING MUSLIMS

Islam under attack

JNIM claims to be defending the world’s Muslims in a larger, global ‘war against Islam’ (ag-Ghali 2023) waged by its enemies. This narrative, consistently employed throughout the entire period from 2017–2023, fulfils a dual function. On the one

hand, it seeks to evoke fear among its regional audiences in the Sahel, as they arguably constitute a target simply due to their identity as Muslims. In this regard, the narrative of a global war against Islam helps to attract recruits, declaring armed jihad as a 'Sharia-accredited duty' (Unknown author 2018a) for all Muslims to defend both themselves and their fellow Muslim co-religionists.

At the same time, the narrative allows JNIM to situate its struggle not only as heroic resistance in defence of local, Muslim populations, but also as forming part of a larger struggle waged by Muslims around the world, accentuated by references to the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, anti-Muslim violence in India, the Christchurch massacre, or historical references to the expulsion of Islam from Andalusia or Sicily as well as, more recently, the Srebrenica Genocide committed by 'Serbian Crusaders' (Unknown author 2023b). JNIM has also framed the growth of right-wing populism in the West as an expression of 'Western hatred against the Ummah of Islam' (ibid.) At the same time, although France – until its recent departure – was clearly seen as the group's immediate, main enemy, JNIM has also made it clear that it views the US as being at the top of the alleged 'alliance of international disbelief' (Unknown author 2021b), albeit allegedly controlled by Jewish elites who are being described as 'the actual kings of America via the Federal Bank of the Rothschilds' (Unknown author 2020b), thus utilising an old antisemitic trope.

The global ummah

Closely related to the narrative of a global war against Islam, JNIM consistently appeals to the unity of Muslims and the 'global ummah' to counter an allegedly Satanic plan by its enemies to 'divide and conquer' Muslim lands (al-Hammam 2018). With respect to the Sahel, the focus lies on portraying JNIM's declared jihad as an opportunity to overcome intra-Muslim divisions along ethnic lines. In several statements, JNIM prides itself for uniting fighters with various ethnic backgrounds, thereby overcoming what are seen as pre-Islamic, tribal conflict lines. JNIM also views contemporary nation-state borders as artificial constructs that prevent an otherwise natural unity of Muslim populations, an argument that is not only applied with reference to the West African context but also globally; for instance concerning the creation of nation-states in the Levant as a result of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Unknown author 2023c).

Moreover, JNIM regularly uses appeals to the global Muslim ummah to emphasise its support for jihadi insurgencies elsewhere. Typically, such statements are released in response to highly symbolic events, such as the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in late 2017, the Taliban takeover

in Afghanistan in August 2021 or, more recently, Hamas's 7th of October attack in Israel. In the case of the latter, JNIM promised Palestinians that 'the entire Ummah of Islam is behind you' (Unknown author 2023c) and that it was seeking to unite forces with Palestinians. Still, these announcements remain largely rhetorical and are primarily intended to project strength by positioning JNIM as part of a larger movement, despite the group's operations being restricted to West Africa. In line with this, the idea of reestablishing the global caliphate is only rarely explicitly evoked by JNIM.

FIGHTING INJUSTICE

Anti-civilian violence

Among the most frequently raised grievances in JNIM's propaganda is the issue of anti-civilian violence by the group's enemies through airstrikes, arrests of civilians, or revenge killings of local populations for suspected association with JNIM. Such acts are overwhelmingly portrayed as the result of these actors' hatred for Islam, thus integrating it with the larger narrative of a global war on Islam, as discussed in the previous sections.

Until the French troop withdrawals from 2022 onwards, anti-civilian violence was overwhelmingly associated with France – including frequent references to its colonial-era human rights violations – as well as its Sahelian 'puppet governments' and their associated militias, who are accused of intimidating and harassing local populations. Following the appearance of the Russian Wagner Group from 2022 onwards, while its human rights violations are also addressed by JNIM, there is an interesting change in the narrative. Although Russia is at some points framed as the Malian Government's new 'atheist communist masters' (Unknown author 2023a), when speaking about the Wagner Group, JNIM primarily uses terms such as 'criminal gang' or 'mercenary associates', whose actions are more generally depicted as the result of moral depravity rather than, for example, a more deeply-rooted hatred for Islam, or geopolitical aspirations to occupy Muslim lands.

Economic exploitation

The second core grievance related to the issue of justice concerns what JNIM portrays as the plundering of the region's resources. According to JNIM's propaganda, when it comes to the West and its (formerly) allied governments in the region, besides waging an ideologically founded war against Islam, they are motivated by greed; stealing the region's natural resources and forcing Muslim populations to live

in poverty. Several companies such as Total and Société Générale are repeatedly mentioned and depicted as tools used by France to mask its alleged continuation of colonial, exploitative practices. Similar narratives have recently been used by pro-government and pro-Russian voices (see, for example, Audinet & Dreyfus 2023: 46–47). Moreover, the West's support for democracy is portrayed as a ploy to facilitate this form of economic exploitation. As stated by JNIM's chief judge in 2018: 'This is one of the reasons why they are exporting democracy to our country – the democracy that gives them the right to continue their occupation and their control of our wealth and resources' (al-Sanhaji 2018). Again, the Sharia is positioned as an antidote to such practices. As outlined in an October 2019 statement, 'the Shariah will protect the wealth of the country from the plunder of the occupiers and agents. No one can touch it except through fair and consensual trade, so that its price is divided among our Muslim peoples fairly and does not go into the accounts of corrupt rulers' (Unknown author 2019a).

A change in tone can be observed around 2022, when the Wagner Group effectively begins to replace France as JNIM's primary foreign military opponent. Whereas France was depicted as having orchestrated a complex, decades-long conspiracy to extract natural resources from the region, the transgressions of the Wagner Force are overwhelmingly framed as the barbaric actions of a criminal entity, rather than as forming part of a geopolitical plan furthered by the Russian regime.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated how JNIM presents its core grievance themes – (1) transforming the state, (2) uniting Muslims, and (3) fighting injustice – simultaneously in a Sahelian context and within a global jihadist framework. Until the recent departure of Western military forces from the region, the group consistently depicted Sahelian governments as manipulated by France and its Western 'Crusader' allies, whereas references to the more recent presence of Russia and its Wagner Group reveal a more ambivalent framing, indicating both adaptability and limitations in JNIM's narrative repertoire. At the same time, JNIM regularly formulates claims and expressions of solidarity towards the global ummah and to insurgents in places such as Palestine or Afghanistan. Yet, such statements must be understood as largely rhetorical attempts at projecting strength and signalling solidarity, rather than attempting operational reach beyond West Africa. This is in contrast to JNIM's Sahel-oriented claims, which align closely with the group's actions on the ground.

One key question that emerges concerns the potential end state of JNIM's insurgency. Back in 2020 JNIM announced its willingness to consider peace negotiations with the Malian Government. While it remains unknown if this was a genuine (and unsuccessful) attempt at opening a dialogue, or a calculated ploy to improve its public image (ICG 2021: 20–21), it was in itself a remarkable and unusual step for a globally affiliated jihadist group. However, the findings of this chapter suggest that while some of JNIM's core grievances – such as opposition to foreign political and economic interference, government corruption or anti-civilian violence – could theoretically be addressed in negotiations, the group's rejection of national borders, its operational presence in multiple Sahelian countries and its continued rhetorical commitment to a global jihadist agenda severely narrow the bargaining space. Therefore, unless JNIM re-nationalises its agenda, prospects for a sustainable political settlement remain remote.

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Chad Southern Sahara desert Ennedi. December 2011. Photo: Charton Franck / hemis.fr, Alamy.com.

THE 'GLOCAL' JIHAD: UNPACKING AL-QAEDA'S SAHELIAN BATTLEFIELDS

Alexandre Gernigon
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During the escort of the fuel tanker convoy, people are dying; there are ambushes on the roads and tankers are catching fire with people inside them, who are burning to death.

(PRESIDENT ASSIMI GOÏTA, CITED IN AFRICANEWS 2025)

In September 2025 Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l Muslimeen (JNIM) effectively laid siege to the Malian capital Bamako by attacking fuel tankers and ambushing military-escorted convoys from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire – the country's vital supply lines. Videos circulating on Malian social media showed lines of oil tankers burning on highways, as jihadists used handheld drones to ignite hundreds of oil tankers, which were left destroyed or abandoned (Al Jazeera 2025). The blockade caused fuel shortages across the city's more than four million residents, electricity outages, long queues at petrol stations, transport paralysis and a near collapse of economic activity. Towns such as Kayes, Nioro and Mopti were without electricity for over a month. The military government responded with emergency measures: schools and universities were closed nationwide and foreign embassies ordered citizens to evacuate. By mid-November 2025 heavily escorted military convoys, including shipments from neighbouring Niger, enabled the partial reopening of petrol stations, resumed public transport, and a gradual return to normal activity in Bamako (Africanews 2025; Roadking 2025).

The unprecedented blockade of the capital demonstrates JNIM's operational reach, organisational capacity, and strategic flexibility. Rather than holding territory conventionally, its advantage lies in controlling circulation – insurgent power exercised not by seizing cities, but by subverting their functioning. Media speculation compared Bamako's vulnerability to cities in Afghanistan or Syria, yet given JNIM's history of splits, mergers and rivalries, the group is unlikely to form a cohesive government (Walther et al. 2025). Nevertheless, the blockade reflects JNIM's growing ambition: the al-Qaeda-affiliated group has expanded southward into key economic hubs to entrench control over supply routes, applying sustained pressure on the military government.

In this light, JNIM emerges as a hybrid actor with transnational outreach across the Sahel; part insurgent group, part economicwarfare actor, part de facto regulator of essential supply lines. Its operations also reflect the fluidity of jihadi movements noted in other conflict contexts: groups frequently merge, fragment and reconfigure as objectives shift in response to alliances and regional political and security dynamics (see Introduction). The siege of Bamako matters not only for the immediate humanitarian impact, but also because it illustrates how insurgent power in the Sahel has evolved – from guerrilla actions in remote areas to asymmetric warfare at the heart of the state.

This chapter investigates how jihadist actors in Mali have successfully consolidated and expanded in and beyond the region. Focusing on one of the region's most influential jihadist groups, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), affiliated

with al-Qaeda, it traces the main actors and conflict drivers and shows how these expand and become entangled in 'global crisis ecologies' (Norman et al. 2024). We argue that the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel is driven by both local and transnational dynamics and, in line with others, hold that understanding the expansion of jihadist groups in the region, requires looking beyond the global/local binary and challenging the dichotomous discussion on the local and global as opposing explanatory models (Paradela-López & Jima-González 2024). Our analysis contributes to this argument by exploring specific dimensions of the local/global interplay. We show how digital connectivity, drones and mobile technologies have allowed jihadist groups to expand their networks and diffuse violence across borders. This, coupled with the central role of jihadist 'entrepreneurs' – leaders who translate global ideological projects into local terms that resonate with local populations' grievances and aspirations – has helped to sustain and amplify JNIM's capacity to root itself in local Sahelian contexts while remaining tied to global jihadist agendas. The agency of Sahelian actors and their ability to adapt strategies to local contexts has therefore been central to the expansion of JNIM. Moreover, we trace how the al-Qaeda/Islamic State relationship in the region has evolved and how it – over time – has come to reflect the rivalry between the two organisations seen in other regions in the world. Finally, we point to the need for further research on the role of digital connectivity in understanding these interlinkages and how global jihadist ideas spread, as well as how new technology enhances their operational capacities, without diverting attention away from historical trajectories and localised entanglements of conflict.

AL-QAEDA IN THE SAHEL'S EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE

In West Africa's central Sahel region, franchises of global jihadist groups are expanding and consolidating their grip on local populations and enhancing their operational capacities. Renowned jihadist organisations, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, are increasingly exploiting local conflict dynamics as they move into new regions. These groups are progressively capable of carrying out complex attacks and infiltrating various areas across West Africa. As a result, the Sahel has now surpassed the Middle East as the global epicentre of terrorism; more than half of terror-related deaths worldwide occur here, with Burkina Faso alone accounting for a fifth of the global total (Global Terrorism Index 2025). In the first half of 2024 fatalities across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger reached unprecedented levels, despite extensive efforts to counter the expansion of jihadist insurgencies – particularly those led by al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Recent years have seen an expansion of JNIM activities and attacks into several West African coastal states, including Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo, near their borders with Sahelian countries (Nsaibia 2023; Haidara 2023; ACLED 2023.). As such, JNIM's areas of operation and territorial expansion are not confined by national borders. The group should not be seen as a purely local nor a strictly global actor; but operating as a 'glocal' organisation, both deeply embedded in local conflicts and connected to transnational networks. This dual nature has enabled JNIM to expand across West Africa while entangling itself in broader global crisis ecologies, including the Ukraine war, external power rivalries, and recent incursions into coastal West Africa.

Since 2020 the conflict in Mali and the broader Sahel has become increasingly entangled in global conflict dynamics and great power rivalries. Western influence in this strategically – particularly for the EU – important region has waned, and relations with Sahelian governments have deteriorated, leading to severed diplomatic ties, the closure of European embassies and suspension of development aid. Sahelian leaders have turned to alternative security partners, notably Russia, which is reshaping the region's security landscape. The growing instability in the Sahel – exacerbated by coups, weakened state institutions, geopolitical tensions and ambitions of foreign actors – have provided JNIM with opportunities to further entrench itself in the region.

Meanwhile, we cannot understand JNIM's success without a contextualised understanding of how they have tapped into local grievances against the state and by appealing to societies who have felt suppressed and exploited by state elites since independence, particularly pastoralists.

AL-QAEDA'S HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY IN THE SAHEL

Rooted in longstanding historical trajectories and regional grievances, the current spiral of violence can be traced back to January 2012. At that time, a loose coalition of Tuareg separatist rebels and three jihadist groups – al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine and the Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO) seized control of Mali's three northern regions, Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. Accelerated by the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, this insurgency marked the beginning of a security crisis that has gradually spread across the region.

But the jihadist takeover of northern Mali did not happen overnight. Initially an Algerian struggle, jihadists in the Sahel evolved from serving as a support base to

gradually becoming actors in their own right.¹⁰ Since the late 1990s, to establish a foothold in northern Mali, AQIM integrated itself into illicit trafficking networks by offering convoy protection and taxing goods passing through territories, where weak state control and longstanding grievances provided fertile ground for its operations (Bencherif 2023). Several leading AQIM figures have built ties with communities by marrying into influential families within northern Mali's trafficking networks (Scheele 2012). AQIM's presence in northern Mali was, thus, not a one-sided infiltration by a jihadist force, but a strategic partnership between Algerian jihadists and their local allies, each benefiting from the collaboration (Thurston 2020).

A key figure in this operational environment was ex-Tuareg rebel leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, former head of Ansar Dine, now the official leader (emir) of JNIM. As one of the most influential jihadist leaders in West Africa, Ag Ghali continues to shape conflict dynamics, posing a significant challenge to both national and international counterterrorism efforts as well as ongoing peace initiatives in Mali.

IYAD AG GHALI: THE SAHEL'S MOST NOTORIOUS JIHADIST ENTREPRENEUR

Born in 1958 in the Kidal region of northern Mali,¹¹ Iyad Ag Ghali belongs to the Ifoghas, the 'noble' clan of the Kel Adagh – a tribal confederation within the broader Tuareg community.

Ag Ghali's militant trajectory began during the 1990s Tuareg rebellion, which was a continuation of the first Tuareg uprising in the 1960s against Modibo Keita's postcolonial regime. While the 1963 rebellion was short-lived and forcefully suppressed by Mali's army, it has remained a source of conflict between Tuareg separatists and the Malian state, as well as a catalyst for intra-Tuareg divisions between leaders loyal to and opposing the Malian Government.

Growing up in a region plagued by political instability and ethnic tension, Iyad belonged to the generation of unemployed Tuareg youth known as the Ishumar (Lecocq 2010), many of whom migrated to Algeria, Libya and elsewhere in North Africa in search of economic opportunities. Some joined Gaddafi's Islamic legion – an experience that shaped the Tuareg separatist movement, Mouvement populaire de libération de l'Azawad (MPLA), in which

Iyad was actively involved. He played a pivotal role in the 1990s Tuareg rebellions against the Malian Government in northern Mali.

During this time Iyad's religious beliefs were likely influenced by his interactions with the Jama'at al-Da'wa wa-l-Tabligh (the Society for Preaching and Spreading the Message), a transnational but peaceful Salafist religious movement active in the Kidal region during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Thurston 2020: 112). Through this movement, he connected with Amadou Koufa, who later became deputy leader of JNIM.¹²

Over time Ag Ghali demonstrated a remarkable ability to navigate shifting alliances, negotiating peace agreements with the Malian Government while maintaining influence among Tuareg nationalists. His role in negotiating the early 1990s peace agreement became a leeway into Mali's political diplomacy, and he briefly served as a diplomat in Saudi Arabia, where he was reportedly exposed to Salafi Islam. This experience further shaped his political and jihadist ideology (Thurston 2020: 106–117).

Ghali remained central to Mali's political and security dynamics. In the early 2000s he helped secure the release of European hostages kidnapped by GSPC (AQIM's predecessor), which likely became his entry point into al-Qaeda's leadership (BBC News 2012). His alignment with AQIM was both a strategic and ideological move to unite Tuareg communities under an Islamist framework (Bencherif 2023).¹³

In 2012, as northern Mali plunged into crisis, Ag Ghali's career trajectory shifted from nationalist Tuareg leader to jihadist. After an unsuccessful attempt to take leadership of the secessionist MNLA movement,¹⁴ he founded Ansar Dine, an AQIM-aligned Salafi-jihadist group involved in the takeover of the key cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal (Klute & Embaló 2011).¹⁵ Cooperating with Tuareg separatists, they expelled the state and national army, while declaring the independent state of 'Azawad'.

Despite numerous attempts by international and regional forces to neutralise him, Ag Ghali has remained elusive, continuing to orchestrate insurgent operations across the region. His deep knowledge of the desert terrain, strategic acumen, and extensive militant networks have cemented his status as one of the most successful militant leaders in West Africa.

WESTERN INTERVENTION AND THE RISE OF BOTTOM-UP JIHAD

In 2013 France launched Opération Serval, which pushed Ansar Dine and other jihadist groups out of urban centres. Iyad Ag Ghali went into hiding but over the next years he became a central figure in jihadist operations across the Sahel, fostering alliances with al-Qaeda affiliates (Bencherif 2021).¹¹ Amid intense, French-led counterterrorism efforts in the north, jihadist groups reconfigured into new constellations and moved southward into central Mali's Mopti region, bordering Niger and Burkina Faso.

In 2012 another important jihadist entrepreneur, the Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa, aligned with Iyad Ag Ghali and joined the jihadist advance. He went on to lead Katiba Macina, JNIM's principal operational branch, responsible for an estimated 75% of the group's attacks (Eizenga & Williams 2021). Koufa, who later became deputy leader of JNIM, played a pivotal role in this strategic shift by adapting global jihadist discourse to local grievances, particularly those of pastoralist communities. His 'jihadism from below' contrasts with Ag Ghali's 'jihadism from above', which relies on elite networks and high-level political manoeuvring (Thurston 2020).

Koufa's preaching rhetoric invoked the 19th century 'golden age' of jihad in the Niger Delta, providing a historical justification for his campaign against what Fulani pastoralists perceived to be an unjust social order. As leader of Katiba Macina and coalition architect, Koufa further exploited growing ethnic tensions among Fulani pastoralists, mobilising young herders and capitalising on long-term state repression, ethnic profiling and the state's collective punishment of Fulani communities as suspected 'terrorists'.

This strategy proved instrumental to jihadist success. In their areas of operation, Katiba Macina attempts to fill governance gaps by providing services including Islamic justice, protection from crime and price regulation of market products (Haidara 2024). To further entrench their influence, Katiba Macina undermines state authority by targeting law enforcement personnel (Pollichieni 2021). In its place, they actively intervene to regulate conflicts over access to natural resources, for example the highly valuable bourgoutières (seasonally flooded pasturelands), crucial for maintaining pastoralists' livelihoods (ICG 2021; Benjaminsen & Ba 2019).

THE AIMS AND GAINS OF JNIM

The formation of JNIM in March 2017 marked a turning point in jihadist activity in the Sahel, as it consolidated fragmented factions into a more cohesive force capable of

challenging both local governments and international actors. In a video release that month, four al-Qaeda-affiliated groups – Ansar Dine, Katiba Macina, al-Mourabitoun and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – announced their merger, appointing Iyad Ag Ghali as emir. Despite the merger, JNIM functions as a coalition of distinct militant Islamist groups, characterised by decentralised leadership, varied structures and shifting motivations. This decentralised structure allows for adaptability to local contexts. Today, JNIM is estimated to have between 5,000 and 6,000 fighters and continues to expand (UNSC 2023). Its success also relates to the role of illicit flows in financing their activities (Pollichieni 2021). JNIM-affiliated groups are estimated to earn between 5 and 35 million US dollars annually (Jama'ah Nuṣrat al-Islām wal-Muslimīn 2017), mostly through extortion of transit routes, drug trafficking, artisanal gold mining, livestock looting, and kidnapping ransoms (ACLED 2023).

JNIM's primary objectives and stated goals are establishing a Salafi-Islamist caliphate in West Africa, expelling external forces, and challenging regional governments (Criminal Code 2023; ECFR 2019; ICG 2021; Haidara 2023; Nsaibia 2023). JNIM's uniting of four jihadist groups under a single banner aimed to strengthen JNIM's operational capabilities and expand its influence. This 'strategic localisation' was both a way to overcome internal divisions in AQIM's leadership and to transcend ethnic and regional divisions by fostering a broad unified jihadist agenda. It includes Tuareg, Fulani, Arabs, and Songhai among its leaders, reflecting the region's diverse social fabric and enhancing its strategic appeal. By mobilising fighters from multiple ethnic backgrounds, JNIM taps into a wide range of local grievances, ensuring an extensive recruitment base. This inclusivity allows it to present itself as a pan-regional force, expanding its reach beyond single social groups. While grounded in local dynamics, JNIM's ability to assemble diverse social identities reflects its ambition for lasting dominance in the Sahel and beyond.

To expand its outreach, JNIM established Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation as a centralised media wing for its four constituent groups (Nsaibia & Lyammouri 2020). Under AQIM's guidance – drawing on two decades of expertise in militant tradecraft and propaganda – JNIM developed a sophisticated media apparatus. The effective use of al-Zallaqa and propaganda campaigns strengthened JNIM's resonance. This has enabled JNIM to evolve from a loose coalition into an integrated armed group capable of coordinating operations across the Sahel (Galán 2018).

Furthermore, a defining feature of JNIM's localised tactics is its pragmatic approach to negotiations and openness to dialogue, both with local self-defence militias and with the Malian state (Koufa 2024). By positioning themselves as mediators and

providers of resources and security, they exploit inter- and intra-communal tensions and capitalise on widespread dissatisfaction with the state to promote alternative modes of governance (Sandor & Campana 2019; Ba & Cold-Ravnkilde 2021).

JNIM'S ADAPTIVE WARFARE AND SHIFTING ENEMIES

[...] the heinous crimes committed by Wagner mercenaries and the Malian army have increased the anger and discontent of the people because they have surpassed the crimes and violations of the French (...) against unarmed civilians. The latter did not do what the Russians did.

(KOUFA 2024)

To achieve its objective of destroying the state and replacing it with a new socio-political order, JNIM has carried out violent campaigns targeting civilians, local security forces, international militaries and UN peacekeepers, and sought to position itself as a protector against foreign invaders. Over time, as Mali's security partnerships have evolved, JNIM's targets have shifted accordingly, adapting its strategies to the changing political and military landscape.

After two consecutive coups in 2020 and 2021, Mali's military-led government under General Assimi Goïta severed ties with existing security partners, demanding the withdrawal of French, European, and UN (MINUSMA) forces. Citing the limited impact of Western security cooperation, the new government aligned itself with Russia and its Wagner mercenaries.

Initially perceived as a success, the French intervention had gradually become increasingly contested by the new military government and the broader public. While Opération Serval (2013–2014) succeeded in countering the expansion of jihadist groups, its successor, Opération Barkhane (2014–2022), had limited results. In political circles, discontent with the collaboration and existing partnership agreements grew. Militarily, security forces did not believe they got the necessary support from France to fight jihadist groups effectively. Similarly, popular voices questioned why jihadist groups gained terrain again despite France's military and technological superiority.

The Kidal episode in 2014 marked a symbolic turning point (Sirène 2015). During Opération Serval, the advance of French and Malian troops stopped at the city of Kidal, the main hub for the Tuareg separatist groups in the north, considered terrorists

by the Malian state, but historically an ally of France in the region. This led to the first accusations of France being in Mali for its own interests rather than Mali's.

These developments, combined with a spreading feeling of neocolonial practices and interference, and lack of respect from the former colonial power – facilitated by extensive Russian-backed disinformation campaigns and propaganda (Kirwin et al. 2022; Cold-Ravnkilde & Sylla 2024) – resulted in France becoming a scapegoat for most of Mali's security and development challenges, ultimately leading to the rupture with France as security partner.

Regarding MINUSMA, widespread perceptions of its ineffectiveness and limited mandate led to growing discontent. Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop criticised the mission at the UN, stating it failed to help the state regain territorial control despite substantial resources. UN reports on human rights abuses by Malian forces, the Wagner Group, and affiliated militias further strained relations, with the transitional government accusing MINUSMA of exacerbating community tensions and advancing foreign agendas. The UN also became a stage for Mali's political dispute with France, which was criticised for interfering in Mali's internal affairs and allegedly supporting jihadist groups – claims Mali repeatedly raised in the Security Council, where France holds a permanent seat.

Amid growing discontent with Western partners, the jihadist insurgency spread and intensified, with similar dynamics unfolding in neighbouring Burkina Faso. In 2022 Burkina Faso experienced two coups, culminating in Captain Ibrahim Traoré's rise to power. While Burkina Faso presents a distinct case, its political upheaval shares some traits with Mali's deteriorating security situation. Like Mali, the state struggled to control territory (Grégoire & Bourgeot 2011), address youth unemployment and curb violent state repression, fuelling jihadist recruitment (Ngom 2021). Furthermore, the politicisation of intercommunal conflicts over access to land and natural resources further exacerbated instability (Haidara 2023).

In 2023 Niger experienced political upheaval when General Abdourahamane Tchiani ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, mirroring events in Mali and Burkina Faso. Goïta, Traoré and Tchiani all rejected Western alliances, prioritising regional security cooperation instead.

By September 2023 the three transitional governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, had signed a mutual defence pact, leading to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2024. AES aimed to strengthen cross-border security against

jihadist insurgencies and create an alternative to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which they criticised for being under French influence. A priority for AES was combating JNIM, the region's most influential Jihadist group (ACLED 2023).

To date, the AES defence cooperation has not yielded success. On 17 September 2024 Bamako experienced its first major attack since 2015, killing 77–100 soldiers and injuring over 200 (Al Jazeera 2024; Nsaibia 2024). JNIM claimed responsibility via Al-Zallaqa, though doubts about their involvement persist (ICG 2024). The sophisticated, large-scale attack marks the expanding reach and growing operational capacity of militant groups.

JNIM, once focused on combating French and Western security forces, now directly targets new security partners, including Russia. This shift is reflected in recent kidnappings of Russian nationals (Voice of Africa 2024), and in statements by JNIM leaders (see above). JNIM also continues attacks on national armies and pro-government militias.

Recent attacks in Tinzwaten and Bamako reflect JNIM's alignment with global conflict dynamics. By drawing in first Western and now Russian forces, JNIM has strengthened its position as a capable global jihadist actor. This mirrors AQIM's strategy of attracting external forces into the conflict contexts in which they operate (Ramaioli 2024). In the Sahel, this dynamic has transformed the region into a theatre of great power rivalry, with the Russian/Ukraine conflict entangled in Mali. France's withdrawal, Russia's growing presence, and the broader geopolitical tensions all contribute to JNIM's sustained and expanding insurgency.

INTRA-JIHADIST RIVALRY: THE IS/AQ DIVIDE IN THE SAHEL

Since its inception, JNIM has formed opportunistic alliances, adapting its relationships as circumstances evolve – most notably with ISGS.

Today, ISGS and JNIM are rivals, mirroring the broader global competition between Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Until 2018, however, they cooperated – earning the label 'the Sahelian anomaly' (Nsaibia & Weiss 2020; Baldaro & Diallo 2020) for defying the international rivalry between them. Their informal territorial division placed ISGS in eastern Mali towards Gao and the border with Niger, while JNIM operated in Kidal, Timbuktu and the Inner Niger Delta (Thurston 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022;

Raineri 2020; Sandor & Campana 2019). This fragile arrangement collapsed in 2018 when ISGS fighters began to challenge JNIM's Katiba Macina (JNIM's local brigade) in the Delta (Baldaro & Diallo 2020; Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022).

Clashes between ISGS and JNIM may also reflect ISGS reintegration into Islamic State Central in March 2019, when it became part of Islamic State's organisational infrastructure as a distinct subgroup under the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). This elevated status fuelled ISGS's ambitions and intensified its challenge to JNIM's dominance. This deteriorating relationship has played out both in violent clashes on the ground and in a parallel battle for influence online (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022).

Reflecting the broader al-Qaeda/Islamic State divide, JNIM has adopted a more pragmatic approach than ISGS. This flexibility partly explains JNIM's success and influence in areas under its control. Unlike the ISGS's rigid imposition of Islamic law, JNIM is reported to grant greater autonomy to local communities in decision-making (ACLED & Global Initiative against Transnational Crime 2023).

One example of JNIM's local adaptation is its decentralised collection of Zakat (the Islamic tax). In some areas JNIM allows villagers to collect Zakat and recovers the funds later. This approach of delegating some control over certain administrative functions to local populations fosters goodwill and strengthens JNIM's relations with communities (*ibid.*) While Zakat also finances JNIM's operations, a portion is sometimes redistributed to locals – a practice that is particularly appreciated by the poorest, aligning with Islamic principles of charity and social justice (Haidara 2024).

DIGITAL JIHAD: THE SHADOW WARFARE OF GLOBAL COMBAT

In addition to creating governance structures, ideological resonance, and using violent coercive measures of control, the jihadists' successful expansion cannot be understood without considering how their use of technology and warfare tactics has evolved. Armed jihadist actors – like other competing violent entrepreneurs – increasingly use social media and new technology as part of their tactics both in terms of strengthening operational capabilities and public performativity (Sweet & Faeq 2025).

In the case of the Sahel, so far little academic attention has been paid to how jihadist 'digital armies' operate, both in terms of what mechanisms enable tactic

coordination and of how armed groups build influence from the digital ‘shadows’ (Nsaibia & Lyammouri 2020). In the digital age jihadist groups strategically leverage technology to incite, indoctrinate and advance their religio-political and military objectives. Jihadist groups have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in their digital tactics, allowing them to offset military losses through increased online recruitment and exploitation of local grievances (Boserup & Martinez 2018; Lierl 2020).

For example, Katiba Macina’s leader, Amadou Koufa, has leveraged WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram to urge the Fulani community to rise against Malian and French armed forces. Similarly, Ansar Dine – now part of JNIM – has embraced social media and messaging platforms to disseminate its narratives. Through Telegram, the group has sought to portray itself as ‘defenders against foreign oppression’, using propaganda images such as photographs of suicide bombers to reinforce this messaging (ICCT 2020).

Yet, the use of digital, social media, and messaging platforms goes beyond the accelerated spread of extremist content. Through their continuously evolving capabilities, jihadist groups in the Sahel rely on drones and portable cameras to magnify landscapes and military operations, amplifying their online propaganda, mobilisation and strategic targeting (Nsaibia & Lyammouri 2020). As such, digital connectivity is intricately embedded in jihadist groups’ rapid transformation of battlefield tactics, particularly in how they develop operational capabilities and construct military power performativity.

CONCLUSION

Some important takeaways emerge from examining al-Qaeda/JNIM’s consolidation and expansion from northern Mali’s border with Algeria to the central Sahel and now coastal West Africa.

First, the establishment and spread of transnational jihadism depends on the leadership of jihadist ‘entrepreneurs’ who can translate a global ideological project into local terms that resonate with people’s grievances and aspirations. The agency of Sahelian actors, and their creative ability to adapt strategies to local contexts, has therefore been central to jihadist success. A key example was JNIM’s ‘strategic localisation’, where AQIM was effectively absorbed under Iyad Ag Ghali’s leadership – an adaptation that both overcame internal rivalries and deepened local legitimacy.

Second, such agency thrives only within conducive environments shaped by structural conditions. In the Sahel, these include the paradoxical coexistence of state violence and repression with weak institutional capacity to deliver governance, particularly in borderland areas. These dynamics have produced political and social vacuums that jihadist groups have exploited, transforming such margins into hubs of alternative governance and authority.

Third, French-led international military interventions have contributed to shaping the trajectory of the Sahelian jihadist insurgency. For more than a decade French and Western operations sought to contain jihadist expansion in ways that often strengthened the jihadist cause – reframing the struggle against Sahelian states as a fight against both the ‘near enemy’ and their international partners as the ‘far enemy’. Following successive coups, French and international withdrawal opened the way for new partnerships with Russia and private military companies. These partnerships have so far only reinforced militarised approaches that escalate violence and brutality, inadvertently contributing to a rise in jihadist attacks and further undermining regime stability.

Fourth, jihadist expansion has not gone uncontested. JNIM’s influence is frequently challenged by the Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) and other competing violent entrepreneurs. JNIM’s governance thus combines purism with pragmatism, reflecting al-Qaeda central’s broader approach and mirroring the dynamics of AQ–IS rivalries seen in other regions.

Fifth, technological developments have reshaped the conflict in ways that go far beyond faster communication or propaganda. The increased use of drones and mobile technologies has enabled jihadist groups – as well as other armed actors – to strike more strategically, expand their networks, and diffuse violence across borders. At the same time, digital connectivity through social media and encrypted messaging platforms is deeply embedded in how jihadist groups innovate tactically and construct military power performativity. Understanding JNIM’s trajectory, therefore, requires moving beyond the simplistic binary of ‘global’ versus ‘local’. Its capacity to root itself in Sahelian contexts while remaining tied to global jihadist agendas – sustained and amplified by digital technologies – underscores the need for more nuanced explanations.

Altogether, these dynamics show that jihadist expansion cannot be explained by any single factor. It arises from the interplay between entrepreneurial leadership, permissive environments shaped by structural fragilities, the unintended effects of international interventions, the pressures of intra-jihadist competition, and the

transformative impact of new technologies. This convergence has entrenched jihadist groups as resilient and adaptive actors in the region's conflict landscape, underscoring the complexity of efforts to contain or reverse their influence.

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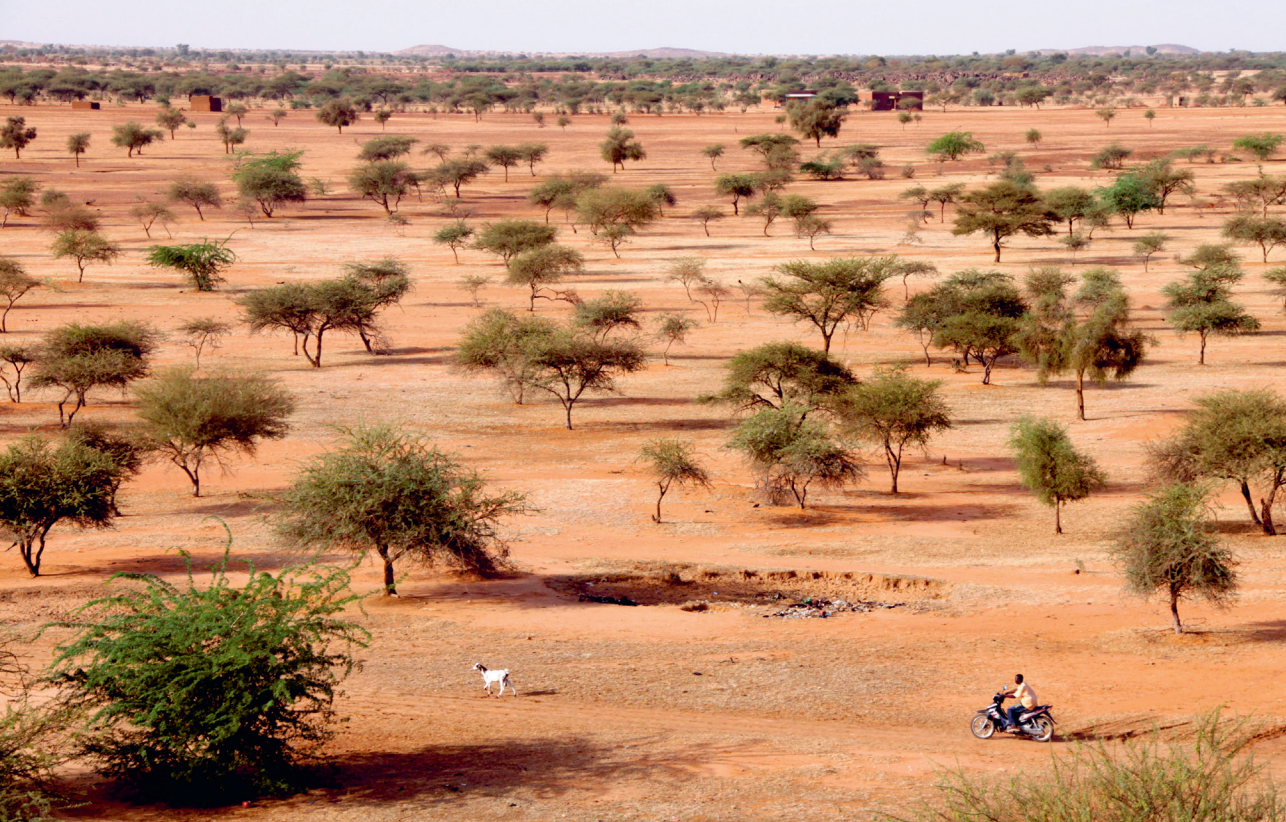
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Landscape of the Sahel region near Gorom Gorom, Burkina Faso. November 2009.
Photo: Pascal Mannaerts, Alamy.com.

ISLAMIC STATE IN THE SAHEL: AN EVOLVING JIHADIST INSURGENCY

Edoardo Baldaro

On 25 May 2025 a Nigerien army camp located in Eknewane – an area near the town of Tillia in the Tahoua region, in central-western Niger close to the Malian border – was the target of a complex attack carried out by members of the jihadist group now known as the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP). According to various international media outlets, at least 58 Nigerien soldiers were killed in the attack, including the camp commander (RFI 2025). These figures make the Eknewane assault one of the deadliest ever suffered by the Nigerien military.

Far from an isolated incident, the attack is part of a broader and more intense offensive launched by ISSP in the border region between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, roughly corresponding to the areas of Tahoua, Tillabéri, Ménaka, Gao, Dori and Gorom-Gorom. Just days later, on 4 June, a Malian army camp in Tessit was attacked, resulting in the deaths of at least 40 soldiers and more than 50 civilians. During yet another assault on 20 June by hundreds of Islamic State fighters, on the Nigerien side of the border, in the Bani Bangou area near Inates, 34 Nigerien soldiers were killed. On the 8th of August, a clash occurred between ISSP fighters and members of al-Qaeda's affiliated group JNIM (Jama'at Nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn) near Diori in northeast Burkina Faso. On all these occasions the militants demonstrated a high level of firepower and an intimate knowledge of the terrain.

The operations in Eknewane, Tessit and Bani Bangou are showcased in the documentary *The Lions of the Sahel*, released by the group via its online propaganda channels at the end of 2025. The production of this documentary and, more significantly, the sharp military escalation by ISSP in the tri-border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, offer key insights into the transformations currently reshaping the landscape of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel and beyond.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this book, within the broader reconfiguration of what is commonly referred to as 'Global Jihad', over the past decade Africa has become, according to many analysts, the new epicentre of Islamist-inspired armed transnational insurgencies, with the central Sahel occupying a particularly prominent position. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Mali in 2011–2012, and even more significantly since 2015–2016, the area encompassing Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has become a base of operations and expansion for groups affiliated with both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Over the past ten years, amid escalating violence and political instability – which, among other consequences, has led to a series of military coups in all three countries – the Sahel has emerged as a central hub for transnational jihadist militancy. According to the Global Terrorism Index (IEP 2025), more than half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in the last two years occurred in this region.

This trend has been also fuelled by the intensifying competition between the local franchises of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which reached a breaking point around 2019. Since 2017 the main factions that declared allegiance to al-Qaeda have been grouped under JNIM (Jama'at Nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn), led by Malian figure Iyad ag Ghali. JNIM is the key actor driving the expansion of jihadist insurgency from the Sahel toward West Africa's coastal states and is now imposing an economic and

political blockade on Mali's capital Bamako, which is threatening the very survival of the Malian regime. In armed competition with JNIM is the group now known as ISSP – the most recent iteration of Islamic State affiliates in the region, which is currently redefining its presence and strategies in the area.

Given these premises, this essay aims at reconstructing the development of the Islamic State's presence and consolidation in the Sahel, in order to shed light on the different and somehow contradictory factors that are constantly redefining the complex 'insurgency ecology' (Anaele 2014) of the area.

The traditional debate which has long divided experts and policymakers working on jihadist insurgencies (not only in Africa) is the 'Local vs. Global' one. On one side are those who view the continent as encompassed by a single, continent-wide 'arc of instability'; on the other side are those who emphasise the essentially local nature of each jihadist insurgency. While the centrality of local sociopolitical, historical, identity-based and religious dynamics is undeniably key to understanding jihadist phenomena, some aspects of global terrorism and counterterrorism must also be addressed.

On the one hand the American-led Global War on Terror has created a discursive and operational framework appropriated by both international actors and local states to develop new forms of political and security control. These frameworks have often further destabilised already fragile institutional and social balances (Smith 2010). On the other hand, insurgent actors have embraced this narrative, using it to legitimise their struggle in the eyes of local populations and to access both symbolic and material resources that would otherwise remain out of reach (Pérouse de Montclos 2018).

Within this externally framed context, local dynamics – some recent, others more deeply rooted – must also be considered as integral to any broader analytical approach. Specifically, the tri-border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso has a complex history of political and intercommunal relations and is now marked by the presence of 'fragile' states, unable to fully exercise sovereign authority across their territories, at odds with classic Weberian or Westphalian models.

Given this context, the Liptako-Gourma region – shared among the three aforementioned states – constitutes the physical epicentre of insecurity, where cross-border mobility, issues of land and resource access, and tensions between historically marginalised communities and central governments have shaped local economies and social systems. The actions of the Islamic State and the various al-Qaeda-aligned groups in the area cannot be understood without acknowledging the

enduring divisions between nomadic and transnational groups like the Tuareg and Fulani and their respective central governments, as well as the tensions between pastoralist communities and those primarily engaged in agriculture or fishing.

Jihadist groups – both those affiliated with al-Qaeda and, later on, those aligned with the Islamic State – have been able to intercept, manipulate and exacerbate pre-existing grievances in the region, successfully building solid constituencies within the most marginalised communities or those targeted by state violence, ultimately generating unprecedented dynamics of violent conflict in the area. Unsurprisingly, the event that marked the beginning of the Sahelian crisis – the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali – saw the then AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) first ally with, and then take over, the demands of Tuareg populations, who had historically resisted integration into the framework proposed by the Malian state (Harmon 2016).

Subsequently, the expansion of the crisis toward the Liptako-Gourma region was made possible, above all, by the violent activation of the grievances of Fulani populations – pastoral and nomadic communities present across West Africa, but who, in all the states of the region, constitute a marginalised minority and are frequent targets of repression by central authorities (van Dijk & de Bruijn 2022). The widening of the crisis to the three borders area, where pastoral and farming communities have historically coexisted but not without tensions over access to and use of land and natural resources, led several observers to describe the Sahelian civil conflict as having evolved into a farmer–herder conflict (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021). Others, however, have noted that even within pastoral communities themselves (both Fulani and Tuareg), the contestation of hierarchical relations and pre-existing social orders has constituted an additional source of violence – one that jihadist groups have been able to exploit successfully, being influenced by it in their turn (Jourde et al. 2019).

More generally, while the ideological dimension cannot be separated from the material aspects of the conflict – particularly in understanding the competitive dynamics and the differing appeal exerted by JNIM and ISSP on the various communities and populations involved in the current cycle of violence (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2025) – the key element in explaining the development of armed violence in the region remains the political one. This refers to the breakdown of the relationship between increasingly repressive state and security institutions and populations subjected to a system of governance perceived as unjust and immutable – except through armed struggle (Raineri 2022).

In this sense, to fully grasp the Islamic State's current structure and strategy in the Sahel, one must consider the local and global dimensions of jihadist insurgencies

as interconnected and mutually influential, moving beyond the often superficial analytical (and political) binary between the Local and the Global. While new categories pointing to the 'glocal' nature of these insurgencies are finding ground in the debate (Bencherif 2021), this essay builds on the concepts of fluidity and unity, and rigidity and pragmatism as exposed in the introduction of this book by Sheikh and Cold-Ravnkilde. In this sense, this essay suggests that jihadist insurgencies in Africa and beyond should be mainly seen as original and contingent syntheses and combinations of global imaginaries, local dynamics, and transnational structures. This perspective is further explored below, where the three phases which have structured the Islamic State's evolution in the Sahel are presented and discussed.

THREE PHASES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAHEL

The Islamic State made its first appearance in the Sahel in 2015 as a maverick group that left al-Qaeda's linked formations. Initially named Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the group was born out of doctrinal, strategic, personal, social and communal ruptures among key figures in the Sahelian insurgency, and it has passed through two different phases. The first (2015–19) is characterised by the attempt to establish itself in the area while being recognised as a credible counterpart by Islamic State's central leadership; the second (2019–2022) saw the group under the sphere of influence of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province)¹² while conducting an open and violent struggle with both local security forces and al-Qaeda's competitors (Nsaibia 2023). Since 2022 the group has seemingly developed into its third phase, defined by a new centrality – and autonomy – obtained within the Islamic State's 'global galaxy', and by an unprecedented attempt to establish territorial control and build a 'caliphate' in the tri-border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Following its designation as the autonomous 'Sahel Province' of the Islamic State in March 2022, in fact, ISSP has shifted from mass violence toward more structured governance and the consolidation of territorial control, especially in Mali's Menaka and Gao regions – even if as pointed out by Stoddard, Berlingozzi and Raineri, the group remains more violent and less territorially structured if compared to ISWAP. This transition has exposed the group to increased military pressure, including airstrikes and targeted operations that have eliminated senior figures. Since the death of founder Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in August 2021, ISSP has restructured its leadership, integrating both local and foreign commanders from diverse ethnic backgrounds – Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Dawsahak, Songhai, and Djerma – under a Shura council led by Abu al-Bara al-Sahrawi.

ISSP's new governance strategy combines coercion and selective accommodation. The group enforces Sharia law through Islamic courts, imposes trade embargoes, and regulates markets to sustain supply lines in towns like Anderamboukane (the de facto 'administrative capital' of ISSP), Inchinane and Tamalat. Punishments for violations are severe, including executions and mutilations, alongside bans on contraband and enforced gender segregation. Moreover, since capturing Tidarmene near Ménaka in April 2023, ISSP has expanded dawa (religious outreach) to reinforce local support, allowing some armed groups to operate under its protection (Nsaibia 2024).

Given this situation, ISSP's current strategy apparently favours territorial consolidation over overextension. Despite its ambitions, ISSP has failed to establish a significant foothold in central Mali, most of Burkina Faso, and the coastal states, largely due to resistance from rival JNIM. At the same time, in Mali, ISSP may expand north toward Kidal or deepen its presence in the Gao region, where it has started collecting zakat. In Niger, eastward expansion toward Nigeria appears increasingly important, with areas like Tassara emerging as new strongholds. These moves suggest a recalibration toward entrenched, sustainable bases rather than rapid geographic expansion. These latest developments mark the effective nature, strategy and agenda of jihadist groups, elsewhere as well as in Africa. Indeed, ISSP appears simultaneously as a link in a transnational chain of global uprising as well as a local organisation whose grievances and objectives are based on local issues and expectations.

Origins of IS in the Sahel (2015–2019)

Three pivotal events have marked the birth and ascent of the then Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) – now ISSP. The first unfolded in two stages, between May and December 2015. The organisation that would come to be known as ISGS made its initial appearance on the complex Sahelian chessboard in May 2015 when its self-proclaimed leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi – nom de guerre of Lehbib Ould Ali Ould Said Ould Yumani, a Sahrawi militant who had previously been a member of the Polisario Front (Guichaoua & Lebovich 2017)¹³ – publicly pledged allegiance (bay'a) to Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi through a video delivered to a Mauritanian news agency.

Although part of a broader dynamic of internal competition fragmenting the global jihadist front in multiple regions, al-Sahrawi's initiative took both international observers and his fellow militants by surprise. At the time of his pro-Baghdadi declaration, al-Sahrawi was the spokesperson for al-Murabitun, a jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda and itself a splinter faction of MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in

West Africa), one of the Salafi jihadist groups involved in the 2012 conquest of northern Mali. Rather than being founded on a doctrinal basis, within the complex mosaic of jihadist groups present in or formed in Mali in the years following the 2012 insurgency, al-Murabitun distinguished itself from its allies by being composed of – and aiming to represent – the interests primarily of certain Tuareg and Arab communities (and entrepreneurs, including criminal ones) from the country's north. In this sense, the background of the Wilaya leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a jihadist figure involved in various illegal economic activities – including cigarette smuggling – has led some observers to suggest that MUJAO, and later al-Murabitun, were among the groups that best embodied, both in their actions and composition, the alleged fusion between jihadist and criminal networks in the region (Raineri & Strazzari 2015).

Nevertheless, al-Sahrawi's oath of allegiance led to an internal rupture within al-Murabitun, confirmed by the response of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who hastily reaffirmed his group's loyalty to al-Qaeda. Within this context, ISGS did not manage to establish itself as an autonomous and self-sufficient organisation, distinct from its former al-Qaeda-aligned comrades, until December of that same year (Le Roux 2019). It was only in October 2016 that al-Baghdadi – then under increasing pressure in Iraq and Syria – issued a formal endorsement of the new mujahideen operating in the Sahara-Sahel.

If 2015 thus marks the founding year of ISGS, two subsequent events illustrate the rapid development of the group's tactical and strategic capabilities, which would soon make it one of the leading actors in the region's jihadist insurgency.

The first occurred on 4 October 2017 near Tongo Tongo, a village located on the Malian border in Niger's Tillabéri region. On that day, a column of around 100 ISGS fighters ambushed a joint patrol of thirty-five Nigerien soldiers and approximately ten members of the US Special Forces. The ensuing clash left four American soldiers, five Nigerien soldiers, and twenty-one insurgents dead – one of the deadliest incidents for US troops in Africa in the past thirty years. The Tongo Tongo ambush may be considered ISGS's first major show of force: a young group, but already lethal and able to operate with ease in the borderlands between Mali and Niger.

While the Tongo Tongo attacks were ISGS's first significant action against international actors, the attack in Inates, Niger, on 10 December 2019 marked the group's transition to an entirely new level – in both strike capability and ambition. At least seventy soldiers were killed in what remains the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of the Nigerien army. The Islamic State demonstrated its superiority over

what is still considered one of the more capable militaries in the region, along with a high degree of coordination and mobilisation.

The Inates operation appears to have been a joint action in which ISGS fighters were joined by members of ISWAP, suggesting a growing desire for integration among different Islamic State affiliates in the region. In this regard, the Inates attack revealed two particularly significant developments. On the one hand, like other jihadist groups active in the region, the Islamic State in West Africa showed itself to possess offensive and military capabilities that could, in the long run, allow it to emulate the actions carried out by its parent organisation in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, the persistent and increasingly ambitious attacks launched in both Niger and Mali in the following months – targeting not only security forces but also local leaders and community heads – demonstrated that ISGS was no longer content merely to operate in these territories. Rather, its ambition had become one of control, and in a certain sense, of ‘governance’.

ISSP as part of the Islamic State’s ‘global galaxy’ (2019–2022)

Since its inception, ISGS has been forging increasingly strong ties with transborder communities – particularly Tuareg, Daosahak and Fulani groups – that have historically been marginalised, if not directly exploited, by local states. The support of these communities is proving to be a decisive factor in the success of ISGS’s strategy of territorial penetration, and a key to understanding the evolution of the ISGS/JNIM relationship – from latent cooperation to open conflict.

From March 2019 to March 2022 – the ‘second phase’ of the Islamic State in the Sahel – ISGS focused less on building a territorial caliphate and more on gaining recognition as a full member of the Islamic State network (Nsaibia 2024). During this period ISGS operated as the Greater Sahara faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the group that emerged from Boko Haram and is mainly active in northeastern Nigeria, before being reclassified as the independent ‘Islamic State in the Sahel Province’. During this second phase, it emerged as the second-most active armed group in the Sahel after JNIM. Operating primarily from its stronghold in the Mali–Niger border zone, the group managed to exert significant control across parts of Mali’s Gao and Menaka regions, Burkina Faso’s Oudalan and Seno provinces, and Niger’s Tillabéri and Tahoua regions.

While ISGS’s links to the Islamic State global central command were weak before 2019 – reflected in its absence from IS propaganda – the group’s operational brutality aligned with IS strategic goals. Its formal integration into ISWAP coincided with a

surge in militant activity across the Sahel: between May 2019 and May 2020, ISSP launched an intense campaign in the Liptako-Gourma area, overrunning multiple military posts and killing over 400 soldiers from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In this sense, the December 2019 attack on Inates marks the integration of ISGS into the ISWAP sphere of influence.

A similar violent escalation took place between ISGS and JNIM. Putting an end to the 'Sahelian exception',¹⁴ from mid-2019 the two groups started clashing in different areas of the Sahel (Baldaro & Diall 2020). First, ISGS made an initial attempt to gain ground in central Mali and the inner Niger Delta at the expense of the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina. While the penetration in central Mali had essentially failed by the end of 2020, the rivalry extended into other areas in the tri-border region. Between 2019 and 2023, the conflict between the two jihadist franchises resulted in nearly 200 clashes and the death of more than 1,100 combatants. After losing ground in 2020, ISSP regained momentum in late 2022, pushing back JNIM forces in key areas of Gao, Menaka and the Burkina Faso–Mali border.

In the meantime, ISGS's extremely violent tactics against international and local security forces, as well as civilians made the group the main target of international counterterrorism efforts. French-led counterterrorism operations between early 2020 and mid-2021 inflicted heavy losses on ISSP, including the death of its founder Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in August 2021. Notwithstanding the various defeats suffered during this period, the group managed to survive and continue its expansion in the region.

Beyond its core territory, between 2019 and 2022 ISSP also engaged in sporadic operations in Algeria, Benin and Nigeria. Its activity in Algeria (2019–2020) reflected attempts to re-establish a presence in areas once held by MUJAO and to coordinate with Libyan militants. In northwestern Nigeria, fighters used the Sanam–Dogondoutchi–Sokoto corridor as a supply route, leveraging kinship ties to mobilise against local banditry, and recruiting new members.

The group's presence in Benin, publicly acknowledged in July 2022 through claimed attacks in Alibori department, is likely part of a longer, covert expansion into West African coastal states. However, ISSP has generally struggled to consolidate gains in newly entered territories, as seen in Burkina Faso's east and centre-north regions and central Mali. For now, its dominance remains strongest in its traditional strongholds, though the trajectory of its operations in Benin remains uncertain (Nsaibia 2024).

CONCLUSION: ISSP'S CONSOLIDATION IN A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

The most recent developments unfolding in the Sahel and West Africa show that the most structured, powerful, and expanding jihadist group at present is clearly JNIM, the al-Qaeda affiliate. Since September of 2025, al-Qaeda-linked armed groups have effectively imposed a blockade around Mali's capital, Bamako, while at the same time economically strangling the country's main productive areas, extending their reach beyond the capital itself. JNIM currently holds a position of strength in both Mali and Burkina Faso, where it controls large portions of national territory. The prospect of the group achieving at least part of its political agenda in the region – if not through outright conquest, then via negotiations or the collapse of local regimes – appears increasingly plausible.

At the same time, JNIM has been the main driver of the southward expansion of the Sahelian crisis, which now directly affects several coastal states bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea like Togo, Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mauritania and Senegal. The most recent reports even point to an incursion of JNIM affiliates into Nigeria, a country historically affected by the insurgency of Boko Haram and later ISWAP. It is precisely ISWAP – which until 2022 acted as the senior partner and umbrella organisation encompassing ISGS (later renamed ISSP) – that now finds itself in difficulty in the Lake Chad region, due not only to state repression by Nigeria but also to increasingly violent clashes with the heirs of Boko Haram (now known as JAS – Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad), from which ISWAP itself split in recent years.

Given this context ISSP has managed to survive and grow in a highly competitive environment. While it is not currently perceived as the main jihadist threat to either coastal states or Sahelian capitals – Niger's capital Niamey stands out as a notable exception, having already been targeted by ISSP operations – ISSP is successfully implementing a strategy that bridges global dynamics and local conflicts. The Mali–Niger border zone – particularly between Ménaka, Gao, Tillabery and Tahoua – is increasingly becoming a bastion of the Islamic State, where the group is shaping a caliphate on African soil in accordance with the directives from the organisation's central command. The group's growing prominence in Islamic State propaganda, coupled with its deepening cooperation with (a declining?) ISWAP, positions its fighters as a central link in the Islamic State-led transnational insurgency. Its proven ability to integrate into the region's social and conflict dynamics makes it an increasingly entrenched actor in both the conflict and political systems of the central Sahel. As a result, for the foreseeable future, the region appears destined to host two of the most structured and resilient expressions of global jihadism.

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Sunset over the Sahel in Niger. September 2018. Photo: Hermattan Toudjourn, Shutterstock.com.

ISSP AND ISWAP: THE TRAJECTORIES OF IS' STRONGEST PROVINCES

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Over the last 10 years, West Africa (specifically the Central Sahel and Lake Chad regions) has emerged as the most violent frontline of global jihadism (Okereke & Gunaratna, 2025; Warner, 2021; Thurston, 2020). Since the territorial collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the epicentre of jihadist violence, in terms of volume of activity, has shifted to Africa, which now accounts for the majority of global terrorism

deaths linked to jihadist groups. West Africa represents the world's deadliest region for violent extremist activity, with 5 of the 10 most affected countries in the world found here (Orrell, 2025). While data in this area are often inconsistent and should be treated with caution, deaths related to violent extremist groups in the region are 10 times higher today than in 2019, accounting for 51% of all global terrorism deaths (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). A potent combination of weak state institutions, militarised governance, economic marginalization, and unresolved intercommunal grievances has turned this vast region into fertile ground for jihadist insurgency.

The majority of this violence is due to the activities of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated group Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the two IS-affiliated factions active in the region: the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP). Within the global structure of IS, these are two of the most closely connected IS groups.¹⁵ Since the rise to prominence of the General Directorate of the Province (Hamming, 2023) as a global coordinating body within IS architecture, both ISSP and ISWAP formally operate under West Africa's al-Furqan office, which itself reports to the (today much depleted) IS-central¹⁶ apparatus. Between 2019 and 2022, they were considered by IS to be the same province. Despite these formal links however, the actual nature of the relationship between these groups is somewhat murky, and both operate in very distinct geographies - ISSP in the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, and ISWAP in the Lake Chad Basin area, including most of the vast Borno State in Nigeria, as well as areas of Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. As the remainder of this contribution illustrates, in both theatres jihadist violence is not driven solely by religious ideology. Rather, these conflicts are hybrid in nature - blending Salafi-jihadist ambitions with local political grievances, economic marginalisation, and governance challenges in areas of limited statehood.

Against this backdrop, the article examines ISWAP and ISSP – two of the Islamic State's most capable and destabilising African provinces – by tracing how each has evolved across a set of key analytical axes, including strategies, governance practices, and patterns of violence, and how these interact with both local dynamics and rivalries, and wider strategic outlook shaped by their transnational affiliations. Drawing on longstanding ethnographic engagement with the field (Raineri et al. 2025; Stoddard, 2023; Raineri 2022; Berlingozzi & Stoddard, 2020), it examines the background of each group, their key opponents and conflict dynamics, the interaction between strategic direction from IS and local operational realities for the groups (particularly around military and governance activities), as well as discussing their current capabilities and trajectories.

ORIGINS AND EMERGENCE OF ISSP AND ISWAP

The two groups have very different and largely unconnected backgrounds: ISWAP's origins (Warner, 2021) can be traced back to 2015 when the militant group, Boko Haram, led by Abubakar Shekau, that had been (violently) active in North-East Nigeria since 2009, pledged allegiance to IS. This formal adherence of Boko Haram to IS created the 'Islamic State West Africa Province' and, after a period of remote support, saw IS fighters travel to the Lake Chad Basin to provide direct guidance and training (Foucher, 2021). However, the key moment in ISWAP's development came from a pivotal split within Boko Haram in 2016, when Abu Musab al-Barnawi (reportedly the son of Boko Haram's founder, Mohammed Yusuf) and another senior Boko Haram commander, Mamman Nur, led a breakaway faction opposed to Shekau, physically relocating themselves to the very northern shores of Lake Chad. This ideological divergence, driven by disagreement over a brutal campaign of violence against Muslim civilians (including the indiscriminate use of suicide bombings by young girls), Shekau's purging of members who opposed him, and a desire for a greater professionalism in ISWAP, led IS-central to recognise al-Barnawi's faction as its official West Africa affiliate.

Following its formal recognition, ISWAP undertook rapid organisational restructuring. It initially concentrated its efforts in remote areas of Lake Chad, establishing control in the far Northeast of Borno state in Nigeria and across the border into Niger. Over time, it has expanded, however, capturing areas from the original Boko Haram in the south of Borno state by 2021 (after Shekau killed himself at the point when ISWAP surrounded his compound). The group now influences territory across a much wider area, incorporating most of Borno State in northeastern Nigeria and a large area in northern Cameroon. The group also has a presence in other parts of Nigeria, although here it operates in a more clandestine way.

In contrast, ISSP emerged (Raineri, 2022) as a splinter group from al-Mourabitoun, a former al-Qaeda affiliate operating in northern Mali and Niger. Its leader, a Western Saharan known by the nom de guerre of Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, announced a bay'ah (pledge of allegiance) to IS in May 2015. However, given al-Sahrawi's longstanding affiliation with the al-Qaeda network (by then IS's global enemies, see Hamming 2022), IS-central only formally acknowledged the group after verifying its commitment and operational relevance, a process that took nearly two years. It was the group's increasing lethality and territorial presence in the tri-border area that ultimately led to its recognition as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). In 2019, IS formally linked ISGS and ISWAP, placing ISWAP in the lead. Although ISGS

was classified as a subunit of ISWAP in IS's organisational structure, both functioned independently in practice. In 2019-20, Sahelian forces suffered major losses owing to a series of large-scale attacks by ISGS, prompting international solidarity and military support. The death of al-Sahrawi in a French airstrike in 2021 briefly disrupted the group's momentum. Yet, it soon restructured under a new leadership (thought to be headed by Mohamed Ibrahim al-Sahrawi, although uncertainty exists) who has since strengthened internal coordination and cohesion, and intensified operations in eastern Mali and western Niger. In the last few years, ISSP has gained full recognition as a separate IS 'province' adopting the name ISSP, although both ISWAP and ISSP report to the al-Furqan office, in which ISWAP commanders play a leading role. As Baldaro details in his chapter, this transition marks the third phase of the Islamic State's trajectory in the Sahel, characterised by greater autonomy within IS's global architecture and a more explicit attempt at territorial consolidation and governance.

OPPONENTS AND RIVALS

Both groups seek to establish the writ of the self-proclaimed IS Caliphate in their areas of operation. Their principal enemies consist of those who physically or ideologically oppose this endeavour. These, therefore, include, in ISWAP's case, the armed forces of Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and the regional counterterrorism coalition, the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF). In the case of ISSP, the Alliance of the Sahel States (comprising Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), along with Russian forces supporting Mali. One should also mention French and UN forces, which used to be among the main rivals of ISGS/ISSP, but have withdrawn after the Sahel's incumbent military juntas ousted them from the region.

Furthermore, both ISWAP and ISSP are also locked in conflict with rival jihadist groups. For ISWAP, this is principally the remaining factions of the Boko Haram group, now more commonly known by its formal name, Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad (or JAS). However, the level of violence waxes and wanes: in the Lake Chad area, ISWAP often clash with JAS factions, while elsewhere in Nigeria, JAS factions (and other jihadist groups such as Ansaru) have, at times, cooperated with ISWAP – including reportedly during the Kuje Prison break near Abuja in 2022 (Adebayo, 2025; Samuel, 2022).¹⁷ For ISSP, the main jihadist opponent is the al-Qaeda affiliated Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the largest and most powerful non-state armed group operating in Mali and Burkina Faso. Clashes between JNIM and ISSP have intensified since 2020, particularly in the tri-border region. This escalation reflects what Baldaro describes as the end of the 'Sahelian exception', namely the

breakdown of tacit coexistence between al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates and the emergence of sustained inter-jihadist warfare across the tri-border region. These rivalries are not only about doctrinal purity but also reflect competition over territory, resources, and legitimacy. In some cases, these battles have led to localised truces or non-aggression pacts, such as the temporary ceasefire reported between JNIM and ISSP factions in eastern Ménaka in mid-2022, which collapsed within months as both groups sought to consolidate control over key supply routes and population centres along the Mali-Niger border. The group has also been locked in conflict with Tuareg armed groups allied with the Malian state, including, for example, the Movement Pour le Salut de Azawad (MSA) and the Groupe d'Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA)¹⁸ around the Ménaka region, an IS stronghold.

Finally, civilian populations, especially those suspected of collaboration with IS opponents, are also frequently targeted by both groups, although the overall balance of civilian targeting differs between them. While ISWAP has tended to limit indiscriminate attacks against civilians – concentrating much of its violence on state forces and selected civilian targets – ISSP has displayed a broader attack profile, with a higher proportion of attacks directed against civilians and other non-state actors. This has resulted in extensive civilian harm in the areas under ISSP influence.

GLOBAL INTERACTIONS AND LOCAL OPERATIONAL DYNAMICS

Evidence suggests that both IS factions in West Africa have ties to IS-central, and today the General Directorate of Provinces, which has provided broad strategic orientations in military, governance, and ideological affairs. This dynamic reflects the broader pattern of 'strategic localisation' discussed in the Introduction, whereby transnational jihadist frameworks are filtered through local actors who retain significant operational agency. At the same time, IS has less of an impact on the week-by-week local operational dynamics in both cases (notwithstanding the intermittent presence of IS trainers in ISWAP's area of operations). The behavior of the groups tends to be shaped by local dynamics, even if the wider strategic direction appears increasingly geared towards adherence to the goals of the Caliphate.

Both groups have demonstrated significant tactical evolution (Nsabia, 2024) and are militarily proficient actors. ISWAP, the most capable of the two, benefitted from the military experience of Boko Haram (who, it should be remembered, captured the sizable town of Gwoza in 2013-14). Their capabilities and tactics – not least the development of SVBIEDs (suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices) - have

also been significantly augmented by their relationship with IS. After splitting from BH in 2016, ISWAP quickly developed its own semi-conventional tactical capabilities from 2018, including major assaults on military bases, coordinated SVBIED attacks, extensive use of roadside bombs, and ambushes. The expansion to southern Borno from 2021 stretched ISWAP, however, and the group lost momentum across 2022-24 due to the renewed pressure from the Nigerian military and a resurgence of Boko Haram/JAS. Nevertheless, by the end of 2024, ISWAP was back on its former track, expanding its military attacks against the Nigerian military in the first half of 2025. ISSP, for its part, leverages considerable tactical mobility using motorbikes and has appeared to benefit from greater coordination with IS to increase its capacity to operate sophisticated attacks using IEDs to deny territory to state forces. Over the years, the group has proved capable of attacking fortified fixed positions, carrying out dynamic ambushes, and resisting drones. More recently, both ISWAP and ISSP have incorporated basic digital tools into their operations - using commercial drones for reconnaissance, encrypted messaging platforms such as Telegram for battlefield coordination, and online media for recruitment and psychological operations (Mustapha, 2025).

Irrespective of international alignments, however, the territorial features in which ISWAP and ISSP operate also contribute to shaping their respective military conduct. Benefiting from forests and the inaccessible riparian areas around Lake Chad, ISWAP's tactics are well-adapted to the territory in which they operate, enabling territorial denial. ISSP, by contrast, operates predominantly in a semi-arid landscape where the group is more exposed to aerial monitoring and attacks, thereby prompting a greater resort to hit-and-run attacks.

Overall, then, ISWAP appears more capable of engaging in sustained semi-conventional warfare, while ISSP has adopted a more guerrilla-like posture with the ability to launch less frequent, but nonetheless complex, semi-conventional attacks (such as the January 2026 attack on the airport in Niamey, Niger). This is arguably the outcome of both consent and dynamic conflict features. Looking at the groups' respective starting points through splintering, al-Mourabitoun was not a capable conventional military actor, unlike the original Boko Haram from which ISWAP originated. And in the subsequent years, ISSP has had to face powerful French counterterrorism operations and continued pressure from other non-state actors, which reduced its capacity to engage in symmetric warfare.

Beyond kinetic strength, both groups have focused on governing local communities. As highlighted in the Introduction, governance practices in the Sahel are deeply

intertwined with access to resources, taxation regimes, and the regulation of local economies - dynamics that are central to understanding the consolidation of both ISWAP and ISSP. ISWAP has invested extensively in deepening its political and social footprint (Samuel, 2025). It has constructed a rudimentary but effective governance apparatus across several rural zones inspired by IS governance in Iraq and Syria, which includes the administration of Sharia courts, a relatively sophisticated tax (zakāt) collection system, market regulations on economic goods (fishing, herding, transport of goods), and the enforcement of societal norms and gender rules through the Islamic police. In some areas, it has taken on the role of an informal welfare provider, distributing food aid and medical supplies to communities under its control. While these services remain limited, they contrast sharply with the often-perceived neglect (and sometimes abuse) from state actors, thus bolstering the group's appeal among disenfranchised populations. This population-centric governance strategy (Berlingozzi & Stoddard, 2020) aims to depict ISWAP as a more just and capable alternative to the state to bolster its legitimacy.

ISSP, by contrast, has historically employed more coercive methods to assert dominance over civilians, especially in highly contested areas where it faces challenges to civilian allegiance from either JNIM, the state, or its international partners. Rather than seeking legitimacy through service provision, ISSP often establishes control through punitive violence and intimidation. However, recent shifts (Abd'Allah, 2023) suggest growing efforts to enhance predictability and (a modicum of) reciprocity, by centralising governance, ensuring (Islamic) law and order, protecting local economies, and cultivating acceptance from local communities, in line with IS governance norms and practices. While ISSP's more militant posture has triggered backlash in certain communities, inchoate and abusive counter-terrorism responses by local states and rival militias can eventually result in grudging acceptance of ISSP as the 'lesser of two evils'.

CURRENT CAPABILITIES AND STRATEGIC TRAJECTORIES

As of 2025, both ISWAP and ISSP have thrived amid the shifting security dynamics and geopolitical realignments of the Sahel. Despite sustained counterterrorism operations against both groups, leadership losses (for ISSP), and internal rivalries in both provinces, both have demonstrated impressive adaptive capacity (Samuel & Stoddard, 2025) and remain entrenched actors in their respective regions. For the states and peoples of these regions, the outlook is negative, as the most likely trajectory is continued expansion of both groups.

ISWAP, with an estimated fighting force in the thousands, continues to operate from entrenched strongholds around the Lake Chad Basin. Exploiting the Nigerian state's military limitations, the group has expanded its reach into previously contested areas and reasserted control over key logistical routes. Its military capabilities are evident in its repeated overrunning of military outposts, precise ambushes on patrols, and coordinated lethal SVBIED and IED attacks. The group's 'burning of the camps' campaign in early to mid-2025 (a major escalation of attacks against state military outposts in Borno State) marked a peak in ISWAP's operational strength, placing it in its strongest position since its inception.

ISSP, although smaller in overall numbers than ISWAP, has grown increasingly potent as a mobile and strategically agile insurgency. Its fighters are now active across wide swathes of the Liptako-Gourma region, particularly in eastern Mali (Ménaka, Gao), northern Burkina Faso (Sahel region), and western Niger (from northern Tillabéri, to the Tillia and Tahoua regions as well as down to the southern Dosso region on the borders with Nigeria and Benin). The weakening of security coordination among West African states and the withdrawal of French and UN forces from key operational zones have provided ISSP with opportunities to regroup, expand territorial influence, and increase dominance over local communities.

A growing concern is the emerging relationship between IS factions and a group known as 'Lakurawa', active in northwestern Nigeria (Alhassan, Oginni & Breitung, 2025). Embedded along the Niger–Nigeria borderlands around Sokoto and Kebbi States, the Lakurawa group shows some signs of alignment with the Islamic State Sahel Province. Although there are dissenting opinions that instead link Lakurawa to JNIM (Alhassan, Oginni & Breitung, 2025), evidence suggesting a possible alignment with ISSP includes the proximity of Lakurawa operations to Dogondoutchi – an ISSP attack zone and key supply corridor (Brant, 2025); reported leadership ties (MondAfrique, 2025); and an apparent pledge of allegiance to ISGS, as cited in UN reporting (UN, 2025). Yet this evidence remains circumstantial. Some well-placed scholars have questioned these links or pointed instead to links to non-IS jihadist groups operating in Nigeria (Adebayo, 2025). Confirmation of ISSP presence in Nigeria, just as JNIM has claimed its first attacks in the same country in October 2025, would mark a worrying development, arguably signalling the long-feared manifestation of growing operational ties between ISSP and ISWAP along a united front in West Africa. However, even if Lakurawa is not formally part of ISSP, IS fighters from the Sahel Province are active along the Nigerian border and reportedly controlling flows of goods between the two states.

While neither ISSP nor ISWAP currently poses a conventional threat to state capitals or core state institutions (although ISSP does operate near Niamey and as mentioned above recently attacked the airport), their long-term trajectory remains alarming. Recent kidnappings of Westerners that occurred or were attempted in Niamey, along with the airport attack, highlight ISSP's growing capacity to infiltrate Niger's capital. However, focusing on these groups' territorial control misses the picture to some extent. By embedding themselves in fragmented rural governance ecologies and economic supply chains, co-opting or coercing communities, and reaching a level of military capability that allows them to oust state forces from key bases and restrict their movement, these groups have carved out resilient insurgent proto-states that challenge the state's monopoly on violence, justice, and, crucially, taxation. These proto-states are partly territorial, but primarily defined by their adhesion to the social and economic networks on which communities in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions rely. Their ability to project power through ideology, military coercion, and service provision marks a shift towards a new, more capable and entrenched form of jihadist insurgency that is expanding over time and increasingly difficult to dislodge.

Besides their current local entanglements and engagements, IS factions in West Africa continue to boast about their intention to wage a global jihad. Unlike their al-Qaeda affiliated jihadist counterparts in the region in JNIM, ISWAP, and ISSP have never formally ruled out the possibility of perpetrating attacks abroad. While they might lack the capability to do so at present, recent IS attacks in Turkey and Russia are a dire reminder of the devastating sophistication that IS factions can achieve when acting in concert through the General Directorate of Provinces.

To sum up, ISWAP and ISSP, despite their shared lineage under the Islamic State's al-Furqan office, have evolved into distinct expressions of jihadist insurgency in West Africa. Their differences reveal how geography, local politics, and strategic context shape the character of IS's Provinces. In terms of targeting patterns, ISWAP has pursued a comparatively restrained approach, focusing its violence on state and military targets while avoiding indiscriminate attacks on civilians. ISSP, by contrast, has adopted a broader and more coercive profile, frequently targeting civilians and rival non-state actors to assert territorial control. Operationally, ISWAP has developed semi-conventional capabilities - coordinated assaults, SVBIEDs, and complex ambushes - reflecting the military experience inherited from Boko Haram. ISSP functions as a mobile guerrilla force, relying on motorbike raids and improvised explosives suited to the Sahel's open terrain, while both groups increasingly exploit digital tools such as drones and encrypted communications. Furthermore, ISWAP emphasises governance and legitimacy, whereas ISSP prioritises coercion and

rapid dominance. Finally, contextual differences appear to shape strategies and adaptation: ISWAP maintains pragmatic relations with some local factions (whilst clashing with others), while ISSP operates within a dense web of rivalries involving JNIM, Tuareg groups, and regional militaries. Together, they illustrate IS's capacity to adapt a globally uniform ideology to locally contingent insurgent ecologies across West Africa.

The emergence and expansion of IS Provinces in West Africa is therefore best understood as a result of increasingly sophisticated armed groups with strategies that fuse growing military capabilities with governance and population control strategies. In so doing they take advantage of the strategic vacuum created by weakened state institutions and (especially in ISSP's case) enduring communal rivalries. In both cases, the groups position themselves as alternatives to ineffective or abusive state actors, using both ideological narratives and governance strategies to encourage compliance, and brutal violence to deter defections. This dual dynamic of local root causes and transnational jihadist strategic direction defines the ongoing evolution of these IS groups in West Africa.

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Alexandre Gernigon is a PhD fellow in French language and culture studies at the Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies (ENGEROM), University of Copenhagen. His research focuses on political developments and security issues in francophone West Africa, with a particular focus on the central Sahel countries and Côte d'Ivoire. His PhD project examines recent changes in France's relationship with its former African colonies, exploring how governments and civil society activists in francophone West Africa perceive and challenge French influence. Alexandre teaches BA and MA courses in French foreign policy and French/African relations in the 21st century. He has previously been affiliated as a research assistant and visiting PhD fellow at the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

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NOTES

1. This book can be read as a continuation of the earlier books published by DIIS on the global dynamics behind the expansion of jihad (Sheikh 2017), and the regional dynamics of jihadism in Southeast Asia (Sheikh 2019).
2. In response to the military government's deployment of Turkish Bayraktar drones, there were more than 30 confirmed jihadist drone strikes in the region by mid-2025 (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED] 2025).
3. Accelerated by the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, a security crisis erupted in Mali in January 2012 when a loose coalition of Tuareg separatist rebels and three jihadist groups – al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine – took control of Mali's three northern regions of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, chased the state and the national army from the north of Mali and declared it the independent state of 'Azawad'. For nine months the jihadists governed through the implementation of Islamic law, including justice systems.
4. Worldview analysis is a context- and culture-sensitive method for understanding how actors' imaginaries and grievances structure perception and meaning-making in conflict-settings and thereby also shape action and conflict dynamics (Sheikh 2022).
5. Scholars have increasingly argued that the longstanding dichotomy between material and ideational drivers is misleading, as ideology and material interests are deeply intertwined in practice. Drawing on socio-theological approaches – such as those advanced by Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona Sheikh (Sheikh & Juergensmeyer 2019) – this perspective emphasises that ideological worldviews also encompass normative visions of governance, including aspirations to rule in accordance with Islamic principles of justice and jurisprudence.
6. 'Azawad', a term used by Tuareg separatists, refers to northern Malian regions – Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao, and parts of Mopti – governed by jihadists from 2012–2013 as the Islamic Emirate of Azawad (Arabic: dawla or imāra) (Skretting 2022).
7. Historical repertoires also play a role. The Inner Niger Delta was a centre of jihadist state formation in the 19th century, and for many Fulani pastoralists the contemporary insurgency evoked memories of the Dina Empire's 'golden age'. (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2022b)
8. The Kidal region in the north was an important exception as it remained under Tuareg rebel control, fuelling suspicions of French complicity. In 2014, Malian forces were barred from re-entering the city, which subsequently evolved into a stronghold of the Tuareg-led Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a strategic hub for trade, smuggling, jihadist activities and rebellion. To Malian nationalists, Tuareg autonomy represented 'territorial loss' and neo-colonial interference, with France and the UN accused of shielding the CMA (Lecocq 2010: 86).
9. While it is commonly described as a private military company, Wagner is in fact 'established, run and financed by the Russian state' (Hansen 2024). Following the death of its leader Yevgeni Prigozhin in 2023, the entity was gradually reorganised and rebranded under the name Africa Corps. For the sake of consistency, in this chapter I refer to it under its original name.
10. In the early 2000s, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) – which later became al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – faced increasing pressure and decline in Algeria. In response, the group shifted its focus southward, seeking to expand its presence in the Sahel region.
11. Other sources write 1954. According to Alex Thurston, 1958 is the correct date.
12. Allegedly, Koufa met Iyad Ag Ghali through Jama'at al-Da'wa wa-l-Tabligh, the missionary movement that both were involved in. Between 1998 and 2010, Ag Ghali had been expanding his political and religious influence in central Mali, and both men reportedly attended an international Tabligh conference in Sévaré in 2011.
13. Iyad's disillusionment with the failure of Tuareg nationalist movements in the 1990s played a role in his ideological shift.
14. Allegedly, Iyad's ideological transformation was influenced by the Aménokal, who reportedly disavowed Ag Ghali as the leader of the MNLA.
15. During the crisis Ag Ghali's former officers from the Tuareg separatist group MPA fought alongside Ansar Dine, as well as the Tuareg separatist movement MNLA and the Malian Army.
16. Due to internal rivalries over leadership, al-Qaeda emir Mokhtar Belmokhtar was excluded from AQIM and formed his own group which became Al-Mourabitoun.
17. ISWAP is an offshoot of Boko Haram - with which it has a violent rivalry -, and it is primarily based in the area around the Lake Chad basin. Since its official split from Boko Haram and until 2022, ISWAP also served as an umbrella organisation – similar to what we observe in the case of the JNIM – for all regional groups affiliated to the Islamic State (ICG 2024). The evolution of the relationship between ISWAP and ISSP, and the differences and similarities between the two groups, are further explored and discussed in the chapter by Ed Stoddard, Laura Berlingozzi and Luca Raineri.
18. The Polisario Front (Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro) is a Sahrawi na-

- tionalist movement founded in 1973 to end Spanish colonial rule in Western Sahara and later to resist Moroccan control after 1975. It seeks independence for Western Sahara and proclaims the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which governs parts of the territory and is recognised by several states.
19. By 'Sahelian exception', observers mean the period between 2015 and 2019, during which groups affiliated to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State did not clash and even occasionally cooperated, in the Sahel, following a logic of division of labour and areas of influence that was not applied in the other parts of the world where the two groups were concomitantly present.
 20. There are a number of IS groups in Africa south of the Sahara including IS Somalia, ISCAP (operating in the DRC) and IS-Mozambique. IS groups also operate in Egypt and were formerly present in Libya.
 21. By IS-central we refer to the core leadership and organisational apparatus of the Islamic State originally based in Iraq and Syria.
 22. The Kuje prison break was a major shock for the Nigerian security establishment and was surprising in two key ways. Firstly it was shocking that a prison so close to Abuja (20km) could be attacked and broken into by militants. Secondly, it was surprising because of the rare cooperation between the different former factions of Boko Haram – ISWAP, JAS and Ansaru – who typically do not cooperate. However it seems that the tensions that exist between ISWAP and JAS in the Lake Chad are not as pronounced in other parts of Nigeria (on Jihadist expansion beyond the north East see Adebayo, 2024).
 23. Emerging in the framework of the 2015 peace process in Mali, the MSA and GATIA have operated in coordination with Malian and foreign forces—including French and Nigerien troops—in counter-IS campaigns around Ménaka and Gao in order to challenge jihadist groups and defend their communities. Yet, their involvement has also often exacerbated local conflict dynamics, contributing to cycles of reprisal and intercommunal violence.



Photo: Alamy.com

About the cover

The Timbuktu Manuscripts are a collection of hundreds of thousands of ancient texts preserved for centuries in private family libraries and scholarly institutions in Timbuktu, Mali. Covering subjects ranging from astronomy, medicine and law to poetry and Quranic scholarship, they represent one of the world's great repositories of Islamic learning. During the jihadist occupation of Timbuktu in 2012, militants burned thousands of manuscripts, viewing the city's rich Sufi Islamic scholarly tradition as heretical. In a remarkable act of resistance, local librarians and citizens managed to move the majority of the nearly 400,000 manuscripts to safety in Bamako.

– Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde

This book examines the evolution of jihadist movements in the Sahel as part of a broader transformation of global jihadism, which has become more geographically dispersed, increasingly lethal, and more deeply rooted in Africa. It focuses on Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State-affiliated groups, including Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), to understand how locally-embedded insurgencies become part of transnational jihadist networks.

The book conceptualises Sahelian jihadism as a case of 'bundled conflicts', in which local grievances, regional dynamics, ideological ambitions and international interventions are deeply intertwined rather than operating as separate drivers. Across the contributions, four cross-cutting themes emerge: the fluidity and fragmentation of jihadist movements alongside recurring efforts at unity; the interplay between ideological commitments and pragmatic adaptation; the centrality of governance and access to resources; and the role of state fragility and foreign interventions in shaping mobilisation and conflict dynamics.

The chapters show how jihadist actors combine local embeddedness with transnational connections, developing governance practices, exploiting conflict environments and adapting to shifting geopolitical conditions. While al-Qaeda- and Islamic State-aligned groups differ in their operational approaches, they share an ability to scale local insurgencies into broader regional and global dynamics.

Overall, the book shows how and why the Sahel has become a central arena for contemporary jihadism, illustrating how insurgencies emerge from overlapping conflict logics that blur the boundaries between the local, regional and global, the material and the ideological, and different scales of conflicts – posing significant challenges for conflict resolution, and containment.

