

ISSUE 1

**NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND
ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN WEST AFRICA**

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



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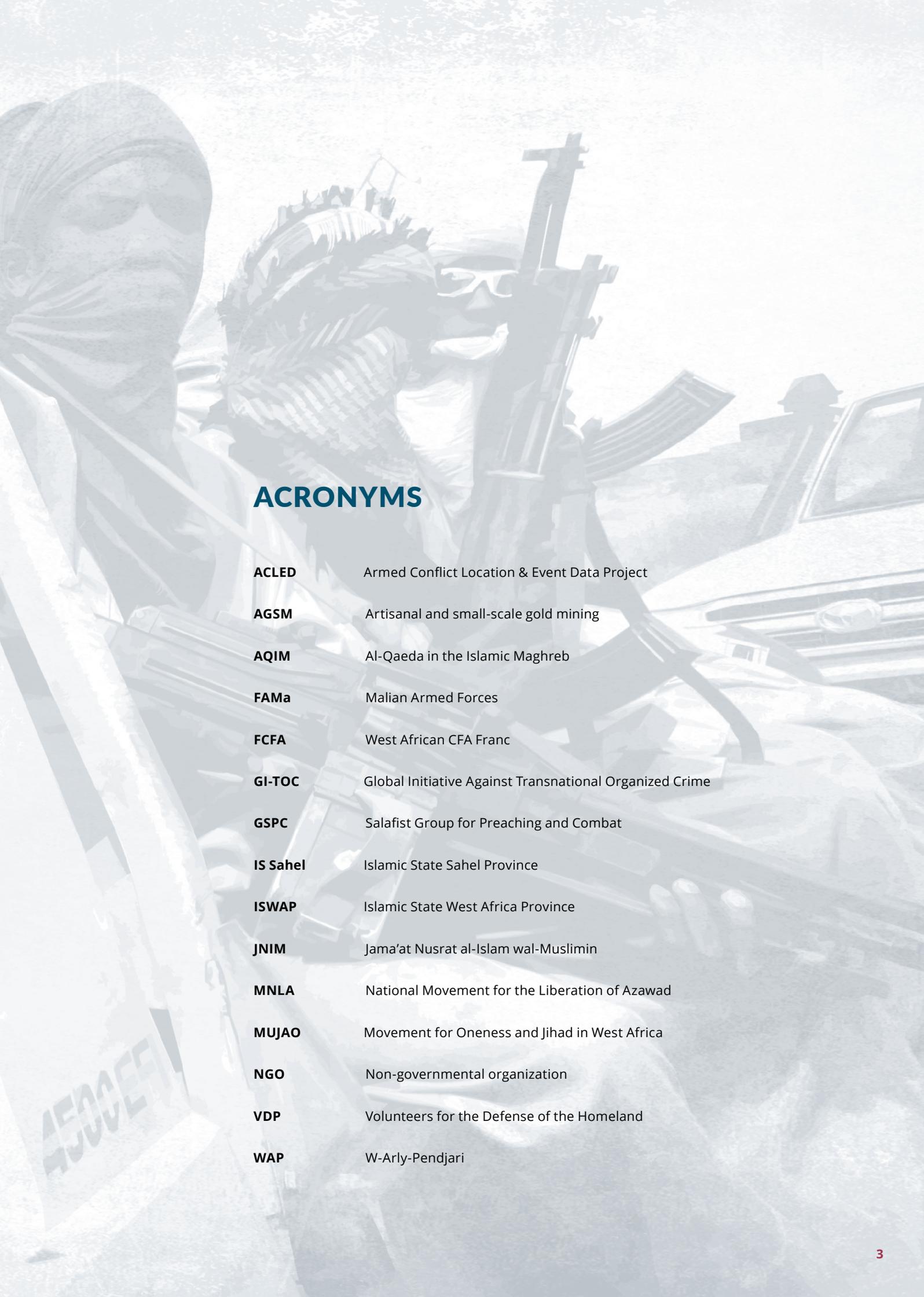
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The background of the page is a grayscale photograph of several individuals, likely militants, wearing head coverings and sunglasses. They are holding rifles, and one is prominently holding a large machine gun. They appear to be in the back of a vehicle, possibly a truck or SUV. The overall tone is somber and military-oriented.

ACRONYMS

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AGSM	Artisanal and small-scale gold mining
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
FAMa	Malian Armed Forces
FCFA	West African CFA Franc
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
IS Sahel	Islamic State Sahel Province
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad
MUJAO	Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organization
VDP	Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland
WAP	W-Arly-Pendjari



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Photo: WhatsApp

This report analyzes the operations and organizational structure of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel region of Africa, focusing on the group's engagement with illicit economies and tactical use of economic warfare. Specifically, the report emphasizes the central role of illicit economies in JNIM's governance strategies, and in financing and resourcing the group's armed struggle. It also tracks how JNIM has evolved organizationally, with these internal changes dictating shifts in its involvement in regional illicit economies. These political and organizational changes, and the group's highly strategic engagement with illicit economies, have underpinned JNIM's expansion into new geographies, its retention of influence in areas of control, and its resilience to disruption.

Further, the report provides further insights into JNIM's strategies for expansion and population control, and argues that understanding the role of JNIM within illicit economies is crucial to gaining insights into the group's governance, financing, and resourcing, as well as its strategic objectives across the central Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and the northernmost areas of several West African littoral states.

JNIM's organizational structure balances unity and central power with local adaptation and flexibility, which has allowed the group to build a cohesive yet adaptable organization. However, the group's exponential growth since its formation strains ongoing cohesion, and operational and tactical objectives differ due to differences within the vast territories in which the group operates. JNIM exerts control and authority over local populations by force using both violent and non-violent means, such as providing civilian services, justice, and dispute mediation; these means vary depending on the context.

This unified and locally flexible strategy is also evident in JNIM's strategic engagement with local licit and illicit economies. While JNIM's engagement in illicit activities is intimately linked to the diverse financing and resourcing of JNIM's war economy, it goes beyond merely accumulating financial resources. JNIM utilizes these resources to enhance its legitimacy and to gain

popular support while furthering its strategic and governance objectives. Further, JNIM's quasi-regulatory role in certain illicit economies – including in enabling access to some state-prohibited resources – is central to its positioning as an alternative governance provider, posited as preferable to regulatory regimes imposed by the state.

The under-explored dimension of economic warfare is highlighted in the report as a vital component of JNIM's overall strategy, which encompasses the destruction and sabotage of critical and public infrastructure, the establishment of checkpoints along transport routes, attacks on commercial and logistic convoys, the imposition of embargoes and blockades, and other tactics such as forced population evictions. The economic warfare dimension of JNIM's strategy significantly overlaps with the organization's effort to expand its competitive systems of control over the population, through which JNIM seeks to weaken the state and impair its authority.

The report concludes by forecasting the trajectory of JNIM's expansion, especially in light of evolving state responses. Given its current organizational structure and adaptive strategies, JNIM appears poised to continue its growth and influence. The group's strategic use of illicit economies and economic warfare serves as a potent driver of its territorial control strategies, and these elements are expected to remain integral to JNIM's operational blueprint.

As state actors devise their own strategies to respond to JNIM's activities, the group's adaptability will be put to the test. The effectiveness of these state responses, in turn, will hinge on a profound understanding of JNIM's organizational dynamics, its strategic engagement with local economies, and the ways in which it navigates and leverages the complex socio-political landscapes within which it operates. Anticipating the future of JNIM necessitates a sustained and nuanced focus on these factors. This report aims to contribute to such an understanding, providing a foundation upon which more effective and informed strategies can be developed to address the challenges posed by JNIM in the Sahel region.



INTRODUCTION

Since its formation, the armed group known as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Support Group for Islam and Muslims, or JNIM) has faced growing pressure from counter-militancy campaigns spearheaded by international, regional, and national militaries, as well as by self-defense and pro-government militias. Nevertheless, the group has demonstrated resilience and adaptability through regrouping and reorganizing, while maintaining its capabilities and expanding its operational reach. It has proven able to advance its expansionist agenda while resisting numerous efforts to counter it. Illicit economies – the resources, financing, and legitimacy drawn from them – are a central element of this resilience.

This report examines the factors that have led to JNIM's success as an armed group. Specifically, it considers JNIM's structural evolution as an armed group, and ventures that it is increasingly unified and strategically coherent, rather than the loose coalition of armed groups that it is often made out to be. This growing unity is reflected not only in its military tactics, but also in its engagement with the civilian population and the Sahel's economies – specifically, its illicit economies. Accordingly, this report tracks JNIM's shifting engagement with illicit economies over time – a crucial element of JNIM's evolving organizational and tactical framework.

At the same time, JNIM has retained enough local adaptability and internal diversity to be able to appeal to different local interests and ethnic constituencies. This report illustrates the

ways in which JNIM's structure helps and hinders the group in the domains that matter to its objectives – as a military actor, as a governance provider and competitor for civilian loyalty, and as an economic actor.

This report first reviews JNIM's structural evolution and recent history, how these structural reforms have been implemented in its military conduct, and how they have shaped engagement with illicit economies. In regard to the civilian population, JNIM's attempts to exercise governance¹ over civilians are explored, as is the group's strategic use of violence, displacement, and economic warfare.² In each of these realms, it is found that JNIM, for all its regional variation, has a fairly common tactical and strategic approach, which has been important to its advancement and implantation throughout the region.

This report also argues that JNIM's integration into local illicit economies³ is critical to its advance, not only in terms of financing itself but also in its efforts to govern civilians. Illicit economies represent a means through which JNIM can forge social ties in new areas it enters, by offering civilians a means of income, while still denying the state any control over local resources. This enhances its legitimacy as an alternative governance provider, particularly in areas where the state has attempted to clamp down on, or at least exclude people from, illicit activities (but without ensuring the provision of formal alternatives).

Methodology

This report marks the first installment in a series of reports examining the central role of illicit economies within the broader spectrum of armed group governance. This series is a collaborative effort between ACLED and the GI-TOC, stemming from a growing awareness of the central role illicit economies play in the strategies of armed groups in the Sahel, and West and Central Africa.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding, this report draws on a broad array of primary and secondary sources. It builds upon on-the-ground data collection conducted in Mali and Burkina Faso since 2021, and research by ACLED and the GI-TOC over the past two years. Simultaneously, it reflects years-long discussions with monitors in both countries.

Interviews spanned a diverse range of individuals, including armed group members, community members and networks

involved in trafficking; those with specific knowledge of illicit economies, including traders involved in cattle rustling, kidnapping negotiators, and truck drivers implicated in the trafficking of fuel and vehicles, alongside a host of stakeholders from the international community to local organizations and associations; and victims of violence from armed groups and organized crime.

Alongside these primary sources, a comprehensive review of gray literature, academic, and media sources was undertaken, with a particular focus on monitoring and analyzing JNIM media channels and communications. Key to this research is the extraction and analysis of ACLED data, constant monitoring efforts of ACLED, and research from the GI-TOC's Observatory of Illicit Economies in West Africa.



ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF JNIM

From AQIM to JNIM

Al-Qaeda's Sahelian branch, JNIM, was formed in Mali in early March 2017 by merging several preexisting militant groups, including Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Sahara Region, al-Murabitun, and Katiba Macina. Militant commanders known for their leading role in the jihadist militant groups in the Sahel represented each of these groups at the merger announcement. JNIM's history has led many to view it as an amalgamation of disparate armed groups consisting of several "cells," or individual units acting according to different interests.⁴ In fact, JNIM would evolve from a patchwork of several jihadist units and its respective leaderships into a versatile and complex armed group vying for supremacy in the central Sahel.

The formalization of JNIM united the aforementioned groups under the slogan "one banner, one group, one emir."⁵ Iyad Ag Ghaly, a longtime Tuareg rebel, nobleman, and politician, who founded the largely Tuareg jihadist group Ansar Dine in November 2011, was installed as supreme leader of JNIM. Ag Ghaly's appointment as *emir* (or commander) of the alliance underscored a desire to give al-Qaeda's Sahel franchise a more local profile. Appointing leaders with roots in their areas of operation has been critical to the course of JNIM's insurgency project. By strategically "localizing" the struggle (previously spearheaded by the Algeria-based AQIM) through local and ethnically diverse representatives from the Tuareg, Fulani, and Arab communities, JNIM has been able to cultivate influence across a swathe of ethnically diverse territories.⁶

This "strategic localization" of JNIM's multi-ethnic political messaging is evident in each phase of the group's expansion. Members of Ag Ghaly's Ifoghas tribe, including his close relatives, played a significant role in AQIM's earlier implantation in the Adrar Mountains, in Mali's Kidal region, as part of the Tuareg-dominated Katibat al-Ansar (also known as Saryat al-Ansar) in early 2007.⁷ The extensive family connections of Ag Ghaly and his kin were instrumental in Islamizing Tuareg separatism to ensure a steady stream of recruits and facilitate

AQIM's expansion in northern Mali.⁸ Bringing al-Murabitun, Ansar Dine, and AQIM into the JNIM fold also ensured the retention of experienced jihadist fighters (particularly from AQIM's Algerian parent group), key religious authorities, and representatives from other key ethnic constituencies in northern Mali.

Illicit economies played a key role in the development of northern Malian politics, and equally, were a critical influence in shaping JNIM's forerunner groups. Among the ethnic constituencies brought into the fold by JNIM were the Tilemsi Arabs, who are known to have had long-standing involvement in both licit and illicit trade, and who helped JNIM's forerunner groups to ingratiate themselves into northern Mali's illicit economies. For instance, in Gao, there was a complex relationship between the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (commonly known by its French acronym, MUJAO) and the Tilemsi Arabs, especially the Lemhar tribe, who are key actors in drug trafficking operations, alongside other licit and illicit trades.⁹ Certain Tilemsi businessmen, involved in both drug trafficking and kidnapping for ransom, were reportedly significant financial backers of MUJAO.¹⁰

This collaboration, however, did not necessarily mean direct involvement in drug trafficking with the Lemhar tribe by the ideological leaders of the jihadist movement. While some Arabs joined MUJAO driven by ideological motives, most Lemhar operators supported the movement primarily through contributions of vehicles and fuel. Some sources suggest these in-kind contributions were in fact the fruits of an "investment" paid by MUJAO to traffickers, who would then buy arms, fuel, or vehicles on their behalf.¹¹ Lemhar operators aimed to maintain their commercial endeavors and defend themselves against the rebels affiliated with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which was a rival group in trafficking activities and with whom they had a persistent conflict until the jihadi takeover of Gao in June 2012.

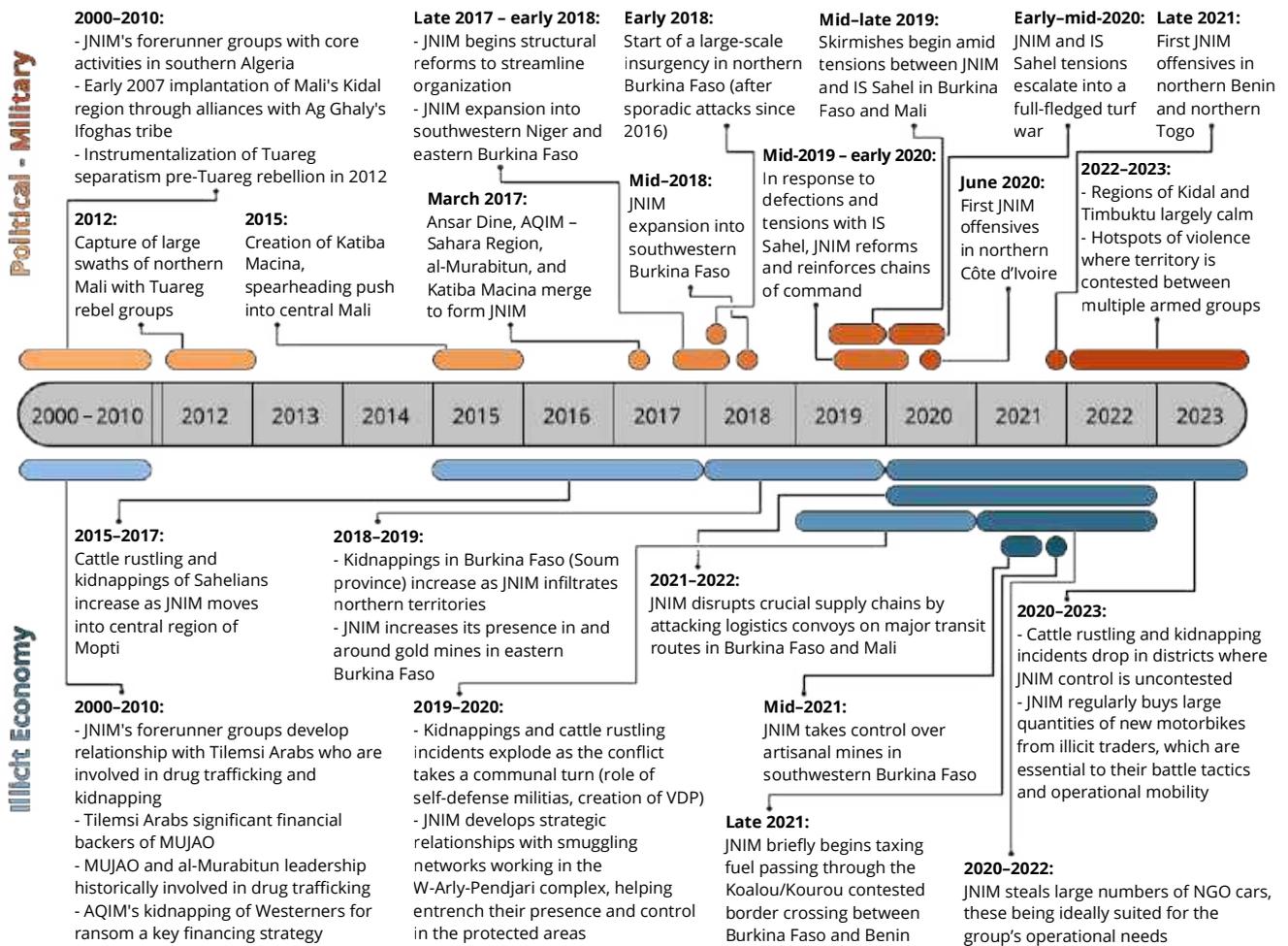


FIGURE 1 Timeline of JNIM activity.

SOURCE ACLED, analysis of data by all authors

Thereafter, this coalition of jihadist militant groups consolidated their hold over northern Mali.¹²

Both MUJAO and al-Murabitun had ties to drug trafficking, with the leadership historically involved in smuggling. These groups' leaders, including Abderrahmane Ould El Amar, Mohamed Ould Nouini Lahbous, and Himama Ould Lekhweir – who were also cousins – were all involved in drug trafficking prior to assuming their militant roles, highlighting the intersection of criminal activity and militancy in the region.¹³

The jihadist movements in control of Gao and Timbuktu in 2012 also preached an anti-state ideology that suited the interests of traffickers. A MUJAO propaganda video from this time declared that tolls, border controls, customs, and taxes were un-Islamic, and also suggested that the abolition of these would mean lower costs for consumers. AQIM and affiliated movements in Timbuktu also stressed that tolls, tariffs, and customs would no longer be levied.¹⁴ This approach

of “liberalizing” illicit economies, in favor of winning support among key demographics and entrenching their legitimacy as governors, is a strategy that has been carried over by JNIM in many parts of the Sahel.

Thus, JNIM and its predecessor groups have consistently maintained a strategic relationship with criminal economies by developing ties with key criminal operators. A member from the Tuareg community articulated JNIM's relationship with criminal actors as follows:

“These are individuals who revolve around the group and carry out these activities. It is challenging for the group to control this [criminal activity], as it is not their primary domain. As long as they are resupplied – that's what matters most. The same goes for cars, they are often purchased through thieves they personally know. But that's the market.”¹⁵



Macina region leader Hamadoun Kouffa with guard corps in JNIM video “Storming two barracks in Burkina Faso,” February 2023. Screenshot Al-Zallaqa Media Foundation

This allows JNIM to reap benefits and leverage the connectivity of these operators – including gaining access to the formal economy, facilitating hostage negotiations, and securing goods and financial services – while minimizing their exposure to direct involvement in criminal activities to preserve ideological purity.

The inclusion of Katiba Macina spearheaded AQIM’s push into central Mali beginning in 2015, extending southwards to Burkina Faso by 2016. Once integrated into JNIM, Katiba Macina further extended its reach into the coastal states of Benin and Côte d’Ivoire in 2019 and 2020 – thus greatly amplifying JNIM’s territorial influence.¹⁶ Katiba Macina, a mainly

Fulani-dominated jihadist group forming part of Ansar Dine and active in central Mali, was represented in JNIM by its *emir*, the Fulani preacher Hamadoun Kouffa. Ever since, the jihadist insurgency has seen a dynamic shift from its historical stronghold in northern Mali, with its power base and driving force gradually relocating into central Mali and further into neighboring Burkina Faso.¹⁷ Therefore, Kouffa played a significant role in JNIM’s regional project, mobilizing more fighters than any other JNIM group. The Burkinabe jihadist group Ansarul Islam was not formally part of the fusion, but since it had close ties to Katiba Macina before JNIM’s formation, it was later also integrated into the alliance.

From a big tent to a cohesive group

For many years, JNIM sought to portray itself as a “big tent” alliance, striving to attract a wide range of local community and ethnic groups.¹⁸ Through its media operations it repeatedly appealed to multiple ethnic constituencies, including Tuareg, Arab, Fulani, Songhai, and Bambara communities. Through its growing influence, it also extended its appeal to include other ethnic groups such as the Dogon in “Dogon Country” and Seno-Gondo plain, the Minyanka in Sikasso region, and Moore and Bissa languages in different parts of Burkina Faso. This is partially reflected in JNIM including the languages of these ethnic groups in its media products to reinforce its image as an inclusive armed group that advocates for widespread communal support.

JNIM has now evolved from a network of local jihadist militant groups, into a more integrated and powerful armed

group surpassing the sum of its individual components. JNIM’s formation in March 2017 marked the emergence of a highly effective armed actor in the Sahel. Today, operating in a competitive conflict environment alongside other insurgent actors, JNIM seeks to achieve hegemony as a non-state armed actor, and to challenge the authority of regional governments. The group aspires to establish an alternative jihadist social and political order across the central Sahel.

Whilst JNIM undoubtedly faces challenges from military actors and its rival Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), its military record indicates success in advancing its objectives. It did so by enhancing coordination and deepening cooperation among its constituent groups. Several reliable sources suggest that JNIM began undergoing structural reforms in late 2017 and early 2018.¹⁹ These initial changes were aimed at

streamlining the armed group and enhancing its operational effectiveness. Understanding the inner makings of JNIM presents a substantial challenge, given the group's opaque structure and the clandestine nature of its operations. Current knowledge only allows hypothesizing the degree to which standardized operational protocols and strategic guidelines have been enacted within the organization.²⁰

Between mid-2019 and early 2020, reforms and restructuring of command chains were undertaken in response to growing tensions between JNIM and the then-Greater Sahara faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP-GS) and the subsequent outbreak of conflict between the two groups.²¹ These adjustments were made to counter internal dissent and defections within JNIM's ranks.²² As a result, JNIM managed to consolidate its ranks and push ISWAP-GS out of JNIM strongholds – most notably, Mali's Inner Niger Delta and Burkina Faso's Est region, where ISWAP-GS had established presence.²³

Understanding JNIM's advance in the Sahel

JNIM's influence and reach have grown from its traditional strongholds in northern and central Mali to encompass the western and southern parts of the country, most of Burkina Faso, parts of Niger, and the northernmost areas of West African littoral states, including Benin, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Togo (*see map below*).

JNIM has also devised an array of tactics to sustain a high operational tempo, outpacing its adversaries and competitors. Across the central Sahel, JNIM employs the most diverse types of violence, including targeted assassinations, complex attacks, and large-scale military campaigns. It stands out in both the sustained frequency and scope of its attacks (*see graph below*), highlighting the group's moderately advanced militant skills, which continue to develop and spread as it grows and expands geographically.

The group's engagement in illicit economies is a key aspect of JNIM's successful expansion. It vitally enables JNIM to find local sources of revenue, which the group relies on more and more as it moves further away from its core in northern Mali. Illicit supply chains are also crucial to resourcing the group, including networks smuggling motorbikes and fuel. Finally, illicit economies allow JNIM to position itself as a legitimate provider of governance. Illicit activities that do not cause direct harm to communities tend to be perceived by many Sahelians as a legitimate source of livelihood, particularly where formal opportunities are lacking and agricultural or

Since then, JNIM has developed a system that maintains internal cohesion by striking a more effective balance between autonomy and interdependence among its various factions. This new structure allows individual factions to maintain a degree of independence while still collaborating and coordinating their efforts with other factions within the organization.²⁴ This close engagement has helped JNIM overcome long-standing internal divisions that had beset its parent organization, AQIM, and its predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). These divisions, characterized by leadership disputes and factional rivalries, had been a prominent feature for over a decade following the organization's establishment in the Sahara.²⁵ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the ephemeral jihadist rule in northern Mali, jihadist alliances and coalitions were marked by a cycle of frequent splits and mergers. Moreover, JNIM managed to buck the trend it grappled with from 2017 to 2019, during which ISGS consistently poached its members, even attracting entire units away from JNIM.²⁶

pastoral livelihoods are challenged by shortages of land or other resources. "Criminal" behavior, in the eyes of many Sahelian residents, is rather that which causes direct harm to people, or involves violence, such as robbery, theft, or kidnap.²⁷ While JNIM also engages in behaviors that would be seen as illegitimate, they tend to do so strategically – either by selectively focusing on communities framed as legitimate targets due to their alignment with the state or pro-government militias, or employing criminal groups for resource extraction operations as intermediaries, for example, in kidnap for ransom and vehicle theft.

However, JNIM is not able to recreate its more successful examples of establishment and governance everywhere. In the areas where it remains challenged by state, paramilitary forces, or rival non-state armed groups, JNIM exercises a greater degree of violence and repression against civilians. The relative strength and influence of JNIM across various regions is multidimensional, with indicators like the number of initiated combat engagements and civilian-targeting incidents providing key insights. This, for example, is the case in regions such as Mopti, Est, Sahel, Segou, and Centre-Nord; high counts of such incidents suggest a strong JNIM presence, but also high levels of contestation. However, it is important to consider the variations that exist. In some regions, despite high operational strength, JNIM opts for alliance-building or control consolidation rather than increased violent activities, while in others it seeks to assert its influence or cause destabilization.

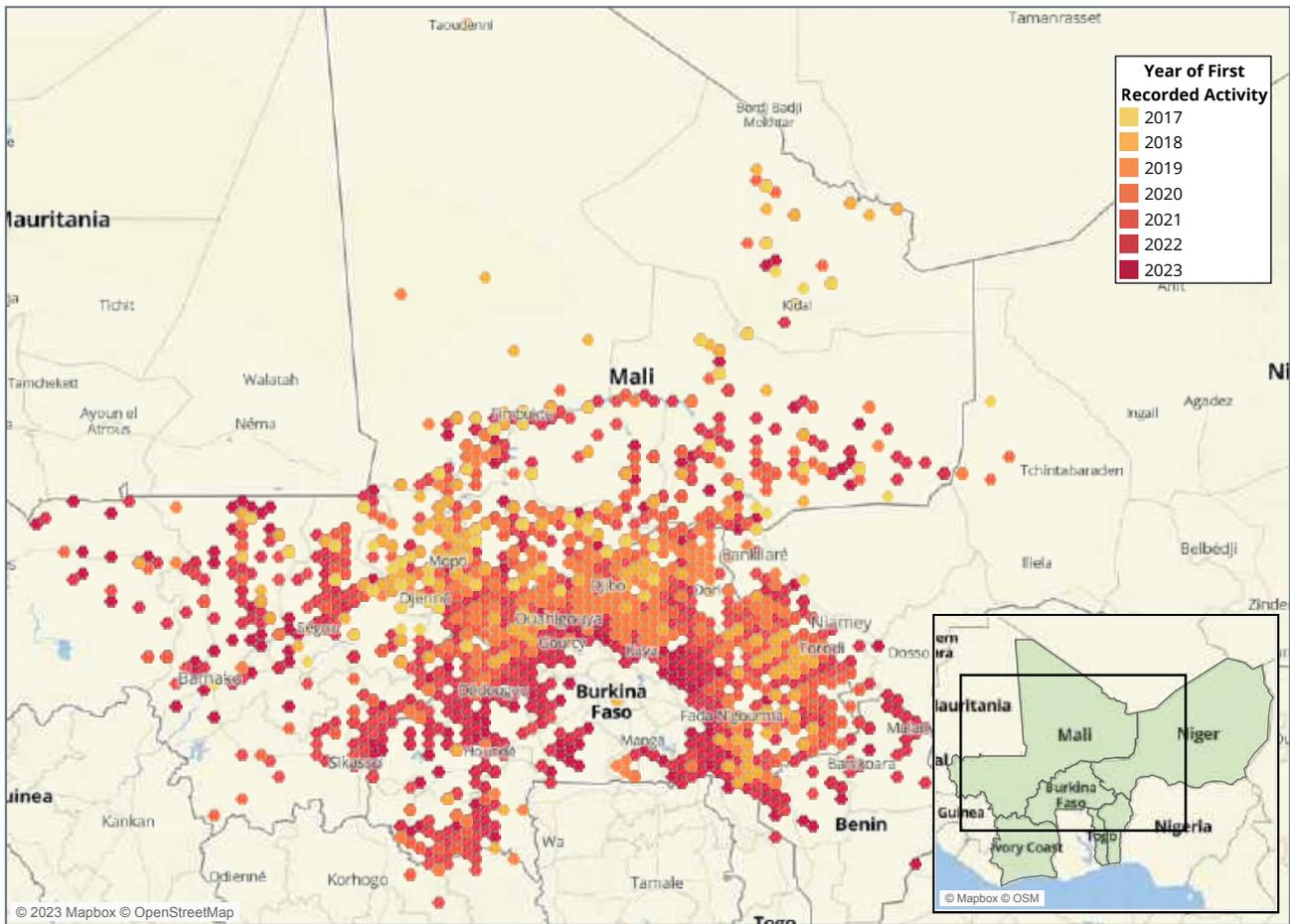


FIGURE 2 Expansion of JNIM activity, March 2017 – July 2023.

SOURCE ACLED

These variations illustrate a complex landscape influenced by group strategy, local alliances, community support, and the presence of military forces or rival groups.

JNIM's strength in a particular territory does not correlate with increased civilian targeting; in fact, the excessive use of force often reflects weakness rather than strength. Lack of control or discipline, inability to win local support, strategic deficiencies, and the erosion of legitimacy are just some of the manifestations of weakness that the use of excessive force often reveals. Discrepancies in regions like Kidal and Timbuktu, and parts of Gao, Menaka, and Koulikoro reflect the complex set of influences at play in dictating JNIM's use of violence against civilians. The regions of Kidal and Timbuktu remained largely calm throughout 2022 and 2023 as JNIM consolidated control and established a modus vivendi with other armed groups operating in the region. Thus, the attacks perpetrated by JNIM were primarily directed at MINUSMA or the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA).

By contrast, the violent interplay between competing forces (jihadist militant groups, government forces, militias, and self-defense groups) through cycles of attacks and reprisals contributes to both the escalation and brutalization of conflict. Subsequently, this results in an ever-increasing targeting of civilians and the normalization of mass atrocities.

For example, in 2023, the highly contested Boucle du Mouhoun region in Burkina Faso, experienced some of the highest levels of violence against civilians ever carried out by JNIM, as it attempts to infiltrate the region.²⁸ This surge in violence came in response to an attack against the Fulani community by Dozo (or traditional hunter) volunteer fighters in the town of Nouna in late 2022. The attack by Dozos (also known as Donsos) was retaliatory, in response to an armed assault by JNIM on their headquarters in Nouna.

Aside from a massacre in Bourasso in July, and the dynamics in Boucle du Mouhoun region outlined above, JNIM's attacks on civilians were small-scale throughout 2022, with the July

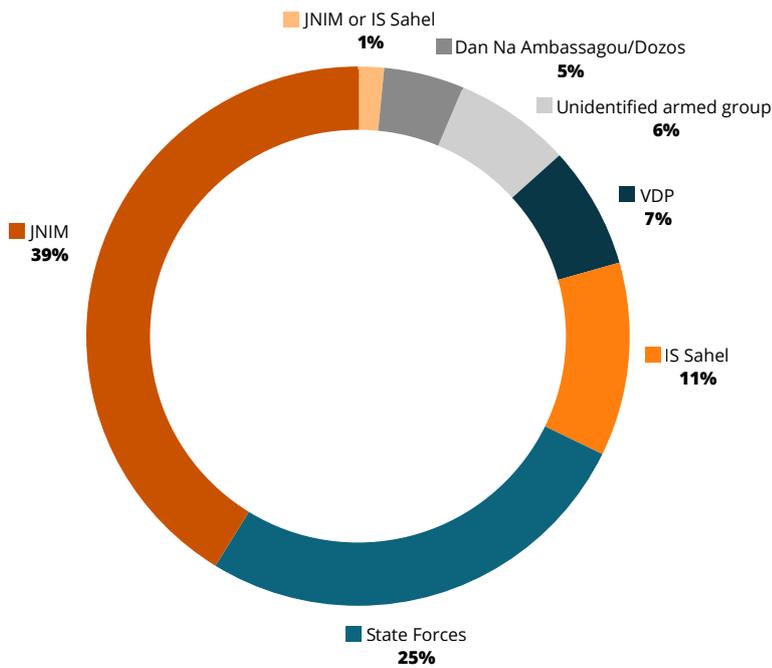


FIGURE 3 Participation in political violence by key actors in the central Sahel, January 2021 – July 2023.

SOURCE ACLED

massacre likely being a retaliatory action following a series of military operations against JNIM in May.

The group's behavior and engagement with illicit economies also similarly varies between areas under their influence and areas they are attempting to infiltrate or in which they are facing challenges, with mostly governance in the former and predatory behaviors in the latter. Illustratively, the 2021 Solhan gold mine massacre in Burkina Faso, which killed about 160 people, was likely linked to local actors' resistance towards making payments to JNIM, and the activities of self-defense militias in protecting the site.²⁹ Further, in 2021 in the Malian region of Mopti, the number of livestock looting incidents sharply dropped once JNIM established influence over a territory, such as in Youwarou district, whereas it remained high where the territory is contested, like in Bandiagara and

Bankass districts.³⁰ Similarly, trends in Burkina Faso in 2018 indicated that kidnapping incidents sharply increased when JNIM started its insurgency in Soum province, Sahel region, as it used kidnappings to gather intelligence but also to intimidate key figures in the community. But, in 2022, only one kidnapping incident was recorded in Soum province, where the group faces little opposition. Thus, an increase in kidnapping can serve as an early-warning mechanism for the group's infiltration into a new zone, and as an indicator of consolidated influence.³¹

As the data in this report demonstrates, this wide-ranging toolkit has enabled JNIM to continue expanding, even when the groups' stated aim to win over civilian residents is challenged. JNIM's evolving structure and accompanying strategy are at the core of this advance.

A line of men in blue clothing and yellow head coverings, some holding rifles, walking in a desert. The scene is captured from a low angle, emphasizing the line of figures against a bright, hazy sky. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

INTERNAL SUPERVISION AND FUNCTIONAL SPECIALIZATION

JNIM's chains of command are not limited to administrative boundaries but cut across the group's administrative regions, countries, and borders. This has been key to both managing potential divisions, but also to the construction of an organization-wide strategy and religious outlook.

A prime example of JNIM's organizational flexibility is the continuous deployment of senior commanders to the border Gourma region in order to smooth over potential fractures in the group.³² Initially around 2014-15, the Mauritanian Abu Bakr al-Shinqiti from AQIM's Sahara Emirate based in Timbuktu,³³ was assigned there as a trainer, weapons expert, and coordinator. However, in 2016, he was killed in battle with Malian forces in Dinangourou.³⁴ Following his death, senior Ansar Dine commander Almansour Ag Alkassoum assumed the role of coordinator between northern groups and those in the central region, including his own *katiba* (or brigade) in Gourma, Katiba Macina, Katiba Serma, and Ansarul Islam. Like Abu Bakr al-Shinqiti, Ag Alkassoum was killed in a French military operation. Subsequently, another Mauritanian, Hamza al-Shinqiti, took on the responsibility of coordinating operations in the area in 2019.³⁵ Hamza al-Shinqiti played a pivotal role when the conflict with IS Sahel transpired, as he took command of fighters in Douentza and Gourma to prevent defections of those dissatisfied with Macina leader Kouffa. As a result of his appointment, fighters from the group known as Katiba Serma (now part of the Aribanda region), along with some members who had previously exhibited pro-IS sentiments, became simultaneously more autonomous and closely aligned with the chain of command directly connected to the supreme leader Ag Ghaly.³⁶

This example shows that when senior commanders are killed in counter-terrorism operations or engaging in battle, they are successively replaced, ensuring continuity in leadership and guidance.³⁷ By deploying experienced commanders, who contribute functional specialization skills to various regions,³⁸

JNIM maintains stronger central control, which guarantees that local units stay aligned with the group's overarching objectives while still enjoying a certain level of autonomy.

AQIM has also dispatched senior religious cadres to the region, including Abd al-Hakim al-Muhajir. In June 2021, in the context of the conflict between JNIM and IS Sahel, Al-Muhajir heavily criticized IS Sahel's judge Sadou Cissé for his "extremism and ignorance."³⁹ Al-Muhajir accused Cissé of conflating the ethnic Dogon community and the Dozo hunter militiamen – essentially denouncing Cissé for *takfir* (or excommunicating) the general Muslim population. This intervention shows that JNIM has adopted a multi-level approach to counter internal dissent. In contrast, JNIM considers the Dogon community part of the general Muslim population, thus presenting itself as an inclusive group that seeks to mobilize broad popular support.

In some areas, JNIM faces resistance from local populations, state forces, and other armed actors, challenging its ability to maintain control and influence while engaging on multiple fronts. These factors generate friction within the organization. The response to the June 2021 events in Solhan, in Burkina Faso's Yagha province, is a striking illustration of this friction. A massacre of unprecedented scale unfolded when JNIM-affiliated fighters killed approximately 160 people. Despite an abundance of evidence pointing towards the culpability of a local JNIM group, the armed group not only dismissed responsibility but also condemned the massacre on two separate occasions.⁴⁰ In response to JNIM's denial, the Greater Sahara Faction of ISWAP openly ridiculed JNIM's assertion, even insinuating that the incident triggered internecine fighting within JNIM in central Mali.⁴¹

Meanwhile, in Gourma, JNIM fighters from central Mali and northern Burkina Faso are regularly deployed to keep IS Sahel fighters in check and prevent them from expanding into JNIM territory. JNIM's self-styled Menaka and Gao regions in Mali

struggle to confront IS Sahel effectively, becoming increasingly dependent on support from JNIM in Kidal. At the same time, the Timbuktu region's contribution to JNIM's larger effort

remains relatively meager. This imbalance in contribution and inability to confront common adversaries effectively has the potential to create deeper divisions within the organization.

Current internal group structure and composition

JNIM's strategic direction comes from the top down to the local level, with the leadership hierarchy broadly divided into three tiers: the central leadership group (*majlis al-shura* or *shura* council), regional commanders (*manatiq emirs*) overseeing operations in their designated regions, and area commanders (*markaz emirs*) at the most local level. The central leadership is responsible for determining the organization's overall strategic direction, ensuring cohesion among the various factions, and coordinating with parent and partner organizations, such as AQIM and other al-Qaeda-affiliated groups (see figure below).

While it is true that JNIM's constituent groups maintain some of their characteristics and operational focus, it is far from being a loose coalition of disparate armed groups. Throughout its six-year existence, JNIM has cultivated a robust brand and identity that fighters in sub-groups across its area of operations strongly associate with, whether referring to the group by its full name, "Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin," or simply "al-Qaeda."⁴² This unity is further reinforced by an often-overlooked aspect of JNIM's organizational structure: the internal supervision and crosscutting chains of command,

facilitated by the ongoing deployment of senior military and religious cadres from the former AQIM, Ansar Dine, and Katiba Macina, to other JNIM subgroups and regions beyond these cadres' original areas of operations. This dynamic precedes JNIM's establishment but has continued to be a central element of the group's strategic operations. These commanders maintain oversight and coordinate actions among local groups in various areas, most notably in Haire in Mali, the Gourma borderlands of Burkina Faso and Mali,⁴³ Torodi in Niger,⁴⁴ and along the borders of littoral states.

Numerous attacks showcase the synergies between JNIM's regional commands, especially in relation to large-scale attacks. A series of successful overrun attacks in August and September 2019 against military camps such as Boulkessi, Mondoro, Nassoumbou, Baraboule, and Tongomayel in Mali and Burkina Faso was part of a larger coordinated militant offensive involving the former Katiba Serma (in Aribanda region) and Ansarul Islam (in Burkina region) (see table on page 20). When an August 2019 peace agreement broke down in the Djenne cercle of Mali's Mopti region in April 2021,⁴⁵ several JNIM regions sent support units known as *noussoura*.

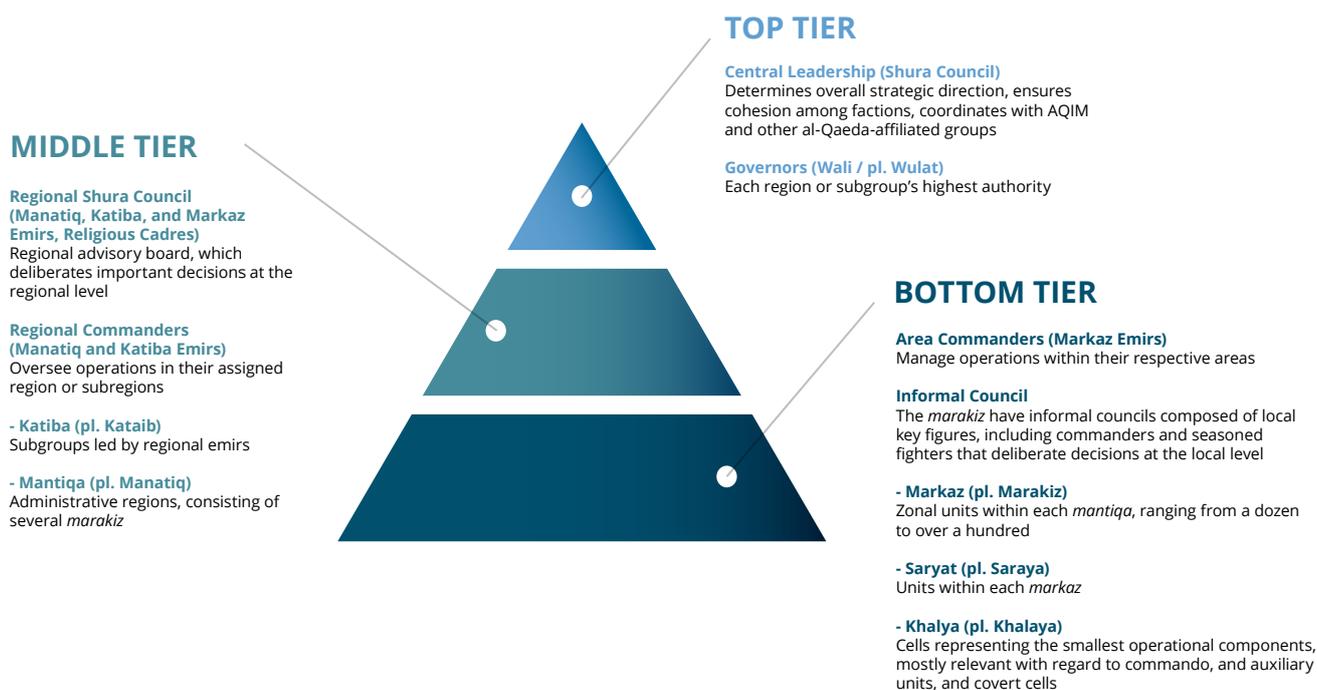


FIGURE 4 JNIM internal group structure and composition.

SOURCE Héni Nsaibia

JNIM subsequently imposed an embargo on the village of Marebougou, which also extended to surrounding villages.⁴⁶ A coalition of Dozos from Djenne and Dan Na Ambassagou militiamen, deployed there to force the lifting of the embargo, were routed in one of the deadliest battles between JNIM militants and Dozo militias recorded by ACLED, leaving scores of militiamen killed and wounded.

The organizational structure of JNIM can be more effectively understood through a set of concepts rooted in Arabic terminology. A *katiba* (or brigade) serves as a subgroup, led by regional *emirs*. Administratively, the group is divided into *manatiq*, or regions, commonly referred to as *mantiqa* (region) in its singular form. The same term also applies to subareas. Each *mantiqa* consists of several *markaz* (*marakiz* in the plural, meaning zonal units), with numbers ranging from a dozen to over a hundred. The Macina and Burkina regions, the largest of JNIM's regions, contain hundreds of *marakiz*. Each *markaz* is composed of several *saraya* (or units), and lastly, the term *khalaya* (or cells) represents the smallest components and is mostly relevant with regard to commando, auxiliary units, and covert cells (see *organizational chart below*).

One of the defining features of JNIM's organizational structure is the balance between centralization and decentralization. While the centralized *shura* council plays a crucial role in deliberating major decisions, JNIM's regional command structures enjoy a significant degree of autonomy in their day-to-day operations. Nonetheless, *markaz* commanders and *mantiqa* commanders need to defer important decisions to their respective *mantiqa* command or the *shura* council.

JNIM's engagement in the kidnap-for-ransom industry is a particularly telling example of the careful balance between centralization and decentralization. The kidnapping economy was largely centralized in the early 2000s, as decisions on targets and operations were taken at the highest level, and disagreements resulted in tensions within the leadership.⁴⁷ Today, the economy is fragmented, both because of the higher number of armed groups (perpetrators) and the diversity of victims. This holds true with JNIM, as decisions related to kidnappings are taken at the level of *markaz* or *mantiqa* commanders, or even cells within the *mantiqa*, depending on the type and value of targets. While some kidnapping incidents remain within the decision power of the core leadership,

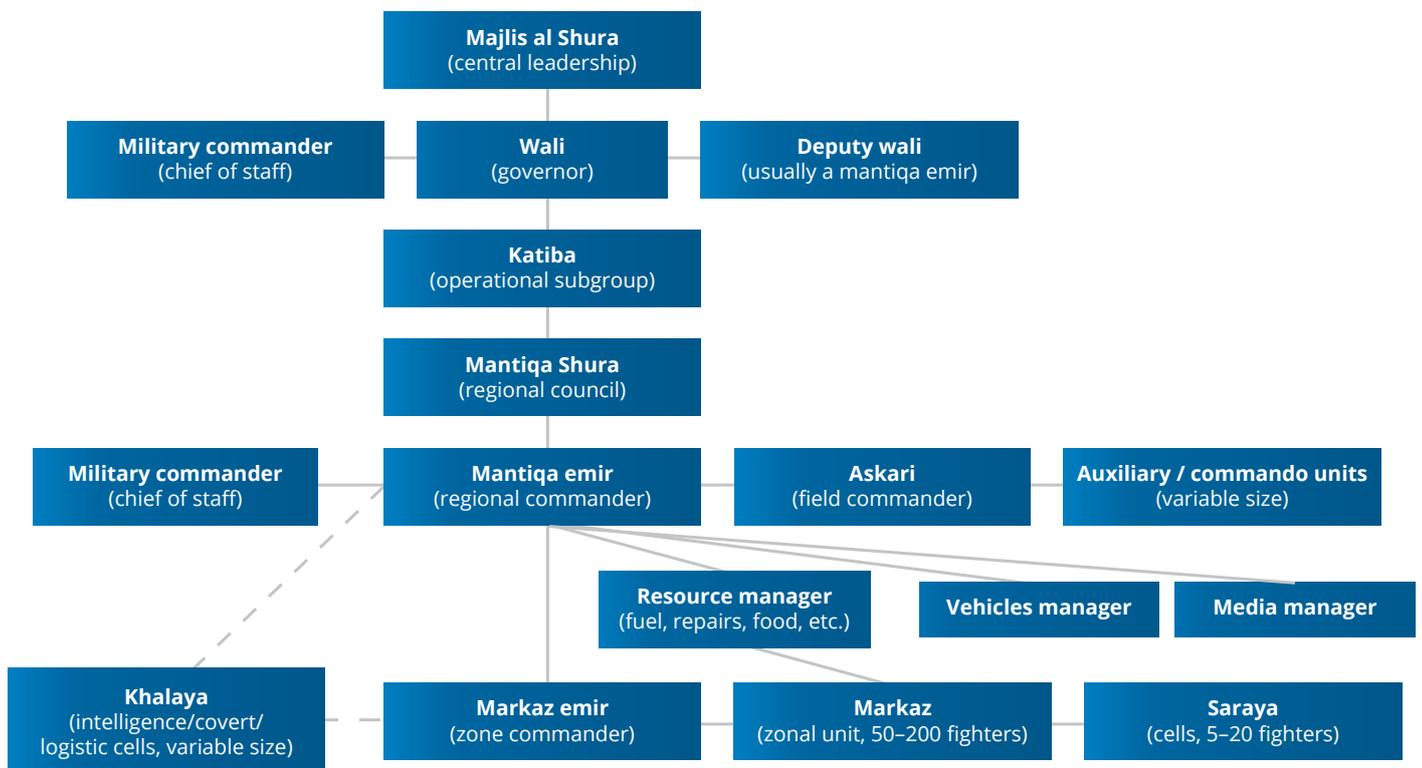


FIGURE 5 JNIM's military chain of command.

SOURCE Héni Nsaibia

the vast majority respond to a local need for liquidity; therefore, this decentralization has allowed for the quicker resolution of kidnapping cases.⁴⁸

Within each *mantîqa* there are also independent commando and auxiliary units, and covert cells. The size and number of these cells within each *mantîqa* vary, depending on the level of entrenchment and influence in a particular area. The concept of *noussoura* (support, as per the aforementioned support units)⁴⁹ is an important dynamic to highlight in this context, as these reinforcement units are deployed in support of another *mantîqa*. For example, if Katiba Serma (in Aribanda region) plans an attack on the military camp in Douentza, it may request reinforcements from Ansarul Islam (in Burkina region) and Katiba Macina (in Macina region). During their

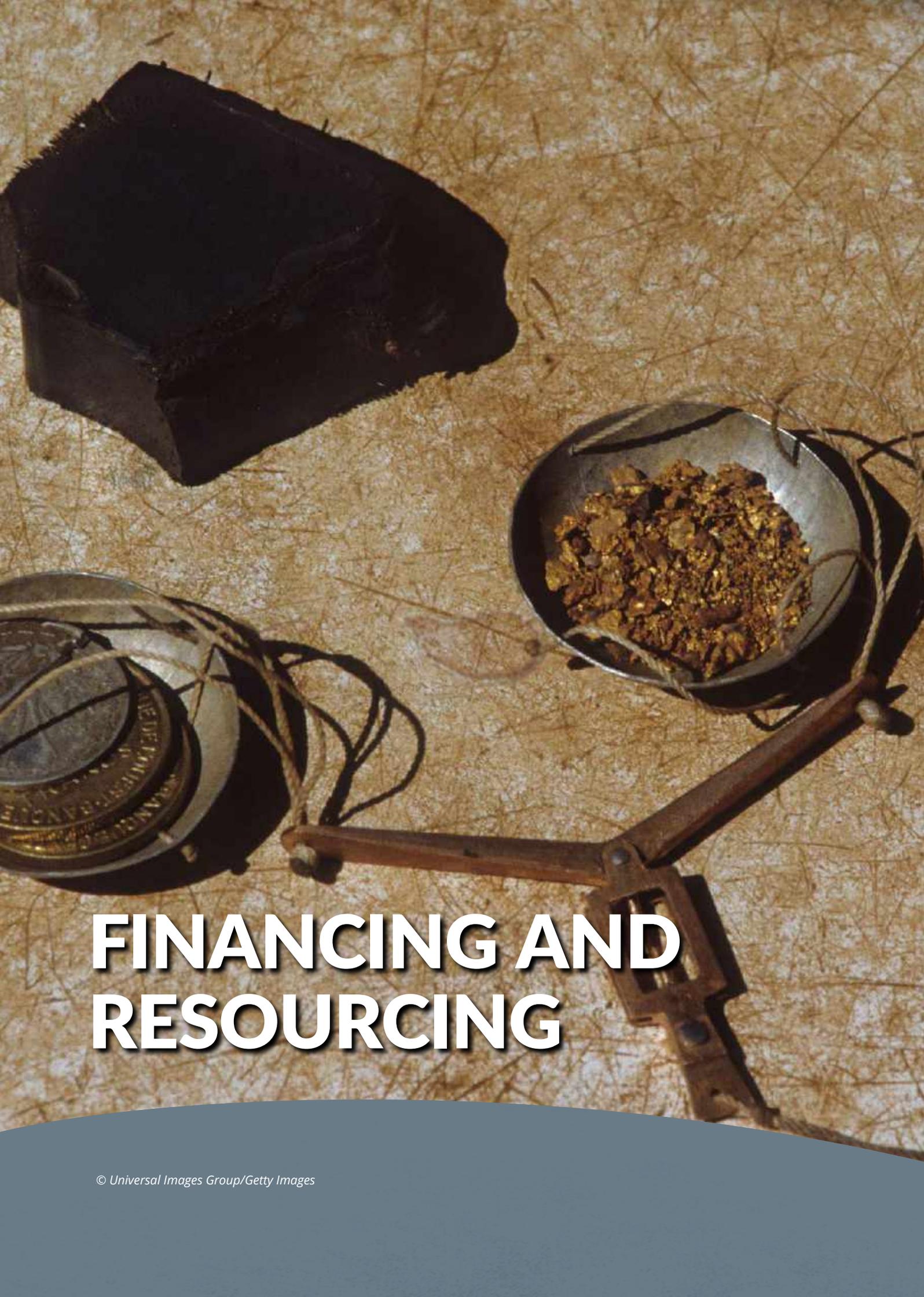
deployment, these reinforcement units become subordinate to the requesting *mantîqa* command.

These JNIM-designated military regions further comprise subregions or military zones that are not overtly publicly disclosed but can be discerned from the frequent mentions in the group's unofficial videos and audio (see table below). JNIM's official media, al-Zallaqa Media Foundation, is also divided into three subsidiaries, reflecting the different regions under the group's influence. This regional segmentation of JNIM's media activities suggests a degree of decentralization and local focus, allowing the group to tailor its messaging and propaganda to the specific contexts and audiences in each region.

Region	Leader(s)	Subregions / Military Zones	Media Subsidiary
Kidal	Iyad Ag Ghaly, Sedan Ag Hitta, Abdallah Ag Albaka, Zinedine Ag Biga	Kidal, Tessalit, Tin-Essako	Minbar al-Tahwid
Gao	Abdallah Ag Albakaye, Hicham Ag Ehya, Himama Ould Lekhweir (Hamza al-Tabankorti), Zakaria (Abu Nour), Hamdi Lamdi	Gao-Anchawadj, Talataye, Tilemsi	Minbar al-Tahwid
Menaka	Faknan Ag Taki, Inkarota Ag Nokh, Mohamed Ali Ag Taouka, Mohamed Ag Hama	Menaka, Tidarmene	Minbar al-Tahwid
Timbuktu	Talha al-Barbouchi, Abu Oumar al-Shinqiti, Abu Moussa al-Ansari	Ber, Goundam, Timbuktu	Minbar al-Murabitin
Macina	Hamadoun Kouffa, Mahmoud Barry, Bobola, Abdul Hamid, Cheick Oumar, Abu Tourabi, Redouwane	Bandiagara, Bankass, Bla, Djenne, Diafarabe, Dialloube, Guimbala, Kayes, Niono, San, Timissa	Minbar al-Fursan
Burkina	Jafar Dicko (Abu Mahamadou), Ousmane Dicko, Idrissa Dicko (Mousslimou), Abdul Bachirou, Abderrahmane Sidibe (Hamza)	Djibo, Fada, Kaya, Mangodara, Mossi, Ouahigouya, Samori, Sebba, Torodi, Benin, Togo	Minbar al-Fursan
Sikasso	Abdul Hamid, Hamza al-Shinqiti	Koutiala, Sikasso, Tominian, Yorosso	Minbar al-Fursan
Aribanda	Hamza al-Shinqiti, Abu Khalid, Moussa Hima (Abu Hamza), Oumar Barry (Farouk)	Douentza, Gourma, Koro	Minbar al-Fursan
Koulikoro	Redouwane	Southern Koulikoro	Minbar al-Fursan

FIGURE 6 JNIM's organizational structure and key leadership.

SOURCE Héni Nsaibia



FINANCING AND RESOURCING

In financing itself and its operations JNIM must constantly reckon with how some highly lucrative activities will also damage JNIM's legitimacy in the eyes of civilian communities.

This is particularly so when the activities fall under the rubric of popular understandings of “criminal” activity, i.e. activity that is violent, or that directly harms the livelihoods of residents. However, these two frequently incompatible

objectives – self-financing and governing – can sometimes be complementary.

This section examines how JNIM navigates this dilemma both in the leveraging of *zakat* (or alms), and exploiting road infrastructure, and its engagement in three illicit economies central to JNIM's strategy: artisanal gold mining, kidnapping, and livestock looting.

Artisanal gold mining

JNIM's artisanal gold mining activity is one example where the group's governance and financing objectives reinforce each other. While it is impossible to estimate the amount of money JNIM makes from artisanal mining through illicit gold dealers, gold is believed to be an important revenue stream for the group. In Burkina Faso alone, where JNIM and ISGS control growing swaths of territory, in 2018 it was estimated that artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) produced about 20 tonnes of gold per year.⁵⁰ Control over artisanal gold mines has repeatedly been cited as a likely factor shaping JNIM's geographic expansion.⁵¹

JNIM extracts revenue from the gold sector by exercising control over ASGM sites (directly or through its influence over local communities) or transportation routes to and from mine sites. Payments – in exchange for security or access – are sometimes demanded as *zakat*.⁵² In some cases, resource flows are indirect; while the sites in Kidal region are directly controlled predominantly by the ex-rebel bloc Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), the alliances between the CMA and JNIM – and in some cases blurred membership – mean a proportion of mining resources is likely flow to JNIM.⁵³ A member of the Tuareg community emphasized, however, that “on paper,” these sites are ostensibly managed by the CMA.⁵⁴ The most important such sites in Kidal are located in Igouzar, another site between Tessalit and Aguelhok, along with several sites in the Tinzaouaten area. But JNIM is also known to fully control mine sites in both Mali and Burkina

Faso. For example, in the N'Abaw goldfield, southwest of Gao at the border with Burkina Faso, around 2,000 gold miners work in the JNIM-controlled site.⁵⁵ A member of the Tuareg community indicated that many miners tend to prefer these sites controlled by JNIM over those controlled by signatory armed groups,⁵⁶ including the CMA and the pro-government militia coalition Plateforme, citing the latter's heavy taxation as a deterrent.

The management of gold mines in the Sahel is often controversial at the local level. Firstly, the majority of artisanal gold mining is informal, in areas that remain under control of the state, and are therefore subject to repeated state crackdowns. This creates grievances among communities reliant on mining in contexts where scarce alternatives exist. Secondly, certain parties tend to be excluded from mining opportunities. Artisanal sites are often guarded by vigilante groups affiliated with the landowner or with those pre-financing the mining operation, excluding residents who wish to prospect for themselves. Private security guards play the same role in industrial or privately run mines.⁵⁷

By forcing those guarding the mining site to leave, JNIM can effectively liberalize access to mines – thus, winning the favor of the locals. For instance, in mid-2021, JNIM took over artisanal mines in the Dida forest in southwestern Burkina Faso, which had previously been guarded by Dozo hunting associations. JNIM permitted artisanal miners who had previously



N'thaka gold mine site in the Gao region, northern Mali, August 2022.

Photo: GI-TOC

been excluded from the site to mine there in exchange for periodic contributions from miners, which were reportedly viewed as largely fair.⁵⁸ Given that the miners' continued access to the site relied on JNIM remaining in the area, and in order to prevent the Dozo from reclaiming it, they became supportive of JNIM's presence.⁵⁹ JNIM was thus able to simultaneously profit and build relationships locally. Furthermore, mining sites fulfill multiple purposes for militant groups like JNIM; they serve as recruitment centers, logistical hubs offering easy access to components and precursors for improvised explosive devices, ideal locations for storing weapons,⁶⁰ and

where militants can alternate between civilian and combatant roles with ease.

Governments have repeatedly sought to close down informal and artisanal gold mining activities in the Sahel to shut off funding streams to armed groups. However, this has frequently proved counterproductive and played into JNIM's governance narratives, where the group positions itself as a provider of economic opportunities, and a "gatekeeper" enabling access to resources forbidden by the state.⁶¹

Kidnapping

The kidnap-for-ransom economy has been a central element of jihadist militant groups' resourcing since the first decade of the 2000s, but remained a central source of financing for armed groups into the mid-2010s. In 2017, the year of JNIM's birth, the group's annual revenue in the region was estimated to range between 18 and 35 million US dollars, with kidnapping for ransom estimated to represent up to 40% of the group's funding.⁶²

In Burkina Faso, kidnappings have increased substantially since 2017. ACLED records a rise from eight incidents in 2017, to 262 in 2021, and 222 in 2022, an increase that to some extent tracks the group's expansion into the country. However, while JNIM continues to be a central player in the Sahel's kidnapping economy, the kidnapping of Sahelians is a

fragmented criminal market, closely related to local realities. Like many fragmented markets, the kidnapping industry is characterized by a high degree of violence and unpredictability due to the numerous actors – jihadist militant groups, rebel groups, self-defense militias, criminal groups, and state actors – and the distinct motivations involved. Crucially, while kidnappings remain an element of JNIM financing, incidents are not always designed to result in ransom.

Paying a ransom has become equivalent to supporting jihadist militant groups in the Sahel. Thus, many victims remain silent as to the conditions of their detention and their release. However, GI-TOC data collected in 2022 in Burkina Faso found that ransoms paid by Sahelian targets varied based on perceived value; the ransom for important businessmen could be

Abductees	Ransom	
	FCFA	USD
Small traders or shopkeepers	300,000–800,000 FCFA	US\$500–US\$1,340
Important businessmen	2m FCFA – 3m FCFA	US\$3,350–US\$5,030
Cattle and gold site owners	8m FCFA	US\$13,380
State-linked individuals (e.g. health officials)	13m FCFA	US\$22,005

FIGURE 7 Ransom payments for different kidnapping victims in Burkina Faso.

SOURCE GI-TOC

double or triple that of a small trader or shopkeeper (*see table above*).⁶³ Price tags for cattle owners and owners of gold sites can be even higher, as much as 8 million FCFA (US\$13,380). For Sahelians, the largest ransoms are paid for individuals linked with the state, such as health officials.⁶⁴

Though more rare, the kidnapping of foreigners continues and is the most lucrative – ransoms reach up to several million (euros or US dollars) for Westerners. JNIM likely leveraged this in 2022, when kidnappings of foreigners in the Sahel spiked,⁶⁵ as JNIM needed to quickly increase revenue to finance the intense fighting against IS Sahel in northern Mali, and against FAMA in central Mali.⁶⁶ More important than the increase in scale, the change in modus operandi also showed the need for quick resolution and liquidity. The captivity only lasted several weeks (compared to months or years previously), the ransoms were lower than usual, and the negotiations took place directly with the families of the victims – not governments.⁶⁷

While there is no doubt that ransoms are a source of financing for JNIM, the kidnapping industry is also used by the group as a strategic tool driving its expansion and consolidation in new areas. A spike in kidnappings, especially of influential local figures, can serve as an early warning sign that the group is trying to infiltrate a community. Kidnapping incidents rise and remain high upon the initial arrival of JNIM until the group consolidates its influence. For example, in Burkina Faso's Soum province, kidnappings represented more than 50% of all incidents in the country in 2018, when the group was in the process of infiltrating the province. In contrast, only one kidnapping incident was recorded in 2022,⁶⁸ as the group had established a consolidated level of influence. In areas where JNIM's influence remains contested, incidents are higher.

Since 2021, the Est region of Burkina Faso has seen the highest concentration of kidnapping incidents, likely in large part due to the region's high number of self-defense groups, such as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP). VDP deployment appears to be a significant trigger for kidnapping, with data showing a strong geographical overlap between kidnappings and clashes between JNIM and the VDP.⁶⁹

Motivations also change with time. In a new control territory, JNIM uses kidnapping for intimidation and intelligence-gathering. Once it has achieved an acceptable level of influence, it is also used for vetting and voluntary or forced recruitment purposes. Today in the Sahel, these are the main motivations behind kidnapping incidents of Sahelian targets, with financial motivations only driving a minority of cases.

In fact, JNIM's governance objectives often trump financial considerations. For example, JNIM refrains from kidnapping influential local leaders such as village chiefs or religious leaders, who – despite being high-ransom targets – are also a source of increased legitimacy for JNIM vis-à-vis the population, or can serve as a key negotiation partner with the state or communities. In Burkina Faso, JNIM could potentially kidnap the *emirs* of Djibo, Baraboule, and Tongomayel for ransom, but refrains from doing so because popular support outweighs financial considerations.⁷⁰

Consequently, while kidnapping foreigners remains a primarily profit-oriented activity, JNIM's local kidnapping activity largely aligns with the group's overarching goal – to establish and retain influence over local populations – with resourcing appearing as a secondary motivation.



Herders looking to sell their goats at the weekly market in Ménaka. © Souleymane Ag Anara

Livestock theft

Livestock theft serves as another illicit economy central to JNIM's financing, its mode of extracting revenue similarly changing in line with its territorial influence. In areas under early-stage infiltration, or where JNIM exerts limited influence, it draws revenue directly through livestock looting. By contrast, in areas where the group exerts significant influence, it instead largely demands livestock as a mode of *zakat*. JNIM also occupies a role in regulation and dispute resolution in livestock theft, positioning itself as a key player in recovering stolen cattle and mediating disputes for communities, largely in areas it controls. By doing so, JNIM aims to solidify its presence and influence within the communities.

In districts under JNIM's influence within the Inner Niger Delta in the Mopti region of central Mali, for example, the group has imposed rules on land access, and acted on reports of livestock thefts, reducing corruption and nepotism that previously plagued local authorities.⁷¹ As a result, the number of stolen livestock in areas under JNIM control appears to drop. In Youwarou district, where the group has consolidated influence, livestock theft since 2021 has been significantly lower than in contested Bandiagara or Bankass, which is also a hotspot of violence with the FAMA, the Wagner Group, and the allied ethnic Dogon-majority Dan Na Ambassagou self-defense militia. In

2021, Bandiagara experienced the highest rate of cattle theft, with over 65,000 cattle stolen. This figure is nearly 15 times greater than the number of cattle stolen in Youwarou district during the same period, which recorded 4,550 stolen cattle.⁷²

However, livestock theft plays a substantial role in financing the group. In Youwarou district alone, the GI-TOC estimates that the group made 440 million FCFA (US\$739,200) in revenue from livestock theft in 2021.⁷³ A significant amount of cattle is appropriated through *zakat*, a practice that becomes a major way in which JNIM takes resources from the livestock economy once it has established consolidated influence. Judging from estimates from Youwarou district, and considering that cattle looting is more prevalent in other districts, it can be presumed that the total profits from livestock theft run into the millions of dollars every year, although in contested areas not all of this will flow to JNIM.

Internal sources within Ansarul Islam – a Burkinabe JNIM subgroup with strong historical links to Katiba Macina in central Mali – said in 2021 that they make from 25 to 30 million FCFA (US\$42,063 to US\$50,477) per month from cattle rustling in Sahel, Nord, and Centre-Nord regions where they operate, depending on the period.⁷⁴

Moreover, the cattle rustling economy has proven resilient in the face of increased insecurity and violence, in contrast to other illicit revenue streams that have been to some extent displaced, such as kidnapping foreigners for ransom, or the cocaine trade. The livestock trade's importance to the socio-economic fabric of the region – particularly in Mali, the

second biggest exporter of cattle in West Africa – means JNIM has no problem acquiring and selling the looted livestock. This ability to quickly monetize stolen assets, even in contexts of significant instability, makes livestock looting a cornerstone of the Sahelian war economy and a very attractive source of financing.⁷⁵

Disruption of roads and use of checkpoints

JNIM seeks to destabilize local economies and trade routes early on in their new operational areas. By targeting roads, bridges, markets, transportation, and other essential infrastructure, the group undermines the financial capacities of the states it opposes and the logistical capabilities of government forces. Likewise, it disrupts local economies to manipulate them for its own gain. This is the case particularly for small or medium-sized cities, whose economies and transport infrastructure are often overlooked as sources of funding for ostensibly “rural” armed groups.⁷⁶

For instance, JNIM has carried out a series of large-scale attacks on commercial, supply, and logistics convoys escorted by military forces, primarily in Burkina Faso, but also in Mali. In

2021 and 2022, these attacks occurred on several major transit routes in Burkina Faso and Mali (see map below). By focusing on these convoys, JNIM disrupts crucial supply chains, weakens local economies, and erodes the state's ability to ensure security for its citizens. This, in turn, bolsters the group's ability to exploit existing vulnerabilities and solidify its control over the affected regions.

In addition to direct attacks, JNIM frequently sets up irregular checkpoints, where fighters gather intelligence and conduct identity checks in search of military and security force members, militiamen, and state collaborators. When running checkpoints, they periodically seize opportunities to loot vehicles, motorcycles, and other goods. JNIM also tends to seize

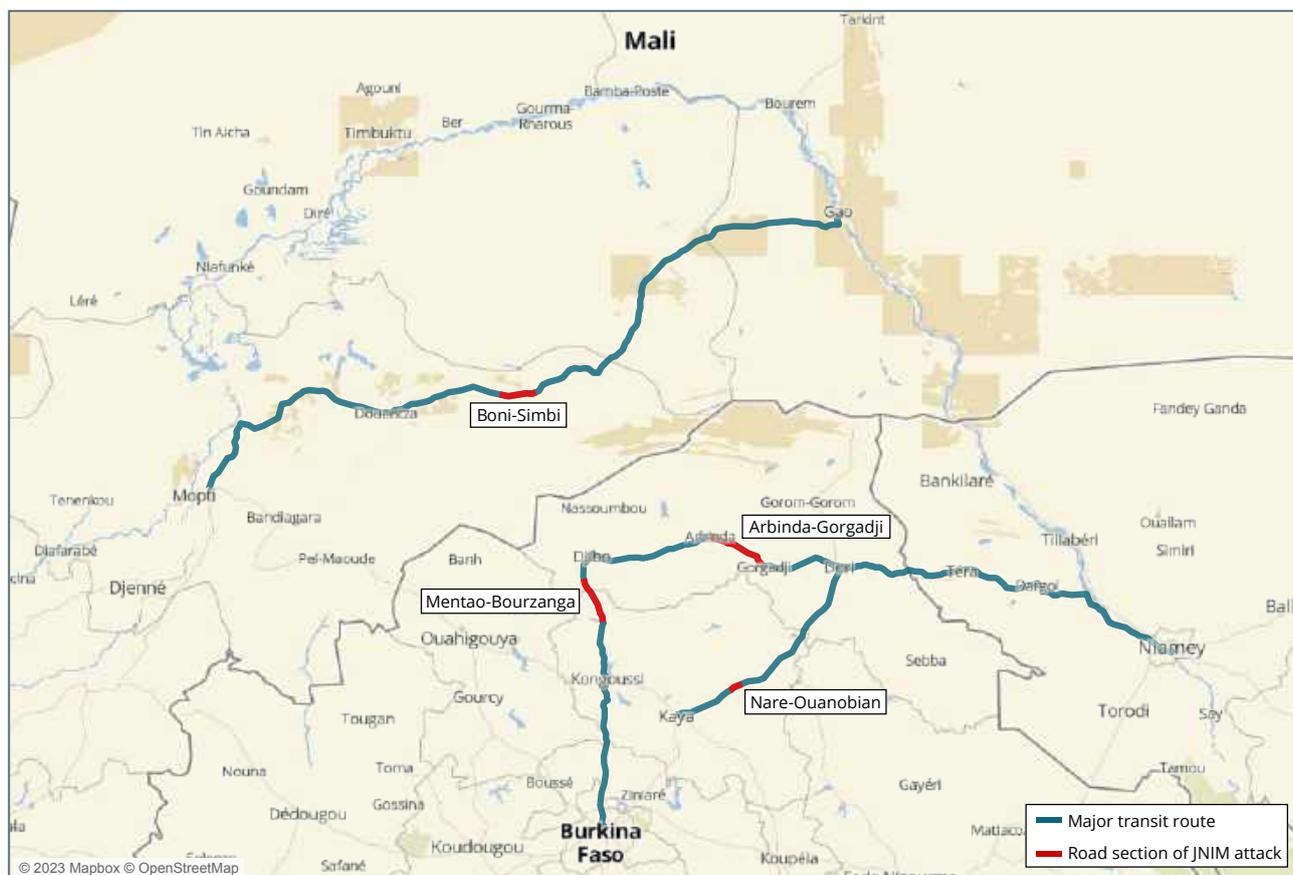


FIGURE 8 Major JNIM attacks on commercial and military convoys in Burkina Faso and Mali, 2021–2022.

SOURCE ACLED, author analysis

trucks carrying key goods such as food or fuel. Militants will typically release the drivers unharmed after the truck is taken to a remote location in the bush. The drivers are occasionally,

but not always, allowed to leave with their trucks; if not, they have to make their way to help on foot.⁷⁷

Taxation of goods

Taxation is another key source of revenue for the group related to checkpoints and road control. JNIM controls key transport and trafficking routes in both Mali and Burkina Faso where the group taxes licit and illicit goods – ranging from fuel to medicines to foodstuffs. The taxes constitute protection money that individuals or companies pay and, in return, can use the road safely.⁷⁸ In that sense, the threat of violence also allows armed groups, including JNIM, to extract rents from businesses that rely on continued use of the road.

For instance, in central Mali, widespread carjacking by bandits and armed groups has allowed well-connected businessmen to establish car rental agencies with their own variant of protection. By paying protection fees to armed groups or bandits, the rental agency owners can ensure that their vehicles can

use the roads unscathed. This forces a dependence from road users on these businessmen, including many international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in central and northern Mali.⁷⁹

JNIM also periodically taxes fuel passing through areas under its control, including in areas surrounding the major towns of Gao and Timbuktu in northern Mali.⁸⁰ Evidence of JNIM systematically taxing fuel flows in some newer areas of influence – including northern Benin – is more sporadic. Illustratively, while JNIM appears to have established a checkpoint and taxed flows moving through the border crossing and fuel smuggling hotspot of Kourou/Koalou, a contested town on the border of Burkina Faso and Benin, in late 2020, this proved only temporary.⁸¹

Tapping into licit and illicit supply chains

JNIM engages with trafficking networks throughout the territories it operates in. Illicit supply chains are essential to JNIM's ability to procure some of the most important goods for its operations. This is the case for fuel and motorbikes and, to a lesser extent, illicit goods such as medicines.

For its own supplies of fuel, JNIM frequently engages in the looting of fuel trucks; specifically, 14,000-liter fuel tankers are one of the types of vehicles most vulnerable to hijacking by JNIM. However, JNIM is also suspected of procuring fuel from much larger, more organized fuel trafficking rings. For instance, 14 such fuel tankers were hijacked by presumed JNIM fighters between Matiacoali and Kantchari in Burkina Faso in June 2022. Several observers, as well as media commentators, said that it was highly unlikely that such a convoy of fuel tankers would have traveled along that road without an escort and, rather, it is more plausible that the incident was a planned delivery of fuel by traffickers to armed groups.⁸²

JNIM fighters use large quantities of fuel for their own consumption. In some cases, including in areas of northern Benin, this has reportedly increased prices and rendered the market more profitable. Some of the enhanced profits are reportedly reinvested in the market, enabling some sellers to operate from makeshift shops rather than by the roadside.⁸³ But JNIM can also resell or pass on the surplus at below-market prices to sympathetic sellers or communities.⁸⁴ For instance, armed

men – believed to be JNIM elements – were reported to be selling fuel to residents of Namounou in Tapoa province, Est region in Burkina Faso. This strategy enables the group to simultaneously acquire resources and garner support from vulnerable populations already grappling with economic hardship due to poverty and the ongoing security and humanitarian crises in the region.

Motorbikes are arguably one of the most important goods for JNIM's operations. Since June 2022, Burkina Faso has imposed a ban on both the import and sale of motorbikes used by JNIM militants, such as the Aloba or other similarly large models. This ban and others appear to have inadvertently boosted an already widespread practice of motorbike trafficking.⁸⁵ These are trafficking networks that JNIM is well-versed in using around the Sahel region.

JNIM obtains these motorbikes through a variety of channels, and it appears to be left to local units to purchase their own motorbikes from convenient networks or suppliers. In some areas, the group appears to trade directly with smuggling networks. For instance, local JNIM units have been known to work with motorbike dealers in the areas in which they operate, frequently pre-financing the purchase of tens of new motorbikes at a time, many of which are smuggled into Sahelian states from coastal states.⁸⁶ The trafficked motorbikes typically appear to be diverted from the licit supply chain



A truck containing bags of rice concealing smuggled motorbikes, seized in Niger in July 2021.

Photo: Tillaberi Police Department

by traders receiving shipments from Asia at major regional ports, particularly Lagos, Lomé, and Cotonou. The motorbikes are then smuggled over the borders of coastal states into the Sahel via Niger or Burkina Faso, typically either concealed in large trucks or driven by individuals using discrete tracks away from main roads.⁸⁷

Police in Tillaberi documented how in Tamou, on the border with Burkina Faso, networks of youths delivered new motorbikes to JNIM fighters, sometimes for cash, but occasionally in exchange for other goods, including on one occasion, four-wheel-drive vehicles. However, traders in Cinkasse in

Togo, Malanville in Benin, and Kompienga in Burkina Faso all described receiving regular orders for several tens of motorbikes from JNIM. It is not clear whether these traders had previously obtained their supplies through licit or illicit means, or both. However, they said that current restrictions on the sales of large cylinder motorbikes, as well as rising prices given supply shortages, were tempting growing numbers of traders to rely on trafficking networks. They all conceded that they regularly sold motorbikes to JNIM and described them as reliable customers who did not attempt to negotiate prices and who would pay in advance.⁸⁸

Access to cash and money laundering

JNIM also maintains financial networks throughout the major cities, where it actively lends money to merchants, invests with banks, and engages in other financial activities. This demonstrates JNIM's involvement in local commerce and its attempts to bolster economic relationships in areas where it operates. Additionally, the group extends its financial influence to villages and small towns, funding small shops for the benefit of local communities. These businesses double as supply points, providing a fallback plan for its fighters or units

should the need arise. This is a strategic move to maintain a constant flow of provisions for the group while also integrating themselves into the local economy. However, it is important to note that this arrangement is not without complications. There have been instances in Gao and Timbuktu in Mali where the situation has soured due to the misappropriation of JNIM investments, resulting in assassinations of the group's designated bankers and businessmen.

Communal fundraising and collection of *zakat*

Armed groups' use of the religious tax known in Islam as *zakat* is a complex phenomenon, as its payment by civilians may mean the group has been conferred with the legitimacy of a religious authority. However, a coercive component cannot be ruled out. *Zakat* is a means through which armed groups might raise revenues to fund their activities.⁸⁹ In the case of JNIM, *zakat* is often an illustration of the group's priorities, and its capabilities, in a given area.

For instance, in January 2023, residents of several villages in Diapaga, Est province in Burkina Faso, had their entire herds of livestock seized on the grounds of *zakat* by JNIM combatants – a coercive move that was economically devastating for residents.⁹⁰ This indicates short-termism on the part of JNIM fighters in the area, seeking to prioritize immediate financial gain rather than relationship-building with residents. However, it may also suggest a degree of local resistance to JNIM control, which is accordingly met with exploitative and coercive actions.

In other areas, however, *zakat* serves a dual role as a means of income for JNIM, and a way to bolster their local credibility through service provision. For instance, in exchange for protection, JNIM imposes *zakat* on livestock owners in central Mali, who must give away a one-year-old bull calf for every 30 heads of cattle and a heifer calf for every 40 heads of cattle.⁹¹

In the Kidal region of Mali, JNIM depends more on fundraising than *zakat*. In some communities, funding is voluntary, while in others, it is mandatory, particularly for those deemed

“pro-Islamic State.”⁹² Although *zakat* is often perceived to be a significant source of income for jihadist militant groups in the region, this notion may not hold true for JNIM in all areas that the group operates. A Fulani youth leader indicated that *zakat* constitutes only a minor portion of the group's resources in central Mali. Notably, around two-thirds of the collected *zakat* is reportedly redistributed to the needy within the community.⁹³ However, JNIM's methods demonstrate significant regional variations. In JNIM-controlled areas in Niger, such as Gotheye and Torodi located in the southwestern part of Tillaberi region, *zakat* taxation practices are described as “messy and extortionist,”⁹⁴ while around Midal, in the Tassara department of Tahoua region's northern territory, locals perceive JNIM's tactics as “soft” and non-violent, specifically noting that the activities are largely restricted to *zakat* collection.⁹⁵

JNIM's collection of *zakat* serves multiple purposes that contribute to their pursuit of legitimacy. It symbolizes adherence to religious obligations, effectively integrating individuals and communities into their value system. *Zakat* collection delineates a geographical and social space under the group's control, extending their influence even into areas they do not militarily control. *Zakat* serves a martial function by identifying tax evaders as legitimate targets of violence, thus enforcing compliance. It has both a social and financial purpose, providing support to the poor and funding for the group's warfare activities, respectively. In these ways, the strategic implementation of *zakat* taxation helps jihadist militant groups construct an image of legitimate authority and control.⁹⁶



GOVERNANCE

“Governance,” in this report refers to JNIM’s attempts to establish itself as a governing authority in local areas through the regulation of residents’ behavior, service provision, and the control of local finances and economies. This is particularly true for illicit economies, as they are easier for the group to exercise control over.⁹⁷ Therefore, governance involves striking a delicate balance between resources and objectives. While local fundraising efforts, *zakat*, and taxation of goods can be a means of financing for JNIM (whether coercive or not), in many examples gaining legitimacy trumps financial motivations. For example, in Mopti, the majority of *zakat* revenues are reportedly redistributed to the community, indicating that *zakat* collection and redistribution appear to play a stronger role in governance than in financing JNIM itself.⁹⁸ However, the balance may tip, in line with JNIM’s needs.

While JNIM’s interaction with illicit economies may be in part to raise revenue, these economies are just as frequently a means of building relationships with communities in order to advance their governance objectives. This is especially evident when JNIM supplants the state forces that are restricting residents’ access to an illicit market. Indeed, JNIM’s regulatory efforts exploit some peoples’ resentment toward state efforts to stop illicit activities. Thus, by removing state regulation, JNIM offers residents the freedom to engage in illicit livelihoods. In exchange, JNIM requires local populations to subordinate themselves to the group’s authority and social order. Outside of the economic sphere, JNIM has been able to cultivate civilian relationships by offering protection and basic but essential services such as dispute resolution. This is particularly in the case of the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) Complex, as explained in the dedicated section below.

However, these forms of outreach and service provision are far from ubiquitous in JNIM’s interactions with civilians. JNIM is only able to securely govern a limited number of communities and individuals, and must contend with pre-existing social fault lines and ongoing external threats. JNIM cannot always depend on community engagement and offers of service provision. When it cannot, JNIM also relies on forcibly displacing those it cannot control, or using violence and economic warfare to restrict civilians’ ability to resist them. The pace and scale of internal displacement in the Sahel indicate that JNIM, in particular, uses forced displacement to create buffer zones in the areas it is entrenching itself in, and to limit the burden of governance and service provision that it has to take on.⁹⁹ Where the group is weaker, it will seek to reduce threats and pressures on itself by reducing the number of civilians in the area and forcing them to leave. The Madjoari department, located within the WAP Complex in Burkina Faso’s Kompienga province, likely serves as the largest buffer zone that JNIM has established after engaging in a year-long violent campaign.¹⁰⁰ This campaign was directed against the military, VDP, and local residents of the department. The intensity of the conflict reached its peak with a major assault on the Madjoari military camp in May 2022. Following this offensive, authorities took action to evacuate the remaining VDP members and civilians from the department.¹⁰¹

While it can foster genuine support among at least some residents of some communities, JNIM is equally willing to use forced displacement and other coercive tactics to be able to control its surroundings. Nevertheless, the governance tactics that JNIM has effectively deployed to win support demonstrate an ideological consistency that spans the Sahel region, which speaks to JNIM’s growing cohesion.

Zakat as a tool of legitimacy

Unlike the Islamic State, which imposes a more rigid and harsh interpretation of Islamic law,¹⁰² JNIM reportedly grants local communities greater decision-making autonomy.¹⁰³ This distinction is crucial to JNIM's success and contributes to its entrenchment and influence in the regions it controls. Local adaptation is evidenced by the decentralized collection of *zakat*, as JNIM often allows villages to handle it themselves and retrieves the funds later.¹⁰⁴ By giving local populations more control over certain aspects of administration, JNIM fosters goodwill and strengthens its relationships with these communities.

In other cases, JNIM fighters collect *zakat* themselves, creating a source of internal tension within JNIM. These tensions are

particularly high when fighters from one ethnic group collect *zakat* from villages inhabited by other ethnic groups. These issues arose in Mema, Gathi-Loumo, and Lere areas of Mopti and Timbuktu, which are co-inhabited by Fulani, Tuareg, and Arab communities, although the *markaz* units are communal in nature along ethnic lines. In order to mitigate these tensions, JNIM ultimately decided that fighters from respective ethnic groups would collect *zakat* from their own communities, which has helped to reduce friction within the group.¹⁰⁵ However, such compromises are not always reached. JNIM has also been known to elevate *zakat* to levels that residents have deemed unacceptable, to the extent that almost all animals in certain villages are seized, leaving residents extremely economically vulnerable.¹⁰⁶

Justice provision

JNIM's self-styled justice system also shows local adaptation by incorporating both internal and community-appointed *cadis* (or judges). JNIM has likewise undertaken initiatives to generate support among local communities, including anti-banditry operations and the arrest of individuals involved in robberies, gang activity, and other crimes.¹⁰⁷ The group also intervenes to arbitrate cases of livestock theft and highway robberies and the return of stolen items to local communities, such as in the case of the recovery and return of stolen telecommunications antenna batteries in Madiakoye, Mali.¹⁰⁸ In another notable case, JNIM also punished two of its

local commanders in Gourma area of Mali for the ill-treatment of members from the Tuareg Imghad community. Another example involves JNIM militants being reprimanded by their local commanders after closing down schools in the villages of Intechaq, Telabit, and Aoukenek, in Tessalit cercle of Kidal region in November 2022. The local commander subsequently ordered the schools to be reopened. In meting out sanctions to wrongdoers within and outside its ranks, the group aims to foster positive relationships with the communities under its control.

JNIM's relationship management with NGOs

One form of JNIM's regulatory functions involves negotiating access to communities with NGOs, kidnapping for intelligence, and counter-banditry efforts. Since the group operates in areas where the state has historically struggled to provide basic services – which have in some contexts long been provided by NGOs – aid groups continue to help fill the gap by supplying these services.

In comparison to the more restrictive IS Sahel, JNIM is more permissive of certain NGO activities in areas under its control. However, this is in part because it relieves pressure to provide essential goods and services to vulnerable communities. The group also sometimes leverages humanitarian access and supplies to advance its own agenda. JNIM has diverted aid trucks and distributed food and medicine to select communities in the areas it controls on multiple occasions. JNIM has systematically hijacked transport trucks and vehicles carrying

a variety of goods and supplies along major roadways. This was particularly prevalent during 2019 and 2020 in the Sahel region, with notable hotspots including Gaskinde, Gaik-Goita, and Mentao, which are located not far from Soum's provincial capital, Djibo in Burkina Faso. It is believed that some of the confiscated goods were redistributed among communities and villages supportive of JNIM.¹⁰⁹ Similar events have frequently taken place in East region. A noteworthy incident occurred in April 2020, when JNIM militants intercepted an NGO truck carrying supplies intended for internally displaced persons on the Fada N'Gourma–Pama road. The seized goods were subsequently handed out to villagers residing in the Kabonga area. Its broader relationship with NGOs is a mix of permissiveness and predation, (the latter will be examined in the next section). Only once has JNIM publicized its own provision of aid in its media and propaganda efforts.¹¹⁰

JNIM's targeted theft of cars also illustrates their financing-governance dilemma, particularly as it applies to the group's relationships with NGOs. The group has engaged in the widespread theft of not only NGO vehicles but also of ambulances owned by district health centers. In May 2022, an NGO security adviser who had been monitoring incidents of vehicle theft said that eight district ambulances had been stolen in Est, Nord-Est, Nord, and Sahel provinces of Burkina Faso since the start of the year. These ambulances were used by the state's district health centers but were vulnerable to theft by JNIM since they were adapted four-wheel-drive Land Cruisers, the type of vehicle that was useful to their operations.¹¹¹ Stealing these ambulances meant JNIM not only acquired new vehicles, but also it inhibited the state from providing healthcare.¹¹² While IS Sahel is also active in some of these areas and engages in vehicle theft, JNIM has been the more active carjacker.

JNIM often targets NGO vehicles and has become adept at stealing not just singular cars, but entire convoys. In April 2022, a convoy of eight new United Nations vehicles bound for Niger was stolen on the road between Matiacoali and Kantchari by presumed JNIM combatants.¹¹³ Nevertheless, JNIM combatants occasionally returned stolen NGO vehicles after using the car. In one case in February 2022, JNIM returned an NGO car it had hijacked to an NGO based in Nouna in Boucle du Mouhoun, Burkina Faso. The combatants who took it informed the NGO staff that they needed the car for an operation, as well as to carry an older commander, who needed air conditioning during the journey. The car was returned about a month after the theft.¹¹⁴ Given that in some areas JNIM relies partially on NGOs to help sustain local residents' basic needs, the group does not wish to alienate them entirely, and is generally more permissive in regard to humanitarian access than IS Sahel. However, operational needs are evidently prioritized.

CONSOLIDATED CONTROL AND SMUGGLING IN THE WAP COMPLEX

The WAP Complex is a transboundary site stretching across Niger, Burkina Faso, and Benin that is preserved for its biodiversity. The Burkinabe portion of the WAP Complex bisects the borders of Sahelian states (Niger and Burkina Faso) with coastal states (Benin, with Togo and Nigeria nearby). Many local residents have long relied on this natural smuggling corridor. The WAP Complex is a remote, well-covered stretch of land that allows small and some larger bands of smugglers to take advantage of price differentials between Sahelian and coastal states.¹¹⁵

When JNIM arrived in these protected areas in 2018, they found common ground with local smuggling networks and developed deep connections with local illicit economies. Smugglers in this area have aided JNIM in getting to know the territory, and in forging relationships between combatants and civilians living around the protected areas. In parts of the WAP Complex, JNIM has ejected state presence, including park rangers, security services, customs, and local officials.¹¹⁶

Smugglers and their dependents living in the area are well-placed to help JNIM navigate and have a direct interest in

helping JNIM push out state forces. Criminal actors make ideal recruits for JNIM due to their familiarity with the area, possession of weapons, and ability to mobilize quickly.¹¹⁷

In 2015, several men described as "bandits", in contact with Fulani fighters from MUJAO operating in Tillaberi and Mali, were arrested by Nigerien forces in Park W, part of the WAP Complex. Subsequently, in 2017, the link between Ansarul Islam and the East region first came to light when the spouse of an Ansarul Islam lieutenant was discovered residing temporarily in the regional capital of Fada N'Gourma. The gendarmerie apprehended her near Pama, where a local imam had accommodated her under the premise that she was visiting her family.¹¹⁸ These precursor events underscore an effort by JNIM and IS Sahel predecessor groups to establish links and potentially a presence in the area years before violent militant activities began in the region in early 2018.

Smugglers and their dependents in southern Burkina Faso reportedly helped JNIM identify police and park ranger posts for targeting. Locally unpopular officials were allegedly among the first to be targeted.¹¹⁹ By removing state officials, smuggling can become less risky and more



The Beninese government has created a Special Brigade to ensure wildlife preservation in Pendjari National Park.

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profitable. In return, smugglers provide JNIM with intelligence on the locations of customs posts, ranger stations, military outposts, and tracks that can be navigated by motorcycle.¹²⁰ An official from the Water and Forestry service in Falmey, Niger, said that convoys of motorbikes were frequently seen passing through the area in the middle of the night, and these were known to be smugglers transporting JNIM elements on their motorbikes. Whenever possible, JNIM members avoid moving overtly and being seen with their weapons.¹²¹

The eviction of rangers and security forces has allowed residents of areas around the WAP Complex to engage in a number of illicit activities, which previously would have carried the risk of imprisonment or severe fines (or bribes) if they had been caught. Smuggling has reportedly increased along the riverine route passing along the eastern edge of the WAP Complex, running through Malanville.

Pirogue boats passing northwards from Benin's Pendjari Park into Niger via the Niger river have reportedly increased the volumes of smuggled goods they are carrying. This increased activity resulted in the construction of new landing stages in villages between Malanville in Benin, and Falmey and Niamey in Niger.¹²²

Despite JNIM's seemingly mixed stance on the practice, the departure of rangers from the WAP Complex has seemingly led to a sharp increase in poaching. Reports indicate that the elephant population has declined over the past several years in Park W, and local bushmeat prices have fallen, suggesting increased poaching.¹²³ As in the context of informal artisanal gold mining, JNIM's positioning as a gatekeeper enabling access to state-forbidden resources has comprised a central element of its engagement with local communities and is indeed a key element of JNIM narratives in many corridors around the WAP Complex.

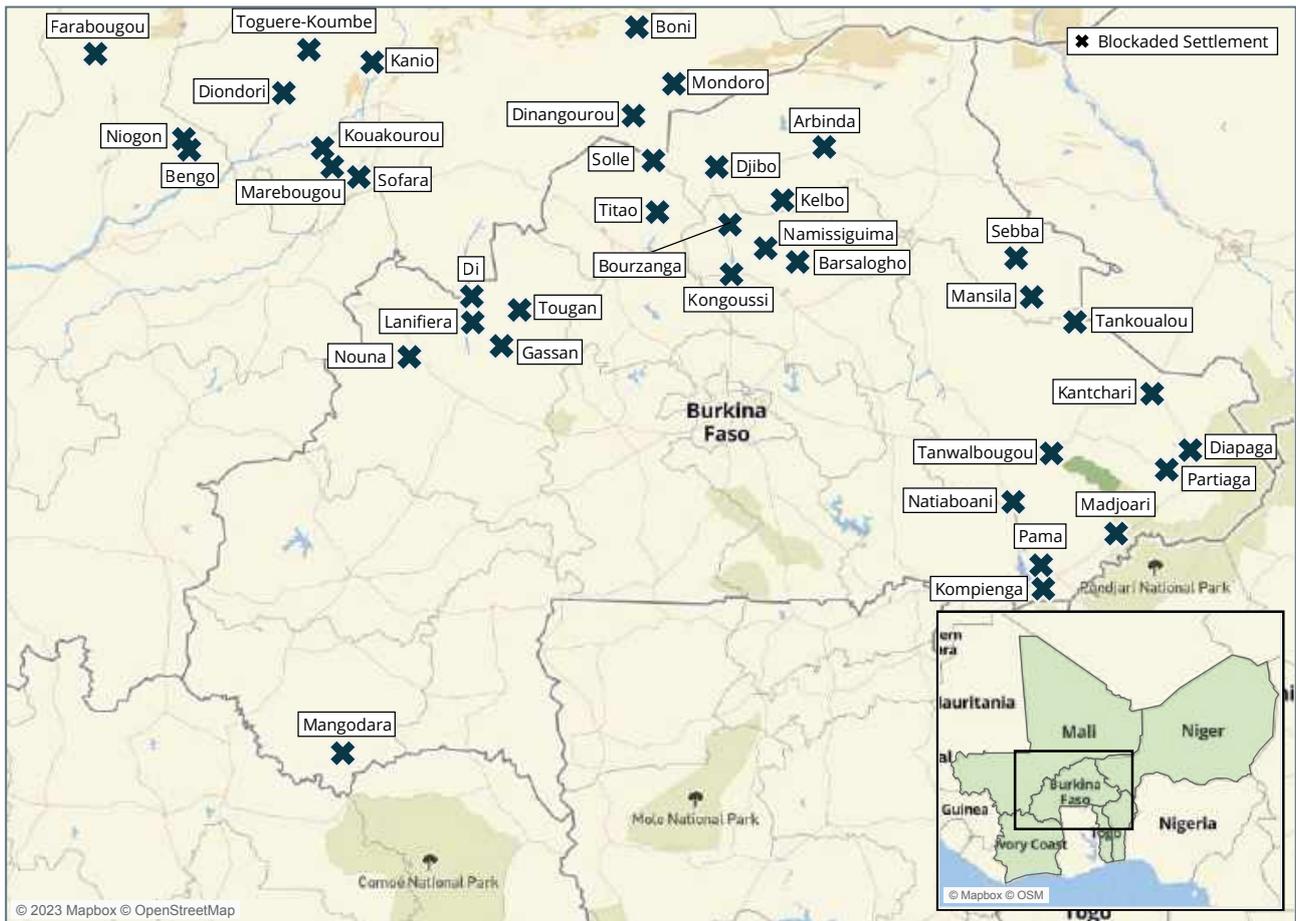


FIGURE 9 Towns and villages under JNIM blockade, 2 March – July 2023.

SOURCE ACLED, author (Héni Nsaibia) dataset

Embargoes and blockades

A key aspect of JNIM’s economic warfare strategy is the imposition of embargoes and blockades on areas perceived as non-compliant or aligned with the state. The array of factors triggering these embargoes highlights the complexity of the issues at play, with each situation having unique and context-specific drivers. JNIM imposes embargoes for various reasons, including disputes over Sharia law enforcement, accusations of collaboration with state forces, perceived abuses by local militias, and violations of peace accords. The consequences of these embargoes are severe, resulting in increased violence, targeted attacks, and heightened insecurity for local populations caught in between attacks and reprisals by militants, militias, and government forces. The underlying tensions and ensuing embargoes imposed as a form of collective punishment tend to spiral into larger conflicts and hence spillover from a specific town or village.

JNIM has deployed embargoes and blockades in various towns and villages in both Mali and Burkina Faso, and to a lesser

degree in Niger (*see map above*). The group has also imposed large-scale embargoes on vital agricultural areas, such as the Niono area in Mali,¹²⁴ and the Sourou valley in Burkina Faso.¹²⁵ Other instances where larger embargoes have been imposed on whole administrative subdivisions include the Bandiagara region (“Le Pays Dogon”) in Mali,¹²⁶ and the Madjoari department in the Kompienga province of Burkina Faso’s Est region.¹²⁷ These embargoes not only weaken local economies but also further isolate communities and limit their access to essential goods and services. The targeting of areas harboring vast farmlands, such as Niono – which is part of the Office du Niger irrigation scheme and the Sourou valley – severely affects the livelihoods of local communities, but also has a significant impact on the broader Malian and Burkinabe economies, as these areas are vital for food security and economic stability.

The first villages that suffered JNIM-imposed embargoes included the villages of Kanio, Kouakourou, and

Toguere-Koumbe in the Mopti region due to disputes over Sharia law enforcement. These villages are predominantly inhabited by the Bozo ethnic group who primarily are fishermen and farmers living along the Niger river. The embargoes in Kanio and Kouakourou began in September 2017 and Toguere-Koumbe in March 2018. The presence of FAMA patrols in these villages exacerbated the security situation, with JNIM militants accusing villagers of collaborating with the army.¹²⁸

In Niono, JNIM militants accused Bambara Dozo hunters of abusing the local Fulani community and imposed an embargo on Farabougou village and its surroundings in early October 2020. Additionally, in Marebougou, located in the Djenne cercle of the Mopti region, JNIM militants imposed an embargo that began in April 2021 after a Dozo chief violated a signed peace accord by attempting to expand his influence and recruit members. The impact of the embargo was not limited to Marebougou as violence spanned three communes in Djenne and Mopti cercles. In Burkina Faso, JNIM imposed an embargo on Mansila town after a conflict between residents and militants arose due to an attack on a woman for not complying with imposed Islamic dress codes.¹²⁹ In other instances, JNIM enacted embargoes in response to the mobilization of state-backed self-defense militias, like the VDP, leading to towns such as Bourzanga, Barsalogo, and Kongoussi being declared “enemy” territories.¹³⁰

JNIM's use of embargoes has both evolved and increased over time. Initially, they were deployed in isolated instances often related to non-compliance with JNIM's interpretation of Sharia law or perceived collaboration with state forces. However, they

have expanded to larger areas, and for a variety of reasons. These include disputes over local resources, power dynamics, perceived abuses by local militias, and resistance against the recruitment efforts by the group. JNIM's escalated use and growing geographic reach of embargoes suggests they have become essential tools in JNIM's strategy to enforce Sharia law, retaliate against collaboration, take control of resources and strategic areas, and respond to local conflict in the group's areas of influence or affecting the group's key constituencies.

Over time, the use of embargoes and blockades expanded to serve broader strategic objectives. For instance, JNIM imposed large-scale embargoes affecting agricultural heartlands, in Niono in Mali since October 2020,¹³¹ and in the Sourou Valley in Burkina Faso in January 2023.¹³² This indicated a shift from reactive and localized embargoes to more proactive and large-scale economic warfare, which is also reflected in the blockades imposed on major towns and along major transit routes. JNIM's use of embargoes and blockades has further evolved into a broader effort to counter state forces and state-backed militias, suggesting that they have evolved into a strategic tool in response to counter-militancy efforts and popular counter-mobilization.

If the current trend continues, it is possible that embargoes and blockades will remain a significant part of JNIM's strategy. The group may escalate the use of these tactics coupled with the increasing mass violence against civilians in areas of resistance and against those who demonstrate collaboration with state forces or pro-government militias. Therefore, there is a heightened risk of the continued use of embargoes as a form of collective punishment and control measure.

Forced evictions

JNIM's use of forced evictions is an additional part of its overall strategy and can be seen as a reverse application of the “oil spot theory” of counterinsurgency. The oil spot theory involves concentrating pro-government forces in a specific area and gradually expanding areas of government control, winning the trust and support of local populations, and providing them with security and essential services.¹³³ The goal is to create an expanding “oil spot” of stability, which eventually engulfs and isolates the insurgent forces.

In contrast, JNIM's forced eviction strategy involves forcibly removing populations from areas under its control, often to punish perceived disloyalty and counter-mobilization, to create buffer zones between its territories and those controlled by the government or rival groups. In return, this frees up territory to plan and stage an attack or to impose an embargo without

having to defend villages inhabited by supportive communities. This approach effectively creates “negative oil spot” areas – or buffer zones – devoid of population and support, which in turn can make it difficult for the state or other actors to establish control and provide essential services.

While this strategy may assist JNIM in maintaining control over and subverting any meaningful state presence in certain areas in the short term, it also carries several disadvantages. Forced evictions can lead to resentment and hostility among local populations, undermining JNIM's efforts to build support and legitimacy. This can make it more challenging for the group to maintain control over territories and populations in the long term. Forced evictions may also deprive JNIM of access to essential supplies and the ability to blend in among the population. By forcibly evicting populations,

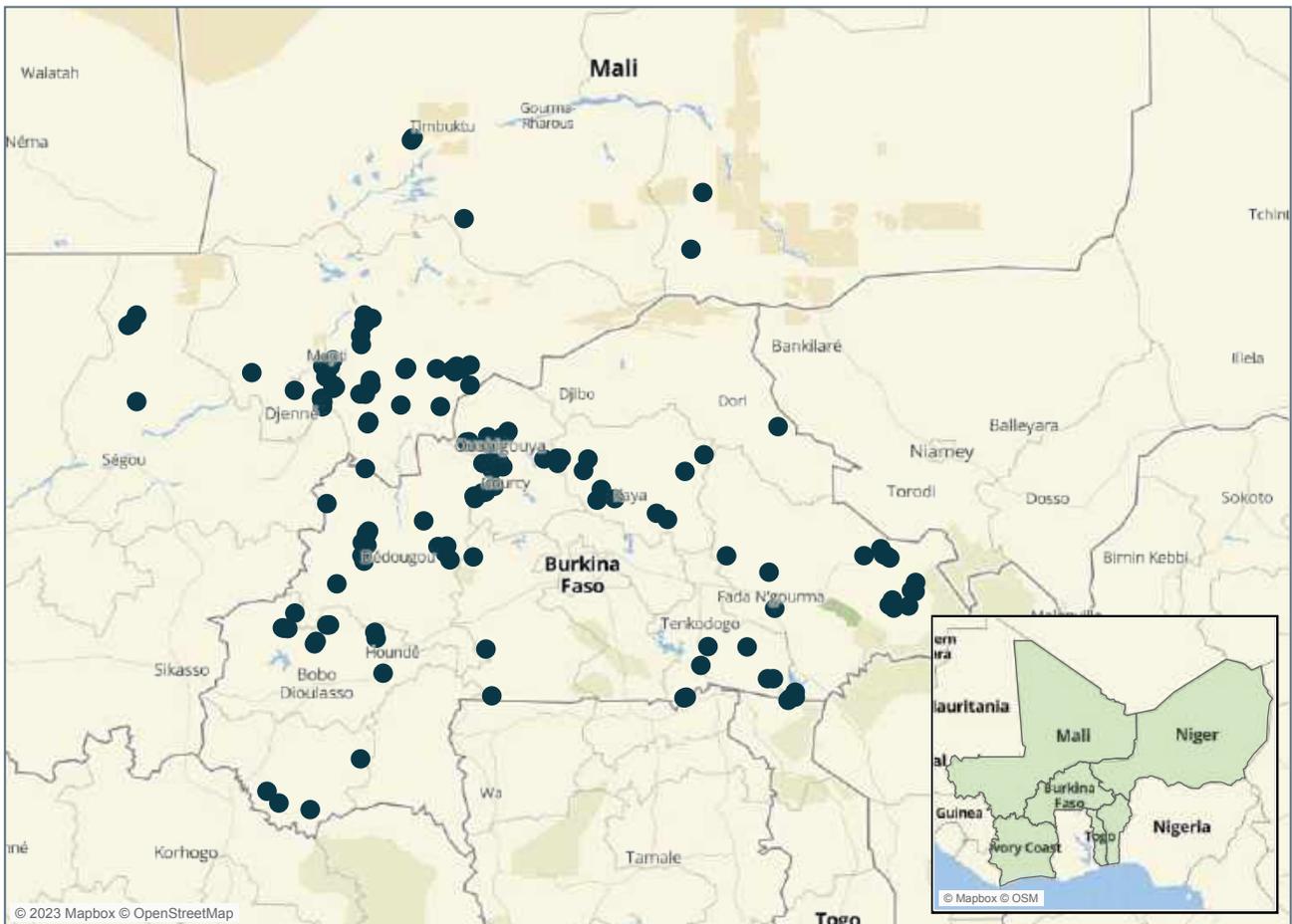


FIGURE 10 Evictions and displacement attributed to JNIM, January 2022 – July 2023.

SOURCE ACLED

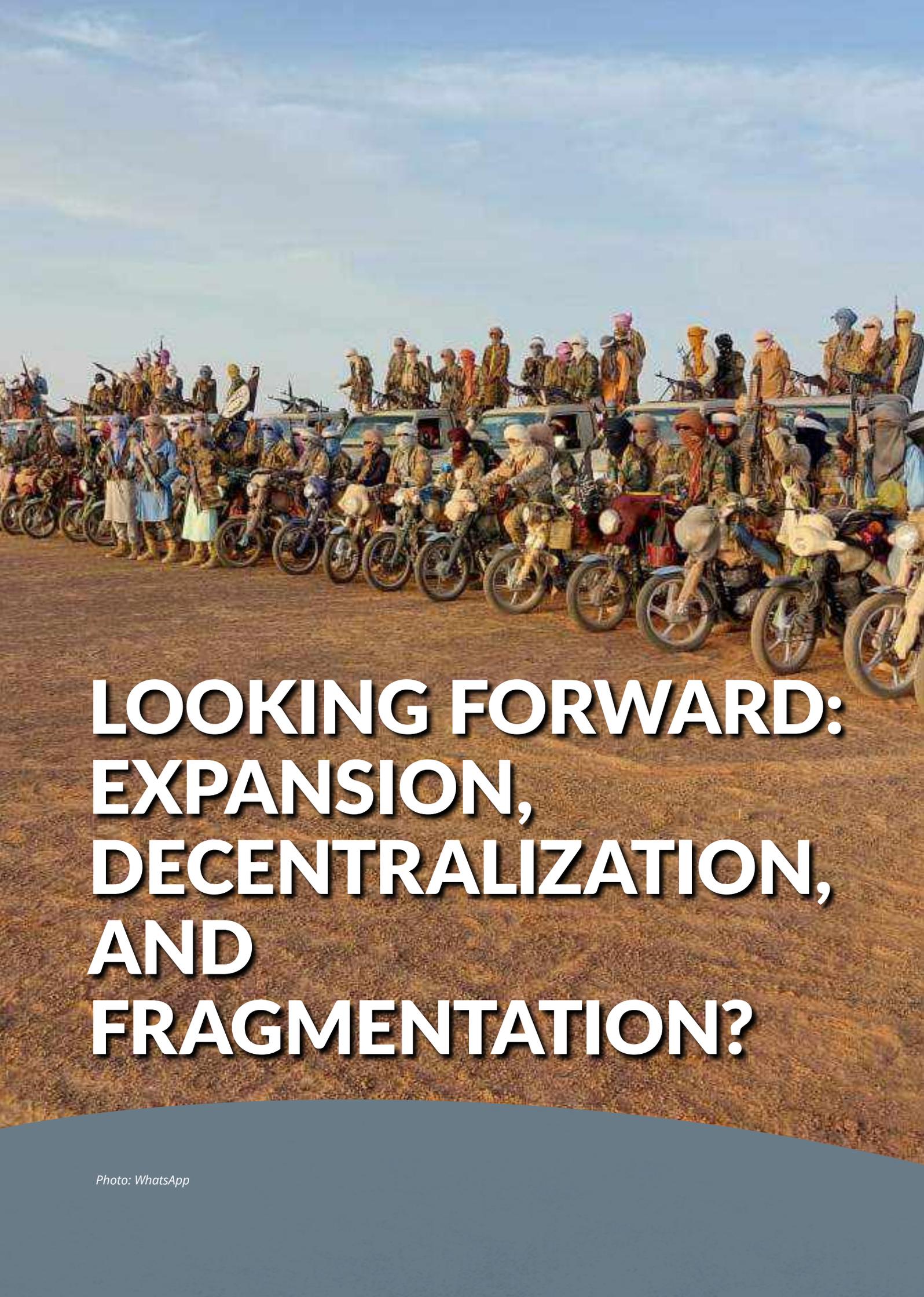
JNIM may inadvertently create spaces for low-cost retaliation from state actors, pro-government militias, or rival insurgent groups, and more easily expose the group to surveillance, airstrikes, and military operations. Thus, the approach has significant adverse effects that can undermine the group’s objectives and long-term prospects.

Forced evictions and widespread displacement further underscore JNIM’s role in escalating insecurity in affected areas due to the group’s militant activities. JNIM intimidates, threatens, and directly attacks residents to force them out of their homes. Since 2022, these tactics have gained momentum and extensively affected numerous regions across Burkina Faso and Mali (see map above). The persistent and frequent occurrence of these forced evictions points to a calculated, sustained campaign by the group, rather than sporadic or isolated incidents.

The group’s systematic targeting and displacement of entire villages suggests a deliberate strategy to collectively punish

and destabilize local communities, disrupt local economies, establish dominance, and aggravate the ongoing humanitarian crisis. A direct consequence of these forced evictions is the mass migration of rural populations into urban centers, which impacts host communities, strains state resources and humanitarian aid capacities, and complicates the overall management of the humanitarian emergency.

JNIM’s economic warfare strategy, although successful in destabilizing its adversaries and promoting an environment conducive to the insurgency, also carries substantial disadvantages for the group itself. These adverse effects encompass alienating and provoking resentment among affected communities, which erodes the essential popular support that insurgents rely on, self-inflicted economic harm that deprives the group of revenue and resources, challenges in recruiting new members, difficulties in maintaining support and service provision, as well as a heightened likelihood of counter-mobilization and reprisals.



LOOKING FORWARD: EXPANSION, DECENTRALIZATION, AND FRAGMENTATION?

Photo: WhatsApp

As JNIM expands into the southern and western regions of Mali, large parts of Burkina Faso, and the northernmost border areas of West African littoral states, the group's militant tactics, economic warfare, and involvement in illicit economies have evolved significantly. JNIM has successfully developed and employed a strategic blueprint for expanding its operations and exerting control or influence over vast territories across national borders in the region.

In the southern and western regions of Mali, JNIM is in an advanced infiltration phase, targeting local populations through psychological operations and coercion. In December 2022, JNIM militants abducted four aid workers in the Kita cercle of Kayes region – a first for the region – potentially due to the militants mistaking them for forest guards. The group's primary focus remains on attacking security checkpoints and ranger stations to weaken the government forces' presence.

The littoral states represent new territory for JNIM and its predecessor groups, bringing uncertainty regarding JNIM's ability to entrench and consolidate control or influence. Despite this, JNIM is increasingly operating deeper within Benin, and to a lesser degree, Togo, and Ghana. Although JNIM has conducted several attacks in Côte d'Ivoire, the pace of attacks has sharply declined since 2022, likely in part due to a significant state security response. Nonetheless, grievances remain, as do reports of ongoing armed group engagement in illicit economies, particularly artisanal gold mining, in the northeast.¹³⁴

It is crucial to consider how the littoral states confront jihadist violence, a threat they are inexperienced in combating. Countries like Benin and Togo have reacted to provocations and adopted similar approaches as their Sahelian neighbors, including arbitrary mass arrests, ethnic profiling, summary executions, and other abuses. These actions have significantly contributed to the growth and spread of militancy and fueled

instability in countries like Burkina Faso and Mali, and Niger to a lesser extent.

Equivalent tactics in regard to illicit economies can have similarly counter-productive consequences. Attempts to restrict fuel smuggling, for example, must reckon with the fact that in many remote areas, smuggled fuel is the only fuel available. For instance, Kompienga province in Burkina Faso has no formal fuel station.¹³⁵ Efforts to stop smuggling convoys have previously been met with resistance from civilians, who are aware that other supplies may not be available. For instance, when in 2017 Malian authorities attempted to extract fuel taxes from a convoy of fuel trucks entering Mali from Niger at Labbezanga, assailants attacked the gendarmes involved, killing one officer.¹³⁶ Operations that will impact the supply and prices of basic goods – whether illicit or not – should ensure in advance that the affected populations have alternative means to cope.

Internally, JNIM has granted greater autonomy to its regional and subregional groups in an effort to appease internal dissent and maintain cohesion. While this strategy has helped manage internal tensions, it also increases the risk of these groups becoming more violent and predatory in their actions. As these subgroups gain more autonomy, they may resort to more extreme measures to assert their dominance, acquire resources, and attract or coerce new recruits. For example, JNIM units in the northern Beninese portion of the WAP Complex made use of threats and forced recruitment in their early interactions with civilians – a tactic that was less observable in their initial approaches to civilian communities in the Burkinabe portions of the biosphere.¹³⁷ This may in part be linked to significant pressure on these units from elements of the state, and rival armed groups.

Increased decentralization and potential deeper divides within JNIM could lead to splits and fragmentation in the group

in the future. The brutalization of the conflict, combined with growing internal tensions, could result in the formation of new offshoots or factions, adding complexity to the already volatile situation in the region. Such fragmentation could provide opportunities for IS Sahel to attract dissenting fighters, as was the trend between 2017 and 2019 in Mali and Burkina Faso. The reversal of this trend in JNIM's favor following the outbreak of conflict between the group and IS Sahel may not be permanent, particularly if JNIM continues to lose major battles and suffer heavy casualties in the fight against IS Sahel.

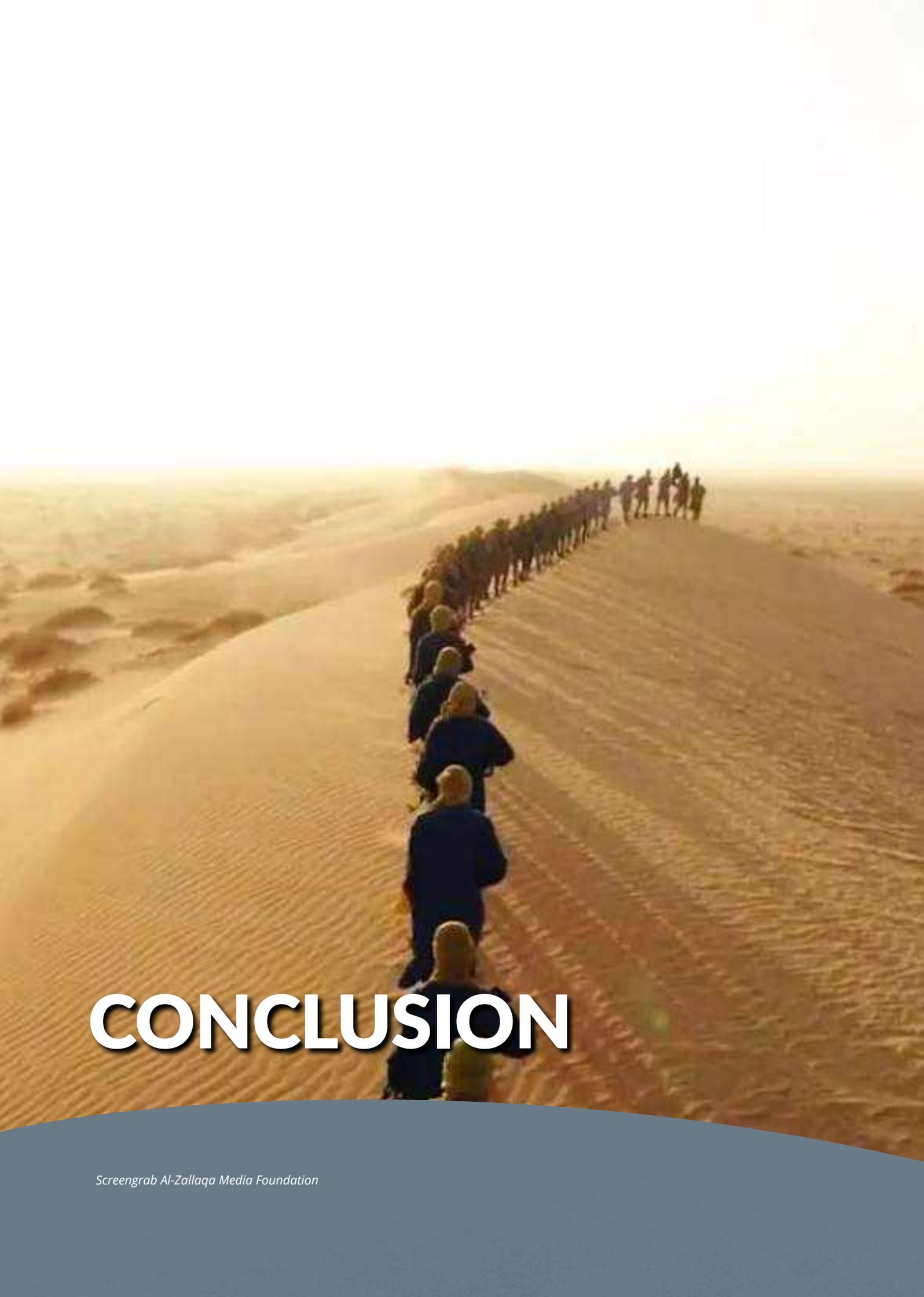
Notably, in Mali, the arrival of the Wagner Group has bolstered FAMA, maintaining pressure on JNIM in some of the group's core areas in central Mali. Similarly, Burkina Faso has shored up its air fleet with drones and helicopters, intensifying an aerial campaign to turn the tide after being increasingly overrun by JNIM.¹³⁸ However, questions remain about whether the momentum of these operations can be maintained in the long-term, considering the high costs and vast territories still outside state control.

Decentralization within JNIM may also result in higher, and potentially less strategic, engagement in illicit economies and activities, including artisanal mining, cattle rustling, and other forms of predatory resource extraction, as more autonomous groups would require greater self-sustainability. Financing motivations could trump governance in dictating JNIM's engagement with illicit and criminal economies at a

local level in some instances of increasingly autonomous local leadership under contexts of strained resources. If the financial incentive supersedes governance goals, the effects could splinter the "pact" with communities, damaging JNIM's legitimacy and risking its long-term objectives.

Despite ongoing challenges, JNIM has repeatedly demonstrated resilience in the face of sustained military campaigns. The group has successfully expanded its operations and control over vast territories across national borders in the region, even while facing growing resistance and counter-mobilization efforts from local populations, state forces, and other armed actors. The protracted and escalating nature of the conflict, combined with JNIM's efforts to mobilize a broader base of fighters, has led to the group becoming more violent and aggressive. Competition with IS Sahel and the need to demonstrate strength and effectiveness have contributed to this trend. Furthermore, the cross-pollination of tactics and ideologies between JNIM and IS Sahel has intensified the levels of violence. This could be damaging to JNIM's relationship with the communities it seeks to govern and presents a risk to its long-term governance objectives.

JNIM's expansion and increased decentralization present an evolving and complex challenge for Sahelian and littoral states and international partners. It is vital to understand the group's trajectory, the potential for fragmentation, and the implications of ongoing trends of violent escalation.



CONCLUSION

Understanding JNIM's approach towards illicit economies must underpin an effective response to delink the group from a central source of financing and legitimacy. This report has outlined how JNIM engages in illicit markets not only with a resourcing objective, but also as a way to win the support of communities, and entrench its legitimacy as a governing authority. Taking action designed to block illicit flows of finance or resources to JNIM not only presents an effectiveness challenge, but it may also compromise long-term objectives by undermining the states' legitimacy at the expense of JNIM's. Moreover, JNIM's sources of funding are highly flexible and localized, and depriving the group of its access to one particular illicit economy may not materially contribute to the deterrence of its violent activity.

In order to ensure stabilization interventions are crime-sensitive and not counterproductive, responses should be tailored to the illicit markets, their typology, their role in shaping instability and violence, as well as contextual dynamics. This includes, for example, taking into account where illicit economies are considered legitimate by the communities and are a source of livelihood, or if they only transit and benefit a small number of people high up in JNIM's hierarchy; while the former is likely to engender pushback to responses seeking to quash the market, the latter is more likely to displace or garner support from communities. More broadly, the role of illicit economies as a revenue stream should not be overlooked at the expense of their importance in governance strategies.

While heavy military action might be necessary, a response should not be limited to that. Public service provision, where possible, should be a priority of the national authorities in order to reassert the state as a service provider and diminish JNIM's reach and governance over communities. A response should take into account the needs of distinct communities, avoiding ethnic profiling, and human rights abuses, and should engage with communities in order to understand how the authorities can ensure support.

JNIM's transformation from a coalition of local jihadist factions into a strategically coherent armed group poses significant challenges to regional and international actors. Its emergence as the most active key armed actor with a significant geographic reach across the Sahel (and beyond) demonstrates that efforts to counter the group have been insufficient. JNIM has withstood years of broad-based counter-militancy while expanding its operations and waging a multi-front war against a range of adversaries. Therefore, it is clear that the evolution of the group and its strategic blueprint makes it necessary to develop thoughtful counter-insurgency strategies that go beyond simplistic approaches, which have already proven counterproductive or failed to produce sustainable results.

It is also necessary to consider that the system JNIM has developed balances autonomy, interdependence, and internal supervision among the various factions, making its organizational structure more cohesive and complex over time. This evolution is key to its resilience and growth, but also to achieving deeper cooperation and coordination between various factions – with many of JNIM's military regions being characterized by a high degree of fluidity between them. These dynamics were more recently manifested through mass mobilization against IS Sahel in Mali's Gourma region and in response to an August 2023 joint offensive by FAMA and Wagner in the Timbuktu region.

Therefore, military pressure or action in JNIM areas of influence can also generate renewed processes of cohesion building despite dissent and tensions within the group. To effectively counter JNIM, it is critical to not only understand the group's past, but also anticipate its future trajectory. Effectively countering JNIM would require a comprehensive approach with a combination of military and, more importantly, socio-political tools that provide communities and sympathizers with alternatives to weaken the group's appeal and influence in the Sahel.

NOTES

- 1 For the purposes of this report, “governance” refers to JNIM’s attempts to regulate the behavior of civilians, to establish themselves as religious authorities, to provide services (particularly dispute resolution, justice, selective security provision and some religious education), and to exercise control over local finances and (illicit) economies, including *zakat* taxation systems, and other related micro-practices. Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hibern Naghizadeh, and Corentin Cohen, “Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel,” Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2021; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Boubacar Ba, “Jihadist Ideological Conflict and Local Governance in Mali,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2022; Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhlel, “Interactions between civilians and jihadists in Mali and Niger,” University of Kent, Kent Academic Repository, 2023.
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 - 32 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 30 September 2020.
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 - 37 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 30 September 2020.
 - 38 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 10 July 2021.
 - 39 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 4 June 2021.
 - 40 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 8 June 2021; 7 July 2021.
 - 41 Twitter @MENASTREAM, 24 June 2021.
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