

The Future of Homeland Security: Addressing the Rise of Terrorism in Africa

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Thank you Mister Chairman and members of the committee for giving me the opportunity to testify today on terrorism threats emanating from parts of the African continent. In particular, focusing on issues and recommendations related to the Sahel region, especially in Mali where insecurity is getting worse by the day. There are two main jihadi groups now operating there: the Islamic State’s Sahel Province and Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin (JNIM).

This increased insecurity can be directly linked to the August 2022 withdrawal of French forces operating under the Operation Barkhane counterinsurgency mission. At the time of the French departure, the Mali insurgency had not been deterred or defeated, but it has undoubtedly worsened since. This suggests France at the very least was managing the situation in hopes that a future easing of the political tempest would facilitate a more sustainable resolution. As for the French, they withdrew at the request of the government of interim Malian president Assimi Goita, who seized power after a May 2021 coup and expressed his preference for the Russian-sponsored Wagner Group as a preferred counterterrorism partner.

Highlighting that Washington and its allies cannot bifurcate counterterrorism and great power competition. A position that casts counterterrorism and great power competition as an either/or challenge will only undermine the challenge of both. While this discussion is focused on Mali and the Sahel more generally, this dynamic first occurred in Syria since the 2011 uprising and is also playing out in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal in mid-August 2021.¹

Current State of Play

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, or ACLED, 60 percent of Wagner’s violent engagements in Mali have targeted civilian noncombatants, as compared to 37 percent of Malian army actions.² Furthermore, each Wagner attack—a category that includes kidnapping, sexual violence, and torture—kills an average of seven noncombatants, twice the

¹ Aaron Y. Zelin, “Syria at the Center of Power Competition and Counterterrorism,” Policy Notes 95, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-center-power-competition-and-counterterrorism>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “Looking for Legitimacy: Taliban Diplomacy Since the Fall of Kabul,” Policy Watch 3640, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/looking-legitimacy-taliban-diplomacy-fall-kabul>.

² Ladd Serwat et al., “Wagner Group Operations in Africa: Civilian Targeting Trends in the Central African Republic and Mali,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 30, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali>.

average caused by Malian army attacks.³ Rights groups argue that such Wagner actions unintentionally drive support for the Islamic State in Mali (IS-M) and JNIM, which capitalizes on grievances against local governments for recruitment purposes.⁴ Likewise, on June 30, 2023, the UN Security Council voted to end the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) mandate, raising the likelihood of greater impunity for all sides.

According to the late August 2023 UN report on IS-M and JNIM, “the passage of time appears to favor the terrorist groups Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, whose military capacities and community penetration grow each day.”⁵ In the same report it states that “in less than a year, [the] Islamic State in [Mali] has almost doubled its areas of control” in rural eastern Menaka and large parts of the Ansongo area in southern Gao.⁶ As for JNIM, the report states that it controls several gold mining sites across northern Mali and villages in at least the Mopti region.⁷ Strikingly, within the month since MINUSMA’s withdrawal from northern Mali, the prevalence of violence has doubled, portending a situation wherein IS-M, JNIM, other nonstate actors can exploit a growing vacuum unfilled by either the Malian military or Wagner.⁸

Making matters even more complicated for Washington, on September 16, Mali signed a mutual defense treaty, officially named the Alliance of Sahel States, with Burkina Faso and Niger—an alternative and competitor to the French-led G5 Sahel alliance (originally including Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), one of the main bulwarks against IS-M and JNIM in the region.⁹ Therefore, today, as IS-M and JNIM exploit Mali’s security vacuum, Washington lacks space to productively intervene given its soured relationship with Bamako and the military regime’s preference for working with Wagner. Unfortunately, the current trajectory will only benefit the jihadists the Malian government claims it wants to defeat.

Background

IS-M and JNIM’s presence in Mali can be traced to an unrelated, decades-old insurgency in the north focused on Tuareg rights that was exploited by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its local allies in 2011–12. AQIM, which benefited from the Libyan weapons bazaar that flourished after the 2011 fall of Muammar Qadhafi, seized territory in spring 2012 in a region of northern Mali referred to locally as Azawad. Even as France’s Operation Serval dismantled this statelet in

³ “Wagner Routinely Targets Civilians in Africa,” *Economist*, August 31, 2023,

<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2023/08/31/wagner-routinely-targets-civilians-in-africa>.

⁴ Sam Mednick, “Violence Soars in Mali in the Year After Russians Arrive,” *Associated Press*, January 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-mali-government-russia-violence-10ba966bceb2dc732cb170b16258e5a6>.

⁵ UN Security Council, “Letter Dated 3 August 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Mali Established Pursuant to Resolution 2374 (2017) Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” August 3, 2023,

https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Associated Press*, “Mali’s Junta Struggles to Fight Growing Violence in a Northern Region as UN Peacekeepers Withdraw,” September 22, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mali-junta-rebels-jihadi-peacekeeping-coup-insecurity-7af6356feec5ce409501f4c7e7dc42f8>.

⁹ “Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso Sign Sahel Security Pact,” *Reuters*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16>.

January 2013, the AQIM- led insurgency continued, prompting an expansion of the jihadist campaign to neighboring countries, especially Burkina Faso. Within Mali, the AQIM-led jihadist alliance included more localized groups like Ansar al-Din and Katibat al-Macina, alongside AQIM splinter groups more regionalized in scope including Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya (JTWJ- GI) and Katibat al-Mulathamini.

AQIM's monopoly on the Malian "jihadosphere," however, was interrupted by the baya (allegiance pledge) given by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi to then IS "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on May 13, 2015, which the group accepted on October 31, 2016.¹⁰ Sahrawi, who became the first leader of IS-M, had previously cofounded JTWJ-GI and served on its shura council. This group, founded in October 2011, merged in August 2013 with Katibat al-Mulathamini, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, to form al-Murabitun, for which Sahrawi also served as a senior leader.¹¹ Remnants of al-Murabitun eventually merged back into AQIM in December 2015, possibly in response to Sahrawi's announcement, which Belmokhtar rejected.¹² Likewise, the remaining pro-AQIM groups—Ansar al-Din and Katibat al-Macina—publicly formalized ties with the al-Qaeda branch on March 2, 2017, adopting the name Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin.¹³

During the first few years when IS-M and JNIM operated simultaneously in Mali, the "Sahel exception" prevailed, as described by French journalist Wassim Nasr. According to this arrangement, the two groups implicitly agreed not to fight each other directly—a contrast with the situation in places like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.¹⁴ But in early 2020, this tacit agreement collapsed, and the two groups have engaged in bloody if select clashes since due to JNIM's fears of fighter defections to IS-M.¹⁵ Setting aside these clashes, IS and JNIM mostly operate in separate regions of Mali. According to JNIM's claims of responsibility in the country, the group has operated mostly in the southeastern, central, and far northern regions of Mopti, Timbuktu, Koulikoro, Kayes, Segou, and Sikasso, while IS-M—as of September 2023—has remained in the far eastern regions of Gao and Menaka.

¹⁰ Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, "Announcing a New Amir and Giving Bay'ah to al-Baghdadi," Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya, May 13, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/05/13/new-audio-message-from-al-murabi%E1%B9%ADuns-adnan-abu-walid-al-%E1%B9%A3a%E1%B8%A5rawi-announcing-a-new-amir-and-giving-bayah-to-al-baghdadi>; Abu al-Walid Sahrawi, "Pledge of Allegiance in Northern Mali to Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Joining the Islamic State," Wi-Kallat Amaq al-Ikhabariyah, October 30, 2016, <https://jihadology.net/2016/10/30/new-video-message-from-abu-al-walid-%E1%B9%A3a%E1%B8%A5rawi-pledge-of-allegiance-in-northern-mali-to-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-and-joining-the-islamic-state>.

¹¹ Caleb Weiss, AQIM's Imperial Playbook: Understanding al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Expansion into West Africa (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, April 2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/aqims-imperial-playbook-understanding-al-qaida-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-expansion-into-west-africa>.

¹² Abu Mus'ab Abd al-Wadud (Abd al-Malik Drukdil), "About al-Murabitun Joining the Base of Jihad Organization, Adopting the Recent Mali Operation, and Messages to the West," al-Andalus Foundation for Media Production, December 3, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/12/03/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-abu-mu%E1%B9%A3ab-abd-al-wadud-abd-al-malik-drukdil-about-al-murabi%E1%B9%ADun-joining-the-ba>.

¹³ Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin, "Founding Statement," al-Zallaqah Foundation for Media Production, March 2, 2017, <https://jihadology.net/2017/03/02/new-video-message-from-jamaah-nu%E1%B9%A3rat-al-islam-wa-l-muslimin-founding-statement>.

¹⁴ Wassim Nasr, "ISIS in Africa: The End of the 'Sahel Exception,'" Newlines Institute for Strategy and Policy, June 2, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Compared with attacks claimed by other IS “provinces,” the IS-M numbers appear paltry: three in 2016; eight in 2017; ten in 2018; sixteen in 2019; thirty-five in 2020; fourteen in 2021; twenty-nine in 2022; and fifteen as of September 2023. Of course, before April 2019, the IS media office simply did not claim Mali-based attacks, and it may have purposefully limited its claims since.¹⁶ This approach would cohere with IS practices elsewhere, particularly in Syria, where leaked documents show that military commanders intentionally prevent publication of claims owing to a lack of technology/internet access, security concerns, or mere indifference.¹⁷ Moreover, in a recent issue of the Islamic State’s Pashto-language Voice of Khurasan magazine, the Khurasan “province” notes that the seeming decline in Afghanistan-based operations can be attributed to a policy of silence, similar to that employed in Syria.¹⁸

When compared with JNIM’s claimed attack data so far in 2023, it further illustrates that IS-M is likely not claiming most of its attacks, especially considering both groups control territory and there’s a major discrepancy between the two groups’ attack tempo. JNIM to date since January 1 has claimed 136 attacks this year, which is on pace for 185 attacks.

From an American security perspective, one area that is potentially worrying in the future is that a cohort of regional foreign fighters mainly from surrounding countries has appeared in IS-M and JNIM’s ranks over the years. It is unlikely, however, that we will see a mobilization similar to what happened in Syria last decade. One reason for low fighter migration to sub-Saharan Africa is the area’s lack of religious-historical resonance for Muslims relative to the Levant and Arabian Peninsula. More practically, transit to Mali is arduous, whereas Turkey—a global travel hub—provides an easy gateway to Syria. Yet the Mali situation bears watching all the same.

It should be noted that JNIM and its parent organization AQIM, has been uninterested in external operations against the West in the homeland. For example, in June 2021 AQIM leader Abu Obaida Yusuf al-Annabi said that France was “deceiving” its citizens by saying that the country’s operations in Mali were necessary to protect France from jihadist attacks at home, because there has never been an attack on French soil by a Malian or orchestrated by Mali-based jihadists.¹⁹ However, AQIM/JNIM have had no qualms about attacking Western countries or interests regionally in the past: its long-standing kidnapping campaign going back 15--plus-years, the December 2012 In Amenas hostage crisis and attack in Algeria, the May 2013 attack on a military barracks in Agadez, Niger, and a French-owned and operated uranium mine in Arlit, Niger, the November 2015 Radisson Blu hotel attack in Mali, the January 2016

¹⁶ Prior to IS officially claiming attacks in April 2019, the data from 2016-April 2019 is from data shared with the author by Menastream, a risk consultancy led by researcher Héni Nsaibia.

¹⁷ Aaron Y. Zelin and Devorah Margolin, “The Islamic State’s Shadow Governance in Eastern Syria Since the Fall of Baghuz,” CTC Sentinel 16, no. 9, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-states-shadow-governance-in-eastern-syria-since-the-fall-of-baghuz>.

¹⁸ Islamic State’s Wilayat Khurasan, “Voice of Khurasan Magazine Issue #25,” al-Aza’im Media Foundation, August 28, 2023, <https://jihadology.net/2023/08/28/new-magazine-issue-from-the-islamic-states-wilayat-khurasan-voice-of-khurasan-25-2>.

¹⁹ Sheikh Abu Obaida Yusuf al-Annabi, “And God Will Surely Support Those Who Support Him,” al-Andalus Foundation for Media Production, June 20, 2021, <https://jihadology.net/2021/06/20/new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-yusuf-al-anabi-and-god-will-surely-support-those-who-support-him>.

Cappuccino restaurant and Splendid Hotel attack in Burkina Faso, and the March 2016 Grand-Bassam attack in the Ivory Coast. Though it appears that since the group became known exclusively as JNIM in Mali in 2017, there has been less of that activity regionally too.

The greater risk for potential external operations comes from IS-M, even if it remains a low risk at this juncture. History dictates though that the longer the group possesses a safe haven and the opportunity to expand its rule, the more capable it will be of planning operations, whether directed, guided, or inspired—as previously observed by IS “provinces” in Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan.²⁰

More immediately, IS-M’s and JNIM’s success in Mali may likewise prompt forays into nearby regions. One possibility is that the infusion of resources will be reinvested into faltering operations in North Africa, especially Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. Such a trend would mark an effective reversal of the southward flow of arms, money, and militancy from North Africa following the 2011 revolutions. Alternatively, IS-M and JNIM might try to extend farther south into the Gulf of Guinea countries like Benin and Togo, where both have grown slowly in recent years, or even push into newer countries such as Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, or Guinea.²¹

Internally, worsening security dynamics across Mali will continue to open operating space for JNIM and IS-M, particularly in light of recent reports of conflict between the aligned Wagner Group and Malian military and the formerly pro-government Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA),²² a coalition of Tuareg militant factions.²³ Various Tuareg militants may also choose to align with one of the jihadist factions (IS-M or JNIM), even though no evidence suggests this has happened yet.²⁴

²⁰ Petter Nesser, “Military Interventions, Jihadi Networks, and Terrorist Entrepreneurs: How the Islamic State Terror Wave Rose So High in Europe,” CTC Sentinel 12, no. 3 (March 2019), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/military-interventions-jihadi-networks-terrorist-entrepreneurs-islamic-state-terror-wave-rose-high-europe>; Aaron Y. Zelin, *The Others: Foreign Fighters in Libya*, Policy Note 45 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2018), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/others-foreign-fighters-libya>; Aaron Y. Zelin, “ISKP Goes Global: External Operations from Afghanistan,” PolicyWatch 3778, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 11, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iskp-goes-global-external-operations-afghanistan>.

²¹ Sam Mednick and Virgile Ahissou, “Jihadi Violence Hits Benin, Shows Spread Across West Africa,” Associated Press, December 28, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/islamic-state-group-al-qaida-politics-benin-violence-e70ea4e0cf5211785cf1cb20c4b38487>; “Togo Extends State of Emergency in North,” Agence France-Presse, April 7, 2023, <https://www.barrons.com/news/togo-extends-state-of-emergency-in-north-5c083845>; “Ghana Sends Special Forces to Border as Sahel Violence Spreads,” African Defense Forum, May 9, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/ghana-sends-special-forces-to-border-as-sahel-violence-spreads>; Annie Linskey, “Kamala Harris Pledges \$100 Million to West Africa Nations to Fight Extremist Threat,” Wall Street Journal, March 27, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/kamala-harris-pledges-100-million-to-west-africa-nations-to-fight-extremist-threat-6f02504e>.

²² Coordination of Azawad Movements, post on X (formerly Twitter), September 12, 2023, <https://twitter.com/cicamazawad/status/1701653679831478529>.

²³ Andrew Lebovich, “Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel: Mouvement Pour Le Salut de Azawad, Groupe D’Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés,” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2019, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping.

²⁴ “Letter Dated 3 August 2023 from the Panel of Experts on Mali,” https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2023_578.pdf.

Therefore, in Mali and the broader Sahel, security dynamics involving local, regional, and global actors have produced a fluid geopolitical situation that benefits the local Islamic State “province” as well as JNIM and other nonstate actors. Today’s reality, of course, does great damage to the Sahelian population.

Recommendations

The current Malian preference for Wagner, which effectively blocks Western nations from the theater, limits U.S. options for meaningfully shaping dynamics on the ground. Even if the United States or its French or other allies were more inclined to assert themselves, broader geostrategic concerns could hinder their appetite for a counterterrorism turf war with Russia. Tenuous U.S. ties with the current Nigerien leadership further complicate the situation and may hinder the effectiveness of the local U.S. drone base, which has been used against both IS Sahel Province and JNIM militants over the years. Washington should therefore prepare for the possibility that Niger could ask the United States to leave, as Mali recently did with France. Contingency planning for a drone base could include engaging countries like Ghana or Senegal, allowing for a backup plan amid the current trajectory.

The U.S. Treasury Department should consider applying broader sanctions against IS-M and JNIM leaders and financial networks. To date, only four senior figures have been designated from JNIM and two from IS-M.²⁵ With two of these six figures now dead. Furthermore, neither group has seen a designation against them since 2021, even as both groups have gotten stronger in Mali. Broader targeting could potentially limit IS-M’s and JNIM’s ability to move money across borders. However, clear insight into the deep bench of IS-M and JNIM leadership or financiers is unavailable in the open source. Therefore, the State and Treasury Departments should use classified information and draw from the intelligence community to shed light on these figures, in turn denying them opportunities to help IS-M and JNIM.

Likewise, it is also worth confronting the Wagner Group and its logistics without hesitation. In late July, the U.S. sanctioned three Malian officials (Malian Defense Minister Colonel Sadio Camara, Air Force Chief of Staff Colonel Alou Boi Diarra, and Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant Colonel Adama Bagayoko) for facilitating and expanding the Wagner Group’s operations in the country since December 2021.²⁶ This is a good start, though it would be worthwhile to target those within the Wagner Group more specifically as the U.S. has done previously with its officials’ activity in the Ukraine war. Due to the cross-border nature of the conflict in Mali and its connections to the insurgencies in Burkina Faso and Niger, as well as the two countries’ also working with the Wagner Group, considering sanctions related to these activities in those countries is worth exploring as well.

Finally, there has been a growing perception, whether it is true or not, in the Sahel region, as well as elsewhere in the world that the United States can be fickle with its allies in contrast to Russia,

²⁵ “Individuals and Entities Designated by the State Department Under E.O. 13224,” U.S. Department of State, last updated June 20, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/executive-order-13224/#state>.

²⁶ Anthony J. Blinken, “Imposing Sanctions on Malian Officials in Connection with the Wagner Group,” U.S. Department of State, July 24, 2023, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/imposing-sanctions-on-malian-officials-in-connection-with-the-wagner-group>.

which backs them no matter what. Therefore, before the security situation devolves even more and spreads to other countries again it is imperative that Washington sticks to its allies regionally and make these efforts visible. Otherwise, do not be surprised if Moscow tries to find cracks in the foundations of relations and leverages insecurity to take advantage and undermine the U.S.'s position in the region in the way we have already now seen in recent years in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Remembering that counterterrorism and great power competition are linked in these conflict zones will also alleviate tactical and strategic misunderstandings and deter Russia from taking advantage of a warped view by Washington that these issue-sets are somehow not linked.