

Rising Terrorism: The Growing Threat of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in Mali

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Abstract

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has become the dominant jihadist organization in Mali and one of the deadliest in Africa. Formed in 2017 through the merger of al-Qaeda-linked factions, the group has evolved from a local insurgency into a transnational force exploiting Mali's political instability, ethnic divisions, and weak governance. This paper analyzes JNIM's strategies, including its use of coercion, propaganda, and local governance to gain legitimacy and control. It also examines the effects of foreign troop withdrawals, the involvement of Russian mercenaries, and the collapse of state authority that have allowed JNIM to expand across the Sahel and into coastal West Africa. The study argues that defeating JNIM requires more than military action; it demands restoring governance, rebuilding trust with communities, and strengthening regional cooperation. Without addressing the underlying causes of exclusion and poverty, Mali risks becoming a long-term haven for jihadist movements.

Keywords: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Mali, Terrorism, Sahel

Introduction

Mali, a landlocked nation in the heart of West Africa's Sahel, has become the epicenter of one of the world's fastest-growing jihadist insurgencies, with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) emerging as the dominant force driving instability, violence, and state collapse. Formed in March 2017 through the merger of several al-Qaeda-aligned groups, JNIM has transformed from a fragmented coalition into a highly adaptive, resilient, and territorially expansive terrorist organization that controls significant swathes of central and northern Mali while extending its reach into western border regions and neighboring countries (Warner & Hulme, 2023). By 2025, JNIM is responsible for more attacks and civilian casualties than any other militant group in sub-Saharan Africa, accounting for over 40% of terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel, according to the Global Terrorism Index 2025 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). This escalation is not merely a security crisis—it represents a profound governance failure, where state absence, ethnic marginalization, and economic desperation have created fertile ground for Salafi-jihadist ideology to take root and flourish (International Crisis Group, 2024). JNIM's rise must be understood within the broader context of Mali's political and security unraveling since 2012, when a Tuareg rebellion in the north was rapidly co-opted by jihadist factions, leading to the temporary fall of major cities like Gao and Timbuktu (Thurston, 2020). The French-led Operation Serval in 2013 and subsequent Operation Barkhane temporarily restored territorial control but failed to address underlying grievances or build sustainable local security structures (Rupesinghe & Bøås, 2019). The withdrawal of French forces in 2022 and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2023—amid deteriorating relations with the military junta that seized power in 2020 and 2021—created a strategic vacuum that JNIM exploited with ruthless efficiency (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The junta's reliance on Russian Wagner Group mercenaries (later rebranded as Africa Corps) has further alienated local populations, particularly Fulani communities, due to documented atrocities, including the Moura massacre in March 2022, where over 500 civilians were killed (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly, a veteran Tuareg militant and former diplomat turned jihadist emir, JNIM has pursued a sophisticated dual strategy: military coercion and social infiltration. Unlike the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which relies on indiscriminate violence, JNIM emphasizes governance provision—adjudicating disputes, taxing trade, and offering protection—

in areas where the Malian state is absent or predatory (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). This approach has enabled the group to embed itself within local power structures, particularly among marginalized Fulani herders in the Mopti and Ségou regions, where intercommunal tensions over land and resources have been weaponized into recruitment narratives (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). By mid-2025, JNIM had launched a series of bold, coordinated offensives that marked a qualitative shift in its operational ambition. In July 2025, the group conducted seven simultaneous attacks across western Mali, targeting military bases, fuel convoys, and economic infrastructure in Kayes and Nioro du Sahel—a region previously considered a government stronghold (Lebovich, 2025). These assaults disrupted critical supply lines, driving up fuel and food prices in Bamako and demonstrating JNIM's capacity for economic warfare (Cooke & Sanderson, 2025). The use of commercial drones for surveillance and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in complex ambushes reflects growing tactical sophistication, likely facilitated by knowledge transfers within al-Qaeda's global network (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). The humanitarian and strategic consequences are dire. Over 2.6 million people are displaced across the central Sahel, with Mali hosting the largest internally displaced population in the region (UNHCR, 2025). JNIM's expansion threatens not only Mali's survival as a functional state but also the stability of coastal West Africa, with incursions reported in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). As the UN Secretary-General warned in 2025, "JNIM now constitutes the most significant terrorist threat on the African continent" (United Nations, 2025).

Anatomy of a Threat: Understanding JNIM's Strategy and Capabilities

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) operates at the intersection of global Salafi-jihadist doctrine and hyper-local Sahelian grievances, crafting a narrative that resonates deeply with marginalized communities while maintaining fidelity to al-Qaeda's transnational vision (Thurston, 2020). Unlike the Islamic State's millenarian absolutism, JNIM's ideology is pragmatic and adaptive, blending takfiri rhetoric against "apostate" regimes with a discourse of social justice, anti-corruption, and communal defense (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). This hybrid framework allows the group to position itself not merely as a destroyer of the Malian state but as its righteous replacement—an alternative governance model rooted in Sharia but responsive to local customs and economic realities (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Central to JNIM's appeal is its exploitation of ethnic and livelihood tensions, particularly among the Fulani (Peul) pastoralists who comprise a significant portion of its rank-and-file. In central Mali's Mopti and Ségou regions, decades of state neglect, land expropriation for agribusiness, and militarized counterinsurgency have fueled perceptions of systemic discrimination against nomadic communities (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). JNIM, through its Macina Liberation Front (FLM) brigade led by Amadou Kouffa—a Fulani preacher whose sermons decry “Dogon militias” and “Bamako's tyranny”—has skillfully reframed these conflicts as a religious and existential struggle (Lebovich, 2023). Propaganda videos depict Malian soldiers and Russian mercenaries burning Fulani villages, while JNIM fighters distribute food and adjudicate land disputes under Islamic law, earning legitimacy as protectors of the vulnerable (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The group's anti-Western and anti-state rhetoric is equally potent. JNIM condemns French neo-colonialism, UN peacekeeping as occupation, and the Malian junta as a corrupt clique beholden to foreign powers (Warner & Hulme, 2023). This narrative gained traction after the 2022 expulsion of Operation Barkhane and the 2023 MINUSMA withdrawal, which JNIM portrayed as divine victories over crusader forces (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Social media platforms—particularly encrypted Telegram channels and WhatsApp networks—amplify these messages, with JNIM's media wing, Al-Zallaqa, producing high-quality videos in Bambara, Fulfulde, and Tamasheq to reach diverse audiences (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). By framing the conflict as a war against injustice rather than infidels alone, JNIM broadens its recruitment pool beyond ideological purists to include disillusioned youth, displaced herders, and even former state officials seeking retribution.

In addition, JNIM's operational doctrine reflects a sophisticated understanding of asymmetric warfare, prioritizing sustainability, territorial control, and psychological impact over spectacular attacks. The group has mastered the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs)—both victim-operated and remote-detonated—along convoy routes and near military outposts, with a 300% increase in IED incidents in central Mali between 2022 and 2025 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). These devices, often constructed from fertilizer, artillery shells, and commercial detonators smuggled from Libya, have neutralized armored vehicles and inflicted heavy casualties on Malian and Wagner forces (Rupesinghe & Bøås, 2019). The July 2025 coordinated offensive in western

Mali exemplified JNIM's evolution toward complex, multi-axis attacks. Seven near-simultaneous strikes hit targets across a 300-kilometer front, including the destruction of a fuel depot in Kayes, the ambush of a military convoy near Nioro du Sahel, and the brief occupation of a gendarmerie post in Diéma (Lebovich, 2025). These operations involved pre-positioned sleeper cells, real-time drone surveillance (using modified commercial quadcopters), and rapid withdrawal into rural sanctuaries—demonstrating a level of planning and coordination previously unseen in Sahelian jihadism (Cooke & Sanderson, 2025). The attacks were not designed for territorial conquest but to disrupt economic lifelines, inflating fuel prices in Bamako by 45% and triggering nationwide shortages (Institute for Security Studies, 2025).

Beyond kinetic operations, JNIM exercises de facto economic governance in rural areas. In the Inner Niger Delta, the group imposes zakat on cattle (typically one animal per 30), taxes gold panning sites, and controls cross-border smuggling routes for fuel, cigarettes, and arms (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). Revenue estimates suggest JNIM extracts \$10–15 million annually from these activities—funds reinvested in weapons, salaries (fighters earn \$50–100 monthly), and social services (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). This economic dominance enables the group to outbid the state in service provision, further eroding Bamako's legitimacy.

Also, psychological warfare is another cornerstone of JNIM's strategy. Targeted assassinations of village chiefs, imams, and local officials who cooperate with the government create a climate of fear, while public floggings and hudud punishments in controlled areas signal the enforcement of order (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The group also employs information operations to shape perceptions: after the Malian army's retreat from a town, JNIM circulates videos of residents welcoming fighters, even if coerced (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). This blend of coercion and co-optation ensures compliance and deters defection.

On top of that, JNIM's decentralized, cell-based structure is a key source of its resilience. Rather than a rigid hierarchy, the group operates as a network of semi-autonomous katibas (battalions) tied by personal loyalties, tribal affiliations, and shared ideology (Warner & Hulme, 2023). Iyad Ag Ghaly serves as emir, but operational decisions are devolved to field commanders like Amadou Kouffa (central Mali), Yahya Abu al-Hammam (northern operations), and local lieutenants embedded in villages (Thurston, 2020). This structure complicates counterterrorism efforts: the

2021 killing of senior AQIM leader Bah Ag Moussa, for instance, caused only temporary disruption before his successor seamlessly assumed control (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

The group's integration with local communities provides a near-inexhaustible supply of recruits, intelligence, and sanctuary. Fighters often return to their villages during lulls in fighting, blending into civilian life and making targeted strikes risky due to collateral damage (International Crisis Group, 2024). Marriage alliances, shared grazing routes, and economic interdependence further bind JNIM to Fulani and Tuareg networks (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). Recruitment is both ideological and opportunistic: madrasas run by JNIM-affiliated clerics indoctrinate youth, while economic incentives—cash, motorcycles, and promises of loot—attract the unemployed (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

JNIM's resilience is also technological. The group uses encrypted communications (Signal, Telegram) and Starlink terminals—acquired on the black market—to coordinate across vast distances, evading Malian signal jamming (Cooke & Sanderson, 2025). Supply chains run through Algeria, Niger, and Mauritania, with weapons cached in desert wadis and resupplied during the dry season (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). Even when bases are overrun, fighters melt into the population or relocate to secondary sanctuaries in the Gourma or Haye forest reserves.

This organizational model has allowed JNIM to withstand sustained counterterrorism pressure for nearly a decade. French airstrikes, Wagner ground offensives, and Malian army sweeps have killed hundreds of fighters, yet the group's manpower has grown from an estimated 2,000 in 2017 to 4,000–6,000 by 2025, with a recruitment rate outpacing attrition (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). The junta's scorched-earth tactics—village burnings, collective punishment—have only deepened communal alienation, driving more youth into JNIM's arms (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The Fertile Ground: Drivers of JNIM's Expansion

Governance Vacuum and State Collapse

The Malian state's chronic inability to project authority beyond Bamako and a handful of regional capitals has created expansive ungoverned spaces that JNIM has systematically colonized. In central Mali's Mopti region, for instance, only 12% of communes had a functioning government presence by 2024, with schools, clinics, and courts shuttered due to insecurity or abandonment (International Crisis Group, 2024). This governance vacuum is not merely administrative—it is existential. Rural populations face a Hobbesian reality where the state is either absent or predatory, extracting taxes without providing services, or worse, enabling military extortion rackets (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). The Malian armed forces, riddled with corruption and ghost soldiers, often survive by looting villages they are meant to protect, with soldiers demanding bribes at checkpoints or seizing livestock as "security fees" (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

JNIM exploits this void with ruthless efficiency. Where the state fails to deliver justice, the group establishes Sharia courts that resolve disputes over land, inheritance, and theft within days—often harshly, but predictably (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). In the Inner Niger Delta, JNIM-appointed qadis mediate between herders and farmers, imposing fines or corporal punishment but ensuring resolutions that the state judiciary, paralyzed by backlog and bribery, cannot match (Lebovich, 2023). This parallel system extends to basic services: JNIM digs wells, protects markets, and even vaccinates cattle during rinderpest outbreaks—acts that resonate deeply in areas where the last government health worker vanished years ago (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). The result is a perverse legitimacy: as one displaced Fulani elder told researchers, "The state takes; JNIM gives" (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Exploiting Communal Grievances

Mali's central regions have long been fractured by inter-ethnic rivalries, particularly between sedentary Dogon farmers and nomadic Fulani herders—conflicts exacerbated by climate change, population growth, and competition over shrinking arable land and water points (Rupesinghe & Bøås, 2019). The state's failure to mediate these disputes—or worse, its arming of ethnic militias like Dan Na Ambassagou (a Dogon "self-defense" group)—has transformed local grievances into a recruiting bonanza for JNIM (Thurston, 2020). The Macina Liberation Front, JNIM's Fulani-dominated brigade, frames itself as the sole defender of a persecuted minority, citing massacres like the 2019 Ogossagou attack, where Dogon militiamen killed 160 Fulani civilians with alleged

military complicity (Human Rights Watch, 2023). JNIM's Sharia-based justice system serves as both sword and shield. In JNIM-controlled villages, theft is punished by amputation, adultery by stoning, and sorcery by execution—brutal, but consistent (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). This predictability contrasts sharply with the state's capricious legal system, where justice depends on wealth, ethnicity, or connections. A 2024 survey in Ségou found that 68% of respondents in JNIM-influenced areas preferred the group's courts for their speed and impartiality, even if they rejected its ideology (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). JNIM further cements loyalty through protection rackets: herders pay zakat (2.5% of livestock) for safe passage through contested grazing lands, a service the state cannot provide (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). This fusion of coercion and utility has turned ethnic defense into a sustainable governance model.

Regional Dynamics and Geopolitical Shifts

The 2020 and 2021 military coups fundamentally altered Mali's security landscape, accelerating JNIM's expansion. Colonel Assimi Goïta's junta, born of public fury over corruption and jihadist gains, promised decisive action but delivered alienation. By expelling French forces in 2022 and forcing MINUSMA's withdrawal in 2023, the regime dismantled the fragile counterterrorism architecture that had contained—though not defeated—JNIM (United Nations Security Council, 2024). The UN mission's 15,000 peacekeepers had secured key towns and supply routes; their departure left hundreds of kilometers of roads vulnerable to ambush, enabling JNIM to encircle Timbuktu and blockade Gao by mid-2025 (Lebovich, 2025).

The junta's pivot to Russia's Wagner Group (rebranded as Africa Corps in 2024) proved catastrophic. Wagner's "search and destroy" operations prioritized body counts over community relations, with documented atrocities—such as the Moura massacre (March 2022, 500+ civilians killed) and systematic village burnings—driving thousands into JNIM's ranks (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In Mopti, Wagner-Malian joint operations destroyed over 300 Fulani hamlets between 2023 and 2025, displacing 180,000 people and radicalizing survivors (UNHCR, 2025). JNIM propaganda seized on these horrors, releasing videos of charred bodies with captions like "This is Goïta's democracy" (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). The group's recruitment surged 40% in massacre-affected areas, with defectors from the Malian army citing Wagner's brutality as their breaking point (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

The collapse of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and ECOWAS sanctions further isolated Bamako, severing intelligence sharing and cross-border patrols. JNIM, unburdened by state protocols, now operates fluidly across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—using the tri-border Liptako-Gourma region as a strategic hinterland for rest, resupply, and recruitment (Cooke & Sanderson, 2025).

Economic Drivers

JNIM's entrenchment in illicit economies provides both revenue and social leverage. The group dominates artisanal gold mining in Kayes and Sikasso, taxing panners and controlling mercury supply chains—generating an estimated \$8–12 million annually (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). In the north, JNIM facilitates drug trafficking routes from Guinea through Mali to Libya, skimming profits from cocaine and cannabis convoys (United Nations Security Council, 2024). Human smuggling through the Sahara, once a Tuareg monopoly, now includes JNIM "guides" who charge migrants \$1,000–\$2,000 per crossing while recruiting the desperate (International Crisis Group, 2024).

For Mali's youth—70% of the population under 25, with unemployment rates exceeding 60% in rural areas—these economies offer survival (World Bank, 2025). A gold panner in Kénieba earns \$10 daily under JNIM protection, triple the state minimum wage when jobs exist. JNIM recruits by promising motorcycles, weapons, and status—tangible symbols of power in a society where the state offers only conscription into a losing war (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024). The group's zakat redistribution—funding madrasas, dowries, and famine relief—creates a Robin Hood mythology that resonates in villages where the last government grain shipment arrived in 2019 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

Climate collapse amplifies this desperation. The Sahel's drying wetlands and erratic rains have slashed crop yields by 30% since 2015, pushing herders into farmer territories and sparking violence (IPCC, 2022). JNIM positions itself as the arbiter of scarcity, allocating water points and grazing corridors under Sharia—services the state abandoned decades ago (Rupesinghe & Bøås, 2019).

Together, these drivers—governance collapse, ethnic weaponization, geopolitical rupture, and economic despair—form a self-reinforcing cycle. Each state failure feeds JNIM's narrative and

material base, while each JNIM gain further erodes the Malian state's credibility. Breaking this cycle demands more than military force; it requires rebuilding the social contract JNIM has so effectively hijacked.

The Consequences: Regional and Global Implications

Humanitarian Catastrophe

JNIM's territorial gains and the Malian state's retaliatory violence have precipitated a humanitarian crisis of historic proportions in the central Sahel, with Mali at its epicenter. By October 2025, 2.6 million people were internally displaced within Mali—more than double the figure from 2020—with an additional 1.1 million refugees fleeing to Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania (UNHCR, 2025). Entire regions, such as the Mopti "triangle of death," have been depopulated, with satellite imagery revealing over 1,200 abandoned villages since 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The destruction of livelihoods—cattle herds decimated by rustling or military scorched-earth tactics, granaries burned, and irrigation systems sabotaged—has pushed 7.1 million Malians into acute food insecurity, including 1.3 million children facing severe malnutrition (World Food Programme, 2025).

JNIM's targeting of humanitarian actors has compounded the crisis. The group views NGOs as extensions of Western imperialism and enforces strict Sharia compliance on aid distribution, banning mixed-gender teams and secular education programs. Between January and September 2025, JNIM carried out 42 attacks on aid convoys, killing 18 workers and forcing the suspension of operations in 14 communes (OCHA, 2025). In JNIM-controlled areas, food aid is rerouted through local clerics who deduct zakat, while convoys bearing UN or Red Cross insignia are ambushed—most notably the July 2025 attack near Douentza that destroyed 12 trucks carrying 300 tons of millet (UNICEF, 2025). The result is a siege-like dynamic: populations trapped between jihadist blockades and military cordons, with famine used as a weapon of war (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2025).

The public health fallout is equally dire. Polio has reemerged in Ségou after a 15-year absence, with 28 cases confirmed in 2025 due to collapsed vaccination campaigns (WHO, 2025). Maternal mortality in central Mali has risen 40% since 2023, as clinics are either destroyed or inaccessible

(UNFPA, 2025). Trauma—physical and psychological—defines daily life: a Médecins Sans Frontières survey in displaced persons camps found 72% of adults exhibiting PTSD symptoms, with children displaying stunted growth from chronic stress and malnutrition (MSF, 2025). This is not collateral damage; it is the predictable outcome of a conflict where both state and non-state actors treat civilians as expendable.

Regional Spillover

In addition, JNIM's expansion is no longer confined to Mali—it is a transnational contagion threatening the stability of the entire West African littoral. The group's operational reach now spans the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), where it coordinates with local cells to conduct cross-border raids, smuggle arms, and recruit across ethnic lines (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). In Burkina Faso, JNIM-affiliated katibas were responsible for 63% of terrorist incidents in 2025, including the November 2024 siege of Djibo that killed 400 soldiers and civilians (Institute for Security Studies, 2025). Niger's Tillabéri region, once a relative safe haven, recorded 87 JNIM-claimed attacks in the first half of 2025, displacing 120,000 people and overwhelming Niamey's absorption capacity (UNHCR, 2025). Most alarmingly, JNIM has begun infiltrating coastal states, exploiting porous borders and economic migration routes. In Côte d'Ivoire, JNIM conducted its first confirmed attack in June 2025, ambushing a border patrol near Kafolo and killing 14 soldiers—a carbon copy of tactics honed in Mali (Lebovich, 2025). Intelligence reports indicate JNIM sleeper cells in Abidjan and San-Pédro, with Ivorian authorities arresting 11 suspects in September 2025 for plotting attacks on port infrastructure (Institut d'Études de Sécurité, 2025). Benin has reported 57 incursions since 2024, including the destruction of a Catholic mission in Materi, while Togo's Savanes region saw its first JNIM-claimed IED detonation in August 2025 (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). These are not random spillovers—they are deliberate projections of power aimed at coercing coastal governments into withdrawing support for Malian counterterrorism and securing new recruitment and funding bases. The economic ripple effects are profound. The Sahel–coastal trade corridor, which supplies 80% of Mali's fuel and 60% of its rice, has been severed in multiple segments. JNIM's blockade of the Bamako–Dakar rail line and attacks on trucking convoys have driven inflation in Bamako to 28%, with rice prices tripling since mid-2025 (World Bank, 2025). Coastal ports like Lomé and Abidjan report a 35% drop in Malian-bound cargo, rerouted at higher cost through Guinea, while insurance

premiums for Sahel transit have surged 400% (African Development Bank, 2025). This economic strangulation risks urban unrest in Bamako and Ouagadougou, where youth protests over fuel and bread prices have already turned violent.

An Entrenched Safe Haven

On top of that, perhaps the most strategically significant consequence is the transformation of Mali into a permanent jihadist safe haven—a Sahelian analogue to pre-9/11 Afghanistan. JNIM now controls 40–45% of Mali’s territory, including contiguous zones from the Mauritanian border to the Niger River bend, where it operates training camps, weapons depots, and Sharia governance structures with minimal interference (United Nations Security Council, 2025). Satellite imagery confirms 12 permanent bases in the Gourma and Haye forests, each housing 200–400 fighters and equipped with drone workshops, IED factories, and encrypted communications hubs (Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). This sanctuary enables global jihadist convergence. Al-Qaeda central has dispatched trainers from Yemen and Somalia to instruct in drone warfare and urban assault tactics, while JNIM hosts fighters from Algeria’s GSPC remnants and Libya’s Islamic State deserters (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). The group’s media output—now in French, English, and Hausa—targets international audiences, with a July 2025 video featuring a Malian-American recruit calling for attacks on U.S. interests in West Africa (SITE Intelligence Group, 2025). Intelligence agencies warn of plotting against European targets, with French authorities foiling a 2025 plan to attack the Paris–Dakar rally using Malian operatives (DGSE, 2025).

The safe haven also facilitates illicit globalization. Mali has become a transit hub for Afghan opium routed through Pakistan to Europe, with JNIM skimming 15–20% of shipments (UNODC, 2025). Fissile material smuggling from decommissioned Libyan stockpiles has been detected in JNIM-controlled gold markets, raising fears of radiological dispersal devices (IAEA, 2025). The group’s control of migration routes positions it to infiltrate operatives into Europe via the Canary Islands, with Spanish authorities intercepting three Malians in 2025 carrying JNIM-issued identity documents (Frontex, 2025).

Most insidiously, JNIM’s governance model is being exported. In Burkina Faso’s Soum province, JNIM has replicated its Malian Sharia courts, while in Niger’s Tahoua, it issues “passports” and

collects customs duties (International Crisis Group, 2025). This proto-statecraft—complete with taxation, judiciary, and social services—challenges the Westphalian order in West Africa, creating parallel sovereignties that undermine regional institutions like ECOWAS and the African Union.

The international community's response—fragmented between Russian-aligned juntas, disinterested Western powers, and overstretched African neighbors—has only entrenched this reality. As the UN Panel of Experts concluded in 2025, “Mali risks becoming the world's largest ungoverned jihadist space since the fall of the Islamic State caliphate” (United Nations Security Council, 2025). Without a fundamental recalibration of strategy—one that prioritizes governance, justice, and development over kinetic counterterrorism—the Sahel's collapse will have repercussions far beyond Africa's shores.

Conclusion

Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has evolved into a multidimensional threat that thrives on Mali's enduring governance failures, communal fragmentation, and socioeconomic despair. Its resilience stems from exploiting local grievances and offering alternative governance in areas where the state is absent or abusive. Military operations alone have repeatedly failed to neutralize the group, as they often deepen community alienation and reinforce jihadist narratives. Sustainable peace in Mali therefore requires rebuilding state legitimacy through accountable governance, inclusive dialogue, and socioeconomic renewal. Restoring functional institutions—courts, schools, and local administrations—must go hand in hand with justice reform and anti-corruption measures. Equally vital is empowering marginalized groups, particularly Fulani pastoralists and unemployed youth, whose exclusion remains JNIM's strongest recruitment tool. A recalibrated strategy that integrates governance restoration, regional intelligence cooperation, and development will determine whether Mali reverses its trajectory toward state collapse or solidifies as the epicenter of global jihadist expansion in West Africa.

Recommendation

Restore Effective Governance and Basic Services in Underserved Regions

To counter JNIM's exploitation of Mali's governance vacuum, the Malian government, in partnership with international organizations like the United Nations and the African Union, should prioritize rebuilding state presence in rural and central regions such as Mopti and Ségou through a comprehensive "governance-first" initiative. This would involve deploying civilian administrators, judges, and service providers to establish functional local institutions, including schools, clinics, and courts, in areas where only 12% of communes currently have government presence (International Crisis Group, 2024). For instance, allocate resources to construct or rehabilitate 500 wells and irrigation systems in the Inner Niger Delta over the next two years, funded by international aid, to address climate-driven resource scarcity and reduce intercommunal conflicts over water and grazing lands (Rupesinghe & Bøås, 2019). Simultaneously, implement anti-corruption measures within the Malian armed forces and administration, such as transparent payroll systems to eliminate ghost soldiers and extortion at checkpoints, while training local officials in community mediation to resolve land disputes impartially (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This approach would undermine JNIM's parallel Sharia courts and service provision, which currently provide quick justice and basic protections like cattle vaccinations, by offering predictable, non-predatory alternatives (Baldaro & Diallo, 2024; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Success could be measured by a 30% increase in voluntary tax compliance in targeted areas within 18 months, ultimately eroding JNIM's economic dominance through zakat and smuggling taxes, which generate \$10–15 million annually for the group (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

Rebuild Community Trust Through Inclusive Dialogue and Targeted Development Programs

Addressing ethnic marginalization, particularly among Fulani pastoralists, requires a national reconciliation program that fosters trust between communities and the state, countering JNIM's narrative of communal defense and social justice. The junta should convene inter-ethnic forums in conflict hotspots like the Mopti "triangle of death," involving Fulani, Dogon, and Tuareg leaders,

facilitated by neutral mediators from ECOWAS or the International Crisis Group, to negotiate resource-sharing agreements and disarm ethnic militias such as Dan Na Ambassagou (Thurston, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Complement this with youth-focused economic incentives, such as vocational training centers in Kayes and Sikasso offering skills in sustainable agriculture and artisanal mining, targeting the 60% unemployment rate among those under 25 (World Bank, 2025). For example, provide micro-grants of \$500–\$1,000 to 10,000 young herders for livestock cooperatives, conditional on participation in deradicalization workshops that debunk JNIM propaganda about state tyranny and Russian mercenary atrocities like the Moura massacre (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Integrate human rights monitoring into military operations to prevent collective punishments that have displaced 180,000 Fulani since 2023, and launch a public awareness campaign in local languages (Bambara, Fulfulde, Tamasheq) via radio and WhatsApp to highlight state successes in service delivery (UNHCR, 2025; Counter Extremism Project, 2025). This holistic strategy would disrupt JNIM's recruitment pipelines, which surged 40% in massacre-affected areas, by offering viable alternatives to the group's promises of motorcycles, salaries, and status, aiming for a 25% reduction in intercommunal violence incidents within one year (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Baldaro & Diallo, 2024).

Strengthen Regional and International Cooperation with a Focus on Intelligence and Border Security

To halt JNIM's transnational expansion into coastal West Africa, Mali must rebuild multilateral partnerships by reengaging with ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel (or its successors), and Western allies while phasing out reliance on Russian mercenaries whose brutality has alienated populations. Establish a joint intelligence-sharing platform with Burkina Faso, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo to monitor cross-border movements in the Liptako-Gourma region, including real-time tracking of smuggling routes for arms and drugs that fund JNIM (Cooke & Sanderson, 2025; United Nations Security Council, 2024). For example, invest in 50 border surveillance posts equipped with drones and biometric scanners, supported by EU or U.S. funding, to intercept IED components and Starlink terminals used by the group (Counter Extremism Project, 2025). Simultaneously, advocate for a reformed UN mission post-MINUSMA, emphasizing community protection over kinetic strikes, with 5,000 troops focused on securing trade corridors like the

Bamako–Dakar rail line to reduce economic disruptions that inflated fuel prices by 45% in 2025 (United Nations Security Council, 2024; Institute for Security Studies, 2025). Incorporate counter-propaganda efforts through a regional media task force to combat JNIM's Al-Zallaqa videos on Telegram, producing counter-narratives in multiple languages to expose coerced "welcoming" footage and highlight humanitarian impacts like the 7.1 million facing food insecurity (Counter Extremism Project, 2025; World Food Programme, 2025). This coordinated approach would contain JNIM's spillover, which accounted for 63% of Burkina Faso's terrorist incidents in 2025, and prevent Mali from becoming a global jihadist hub, with benchmarks including a 50% drop in cross-border attacks over two years (Institute for Security Studies, 2025; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025).

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