



Obsidian Research Bureau

COUNTER INSURGENCY PERSPECTIVES

NATO's New Front?

Proxy Warfare & The Weaponization Of

Jihadism In The Sahel

Obsidian Research Bureau

Illuminating the hidden architecture of power and conflict

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This report is dedicated to the victims of JNIM's terror and to the security forces who fight daily to protect their communities. May they find the support they need to achieve victory.

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NATO's NEW FRONT? PROXY WARFARE AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF JIHADISM IN THE SAHEL

The Sahel region has emerged as the global epicenter of terrorism, accounting for over half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in 2025 . At the heart of this crisis stands Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the Al-Qaeda-aligned coalition that has evolved from a regional insurgency into a sophisticated hybrid threat capable of cross-border drone warfare and economic blockade operations. However, the JNIM phenomenon cannot be understood solely through the lens of Salafi-jihadist ideology or local grievances. The group has increasingly become enmeshed in a complex web of geopolitical competition, where great powers and regional actors leverage extremist and separatist forces as instruments of proxy warfare—a pattern that echoes earlier conflicts in Syria, Libya, and elsewhere.

The Logic of Proxy Warfare in the Sahel

Ordinarily in geopolitics, it is not uncommon to find actors cooperating with the enemy of their enemies to gain an upper hand in conflicts . However, the Sahel presents a uniquely complex dynamic in which three distinct groups of actors—Western powers, Russian-backed juntas, and terror groups—find themselves in a triangular competition where the enemy of one's enemy is not necessarily a friend . In this environment, the lines between state interests, ideological objectives, and tactical convenience have become dangerously blurred, with non-state actors serving as convenient instruments for external powers seeking to advance their strategic agendas without committing to direct military engagement.

The Sahel's strategic importance—as a transit corridor between North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as a source of critical minerals including uranium and gold, and as a theater for competing geopolitical visions—has transformed it into a proving ground for proxy warfare . France, the former colonial power, has sought to maintain influence through military interventions like Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane, though its position has been severely weakened by anti-French sentiment and military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger . Russia, through the Wagner Group and subsequently the Africa Corps, has aggressively moved to fill the security vacuum, offering military support to Sahelian juntas in exchange for access to natural resources and geopolitical leverage . Ukraine, locked in its own existential conflict with Russia, has sought to open a “second front” in Africa by supporting groups aligned against Russian interests . Meanwhile, Turkey has pursued its own influence through proxy groups, including Islamist forces in Syria .

The Historical Precedent: NATO and Extremist Groups

The current use of extremist groups as proxies in the Sahel is not without historical precedent. During the Syrian civil war, a complex constellation of actors—including the United States, Britain, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar—provided support to opposition forces that included Islamist and jihadist

elements . The Free Syrian Army, dominated by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, coordinated closely with foreign jihadist groups, including the Al-Nusra Front, which was not placed on the US terrorist blacklist for months precisely because it was “in effect a key ally in the war against Syria” . Turkey, a NATO member, used Islamic nationalist and Takfiri groups including HTS (Syrian Al-Qaeda) and known members of Daesh during its illegal invasion and subsequent occupation of Syrian and Iraqi territory . Turkish and Turkish-backed forces targeted positions where US and other NATO troops were visibly present, creating dangerous situations for alliance cohesion .

In Libya, NATO intervention in 2011 similarly created conditions where jihadist groups could flourish, with the collapse of the Qaddafi regime opening vast arms depots that eventually supplied groups across the Sahel . The Arab uprisings of 2011 marked a turning point where external state support no longer adhered to the historic East versus West bloc system, opening the possibility of allies forming constellations where they could back forces on opposite sides . This pattern of opportunistic alliance with extremist elements—often justified through the language of humanitarian intervention or counterterrorism—has established a dangerous precedent that is now being replicated in the Sahel.

Ukraine’s Proxy Engagement: The Anti-Russia Dimension

The most dramatic manifestation of proxy dynamics in the Sahel has been the involvement of Ukrainian intelligence in supporting forces arrayed against Russian interests. Mali formally accused Ukraine of directly supporting Tuareg rebels in the country’s north, providing intelligence, logistical support, and military technology training to armed groups . The Malian military discovered Ukrainian-manufactured FPV drones and documents linked to Ukraine’s Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) abandoned by militants during a counter-offensive .

What makes this particularly significant—and troubling—is the relationship between these supported groups and JNIM. Ukrainian intelligence has primarily supported the secular Tuareg separatist movement, the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) . However, the FLA has forged a de facto operational alliance with JNIM, with the two groups conducting coordinated attacks on Malian forces in April 2026 and sharing tactics and equipment . This has created a concerning situation where Ukrainian support for separatist forces indirectly benefits the Al-Qaeda-affiliated JNIM through technical diffusion and joint operations .

The Ukrainian military intelligence spokesman, Andriy Yusov, publicly stated that Tuareg rebels who ambushed Russian personnel in Mali “received necessary information, and not just information, which allowed them to carry out a successful military operation,” adding that cooperation would “continue” and Russian forces would be “punished wherever they are in the world” . This admission, combined with reports of approximately twenty Ukrainian advisors in northern Mali training armed groups in drone use and combat techniques, indicates a deliberate strategy of using proxy forces to degrade Russian influence in Africa .

The stated justification—countering Russian aggression in the context of the Ukraine war—represents a significant expansion of conflict geography. Russia supports the Sahelian juntas, and Ukraine counters by supporting their opponents, regardless of whether those opponents are secular separatists or Al-Qaeda affiliates. The risk of “technical assistance spillover” has been explicitly noted by observers who worry that the transfer of Ukrainian drone technology and training to the FLA could eventually benefit JNIM, particularly given the two groups’ operational cooperation .

France's Ambiguous Position

France's role in the Sahel has been characterized by a combination of genuine counterterrorism operations and the pursuit of strategic interests, including securing access to uranium and maintaining political hegemony rooted in its former colonial status . However, France's efforts have been hampered by the rise of anti-Western sentiment and its inability to address the underlying local networks, ethnic bases, and socioeconomic grievances that sustain groups like JNIM .

The junta-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have aggressively expelled French forces, turning to Russia instead . However, allegations continue to surface regarding French covert activities in the region. Niger's military leader, General Abdourahamane Tiani, publicly accused France of "pushing and financing the authors" of a recent attack on Niamey airport, claiming that French intelligence and special forces had flooded mercenaries with weapons and equipment since April 2025 in the Liptako-Gourma region . Tiani further alleged that France provided 300 million CFA francs (approximately \$542,000) to armed groups, including JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), to conduct operations .

Whether these allegations are accurate or serve as convenient narratives for the junta to justify their anti-French posture, they reflect the reality of a region where every major power is accused of supporting extremist groups for their own ends. The perception that Western powers might be willing to tolerate or even encourage jihadist activity to undermine rival powers—Russia, China, or regional governments—has created an environment of profound mistrust .

Russia: Fighting Terror While Supporting Authoritarianism

Russia's involvement in the Sahel through the Wagner Group and Africa Corps has been driven by a combination of economic interests, strategic positioning, and the desire to counter Western influence . In Mali, Wagner personnel were paid \$10.8 million monthly and granted mining concessions in exchange for providing security and training to the junta . Russian engagement has been framed as a counterterrorism mission, with the Africa Corps actively working to secure supply routes and prevent JNIM from cutting off fuel supplies to Bamako .

However, Russian actions have been heavily criticized for their brutality and ineffectiveness. Between January and October 2024, Malian military and allied Wagner forces killed approximately 1,063 civilians, creating grievances that JNIM actively exploits for recruitment . The rebranding of Wagner as the Africa Corps—a name evoking the Nazi-era Afrika Korps—has not changed the fundamental reality that Russian forces are unable to fully support the Malian military against JNIM .

Russia's strategy faces a fundamental contradiction: it cannot both support authoritarian junta and effectively fight a counterinsurgency that requires winning hearts and minds. The Wagner-Africa Corps experience in Mali has been described as a failure, with the group suffering significant losses, withdrawing from the country, and leaving much of the actual fighting to African mercenaries .

The Three-Way Competition: A New Cold War?

The current configuration in the Sahel represents a three-way competition between Western allies, Russian-backed juntas, and terrorist groups . Western states are focused on cooperating with coastal states through frameworks like the Accra Initiative, aiming to prevent the southward spread of terrorism . Juntas

and their Russian allies are fighting terrorist groups, though often counterproductively. Terror groups, despite their internal differences, are hostile to both Western interests and Russian-backed juntas .

What makes this situation particularly dangerous is the absence of the “enemy of my enemy” logic that typically drives proxy dynamics. In the Sahel, the three groups are “enemies” to each other in a triangular competition where cooperation across state and non-state lines remains unpredictable . Western states oppose both Russian-backed juntas and terror groups; the juntas and their Russian allies also oppose terror groups but have moved against Western interests; and terror groups are against both Western interests and the Russian-backed juntas .

This triangular dynamic creates perverse incentives. A Western state seeking to counter Russian influence might be tempted to turn a blind eye to JNIM operations that degrade Russian positions. A Russian-backed junta might prioritize attacks on its domestic political enemies over counterterrorism. A terrorist group like JNIM might accept covert support from a state actor to weaken a common enemy, even if that state actor is ideologically opposed to the group’s objectives.

JNIM’s Exploitation of Proxy Dynamics

JNIM has demonstrated an impressive capacity to exploit the proxy dynamics that surround it. The group’s strategic expansion from Mali into Burkina Faso, Niger, and coastal West Africa has been facilitated by the security vacuum created by the French withdrawal and Russia’s inability to provide effective security . JNIM has integrated local grievances—ethnic marginalization, economic exclusion, state abuse—into its narrative of resistance, making it difficult for external powers to counter without addressing these root causes .

JNIM has also benefited from the technical diffusion enabled by proxy support. Ukrainian-supplied FPV drone technology intended for Tuareg separatists has reportedly found its way to JNIM-affiliated forces . JNIM’s propaganda apparatus has masterfully framed the group as a legitimate resistance movement defending marginalized populations against corrupt, foreign-backed governments . The group has even opened channels on platforms like TikTok to debate civilians, justify its rule, and promote its implementation of Sharia law, indicating a sophisticated understanding of modern communications .

The Need for Strategic Clarity

JNIM is not simply a Salafi-jihadist terrorist group; it is a product of the geopolitical fragmentation and proxy warfare that have consumed the Sahel. The group has been shaped by—and has exploited—the competing agendas of France, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and regional powers, each of which has, at various points, seen value in supporting or tolerating extremist forces to advance their own interests.

The pattern of state support for extremist proxies, established in Syria and Libya, has now come to the Sahel. As the cases of Ukraine, France, and others demonstrate, counterterrorism is often subordinated to geopolitical competition. This has created a situation where the “fight against terrorism” is little more than a smokescreen for power projection, with jihadist groups like JNIM being the ultimate beneficiaries.

Addressing the JNIM threat requires a recognition that military solutions alone are insufficient and that counterterrorism cannot be decoupled from the broader geopolitical dynamics that sustain the conflict. Without addressing the proxy dynamics that enable JNIM to thrive—through technical support, strategic

toleration, or the creation of security vacuums—counterterrorism efforts will remain merely reactive. The Sahel has become the global epicenter of terrorism not despite great power competition, but in large part because of it.

Strategic Analysis of the JNIM Threat in the Sahel

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has evolved into the world's second deadliest terrorist organization, responsible for over 1,200 deaths across four countries in 2025 . Operating as an Al-Qaeda-aligned Salafi-jihadist coalition, JNIM has transformed from a regional insurgency into a sophisticated hybrid threat capable of conducting cross-border drone warfare, imposing economic blockades on national capitals, and exploiting local grievances to expand its influence across West Africa . The group's recent technological evolution, enabled by external training from Ukrainian intelligence elements and the absorption of drone expertise from allied separatist forces, represents a paradigm shift in Sahelian security . This report provides a comprehensive analysis of JNIM's structure, financial networks, external support, operational tactics, intelligence vulnerabilities, and strategic defeat mechanisms, drawing on open-source intelligence, security force reports, and academic analyses to present a complete picture of one of Africa's most dangerous terrorist organizations.

Structure, Numbers, Location & Leadership

JNIM was formed on March 2, 2017, through the formal merger of four Malian extremist organizations: Ansar al-Din, al-Murabitun, the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), and the Sahara Emirate subgroup of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) . This unification consolidated pre-existing operational cooperation under a single banner, creating a more formidable and resource-rich entity capable of sustained, multi-national operations. The group's formation was announced via a video message in which leader Iyad ag Ghali pledged allegiance to the amir of AQIM, the amir of Al-Qaeda, and the leader of the Taliban . AQIM's leadership formally approved the merger on March 16, 2017, with Al-Qaeda central endorsing the new group on March 19, 2017 .

JNIM's ideological foundation rests on the Salafi-jihadist tradition, which combines a literalist interpretation of Islamic scripture with a militant commitment to establishing Islamic governance through force. The group's stated objectives are the establishment of a Salafi-Islamist state in West Africa governed by Sharia law and the expulsion of all Western influence from the region . Ghali has articulated a dual strategy: expanding the group's presence across West Africa through militant training while simultaneously appeasing local communities through resource distribution and local agreements . This combination of coercion and co-optation has proven highly effective in building local support bases.

The group's ideology is disseminated through a sophisticated propaganda apparatus that includes the Az-Zallaqa Media platform, which produces high-quality videos, audio recordings, and written materials in multiple languages including Arabic, French, and local Sahelian languages . JNIM's narrative emphasizes themes of anti-colonial resistance, defense of Muslim communities against state oppression, and the establishment of divine justice in corrupt societies. This ideological framing resonates particularly strongly in regions where state presence is weak, abusive, or exploitative.

Leadership Structure and Key Figures

JNIM maintains a centralized leadership structure anchored by its Majlis al-Shura (leadership council), which sets strategic priorities and coordinates major operations. The group's leadership exhibits a mix of veteran jihadists with international experience and local commanders who have deep roots in Sahelian communities.

- **Iyad ag Ghali (Amir):** The founder and supreme leader of JNIM since its inception. Born in 1954 in the Kidal region of Mali, Ghali is a veteran Tuareg insurgent who first gained prominence in the 1990s Tuareg uprisings. His background includes service in the Libyan Arab Legion under Muammar Gaddafi, where he developed military skills and networks that would later prove invaluable. The United States designated Ghali as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2013. In June 2023, the Malian government announced a \$3.5 million reward for information leading to his capture or elimination. Ghali is believed to maintain a mobile command presence, moving between safe houses in northern Mali and southern Algeria.
- **Amadou Kouffa (Deputy to Ghali):** A founding member of JNIM and founder/amir of the Macina Liberation Front (MLF). As a Fulani cleric from central Mali, Kouffa's ethnic background enables the group to exploit farmer-herder tensions and the marginalization of Fulani populations across the Sahel. Kouffa was trained in Mauritania and has deep ties to the broader AQIM network. His leadership of the MLF has been instrumental in JNIM's southward expansion into the agriculturally rich regions of central Mali.
- **Jafar Dicko:** JNIM deputy leader in Burkina Faso, sanctioned by the United States in 2024. Dicko oversees kidnappings in Burkina Faso through the JNIM-affiliated group Ansarul Islam. He has been instrumental in the group's dramatic expansion into Burkina Faso, which has become the epicenter of the insurgency. Dicko's network extends across the tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.

Other Key Leaders:

- **Sidan ag Hitta:** Sanctioned by the US in 2021, Hitta coordinated all JNIM negotiations concerning Western hostages. His role in managing the kidnapping portfolio demonstrates the group's sophisticated understanding of hostage diplomacy.
- **Abdelhamid Abou Zeid:** A veteran AQIM commander who operated in northern Mali and was reported killed by French forces in 2013. His legacy lives on through the katiba that bears his name.
- **Mokhtar Belmokhtar:** The notorious "Mr. Marlboro," who led al-Murabitun before the merger and remains an iconic figure within the broader Al-Qaeda network.
- **Oumar Kerena (also known as Farouk or Housseini Mawdo):** Holds a key coordination role inside the organization, managing logistics and supply chains across the region.
- **Abu Bakr al-Ansari:** A charismatic cleric and propagandist who has been instrumental in shaping the group's theological discourse and online presence.

Operational Geography and Strategic Expansion

JNIM's area of operations has expanded dramatically from its northern Mali origins. The group is primarily based in Mali and Burkina Faso but maintains active presence across much of West Africa, including significant areas of Niger, Nigeria, and coastal West Africa.

- Mali: JNIM operates extensively in northern regions (Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal) and has expanded into central (Mopti) and western (Kayes) areas. In September 2024, JNIM attacked Bamako's international airport and a military barracks in the capital, demonstrating its capacity to strike at the heart of state power. The group has imposed blockades in southern Mali since September 2025, cutting off trade routes and starving towns. In July 2025, the Macina Liberation Front launched seven simultaneous attacks spanning hundreds of kilometers in western Mali. The Kayes region is particularly significant as it produces 80% of Mali's gold and serves as a vital corridor for fuel and food imports from Senegal and Mauritania.
- Burkina Faso: This country has become JNIM's primary operational theater, with over 280 attacks recorded in the first half of 2025. Burkina Faso was ranked the country most affected by terrorism globally in the latest Global Terrorism Index. JNIM is active in 11 of the country's 13 regions, with particularly strong presence in the Sahel, Est, and Centre-Nord regions. The group has imposed blockades on several towns, including Djibo, which has been under siege for over two years.
- Coastal West Africa: Since 2019, JNIM has conducted incursions into northern Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. This "Coastal Creep" strategy involves infiltration into fragile borderlands rather than territorial conquest. In the Benin-Niger-Nigeria tri-border region, violent incidents increased by 86% in 2024-2025, with fatalities rising over 260% in certain datasets. JNIM's first attack in Nigeria was claimed in 2024, expanding the group's footprint into Africa's most populous country.
- Niger: JNIM maintains active presence in the Tillabéri region and along the Niger-Mali border. The group has conducted attacks on military convoys and mining sites in the area, capitalizing on the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of French and other Western forces.
- Libya: JNIM maintains logistical and financial networks in southwestern Libya, where Al-Qaeda has a "strong presence" according to UN Security Council reports. These networks facilitate the movement of ransom payments, weapons, and fighters between North and West Africa.

Strength and Manpower

Accurate estimation of JNIM's strength remains challenging due to the group's decentralized nature and reliance on part-time combatants. US counterterrorism sources estimate JNIM has at least 6,000 members. Some analysts suggest the actual number may be considerably higher, with the Macina Liberation Front alone estimated at 5,000-8,000 fighters. Many combatants operate as part-time militiamen, moving between active duty and civilian life, which complicates force estimation.

The group's strength is not uniform across its area of operations. In core areas of Mali and Burkina Faso, JNIM can mobilize hundreds of fighters for coordinated operations. In coastal states, its presence is more limited, with small cells conducting episodic attacks. The group's ability to sustain operations across multiple countries simultaneously indicates significant logistical depth and access to recruitment networks.

Organizational Architecture

JNIM employs a three-tier hierarchical structure designed for resilience and adaptability:

- Central leadership (Shura Council): Provides strategic direction and maintains ideological coherence. This body comprises approximately 10-15 senior leaders who meet periodically to set overall strategy.

- Intermediate level (administrative regions/mantiqas and battalions/katibas): Manages regional operations and resource allocation. Each katiba operates semi-autonomously, adapting tactics to local conditions while remaining aligned with the central strategy.
- Local level (small military units/markazs and saryats): Executes tactical operations with significant autonomy. These small units are highly mobile, difficult to track, and can rapidly adapt to changing security conditions.

This structure enables JNIM to balance centralized strategic control with the flexibility needed to adapt to diverse local conditions across multiple countries. The group's ability to conduct coordinated operations across hundreds of kilometers demonstrates the effectiveness of this architecture.

Logistical And Financial Supply

Overview of JNIM's War Economy

JNIM sustains its operations through a diverse funding model that exploits fragile local economies across the Sahel. The group's financial resources are primarily obtained through ransom-taking, extortion, forced taxation, arms smuggling, and cooperation with organized crime networks . The group has developed sophisticated money laundering mechanisms to convert illicit proceeds into usable resources. These methods include lending funds to local merchants, investing with banks, and underwriting small shops to generate profit .

The financial architecture of JNIM is as sophisticated as its operational structure. The group maintains detailed records of tax revenues, expenditures, and investments. It has been known to assassinate those who interfere with its financial operations, demonstrating the strategic importance it places on economic governance. This integration into local economies creates social ties and denies state control over local resources.

Gold Mining and Taxation

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining, often unlawful, accounts for about 50% of the region's gold production, robbing states of billions in revenue and playing into the hands of groups that control mining communities and smuggling routes . JNIM has a vast membership across all three Sahelian states with an increasing foothold in coastal states, enabling it to control gold smuggling routes with the complicity of international criminal networks .

In localities under their influence, JNIM practises strategic governance to secure civilian support. It negates state regulations by permitting mining and logging in restricted natural reserves, often in hazardous conditions . JNIM imposes taxes and protection fees on miners and communities, ostensibly to shield them from rival groups, but in effect, consolidating its control over resource-rich areas.

In southern Burkina Faso near the Côte d'Ivoire border, JNIM has opened protected forest land for gold mining, demonstrating its capacity to control access to natural resources . The group extracts revenue directly from mining activities while providing services such as security and dispute resolution, creating a self-sustaining economic ecosystem. This model has been replicated across the region, with JNIM controlling gold mines in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Gold Smuggling Routes: The illicit gold trade is facilitated by well-established smuggling routes:

- Southern Route: Gold from Burkina Faso moves south through Togo and Benin to markets in Ghana, where it is laundered into the international financial system.
- Northern Route: Gold from Mali moves north through Niger and Algeria, often traded for weapons and other contraband.
- Western Route: Gold from Mali's Kayes region moves west through Senegal, capitalizing on the country's established gold refining infrastructure.

JNIM taxes these movements at multiple points along the route, extracting revenue from both miners and smugglers. In northern Ghana, an estimated 60-70% of artisanal gold is sold to Burkinabe traders and moved north, creating financial flows that could be exploited by JNIM .

Kidnapping for Ransom

Kidnapping for ransom remains one of JNIM's most lucrative activities, with both foreign nationals and local elites targeted . Over 23 kidnappings of foreigners were recorded in 2025 in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. JNIM has a structured leadership hierarchy for managing these operations, with Sidan ag Hitta coordinating all negotiations concerning Western hostages and Jafar Dicko overseeing kidnappings in Burkina Faso .

The group's kidnapping operations have evolved significantly over time:

- Early Phase (2010-2015): Focus on Western tourists and aid workers, with large ransom payments often exceeding millions of dollars.
- Middle Phase (2015-2020): Expansion to include local elites, journalists, and government officials, with smaller but more frequent payments.
- Current Phase (2020-present): Diversification to include mass kidnappings of civilians, forced recruitment, and use of hostages as leverage in negotiations.
- Ransom Payment Mechanisms: The UN Security Council has reported that Al-Qaeda maintains logistical and financial networks in southwestern Libya to facilitate ransom payment movements . These networks provide secure channels for transferring funds, often involving informal money transfer systems and gold bullion.
- Human Costs: The economic toll of ransom in the region extends beyond the payments themselves. Local taxes increase as communities must find a way to pay their own ransom, causing broader economic harm. The payment of ransom to armed groups also contributes to money laundering and terrorist financing on a regional and international scale .

Extortion and Taxation

The group imposes informal taxation and extortion schemes on communities under its influence, often demanding payments in cash, livestock, or goods. Farmers, traders, and transporters are frequently forced to pay protection fees or risk violence . By controlling key trade routes and markets, JNIM extracts resources from already struggling populations, further entrenching its authority while weakening the financial resilience of local communities .

Trade Route Control: JNIM's control of strategic transport corridors allows it to tax commercial traffic and disrupt trade flows when necessary.

- Sikasso-Kayes-Bamako Corridor: JNIM's 2025 blockade of this vital supply route caused severe fuel shortages and forced the closure of schools and universities.
- Burkina Faso-Mali Border: Cross-border trade is heavily taxed, with JNIM establishing checkpoints at key crossing points.
- Sahelian Pastoral Routes: Cattle rustling and taxation of livestock movements generate significant revenue while destabilizing pastoralist communities.

Cattle Rustling: Cattle rustling has become central to JNIM's revenue generation and community control strategy. The typical pattern involves JNIM-affiliated men on motorcycles approaching Fulani herders and demanding cattle under threat of violence. The stolen cattle are then transported to livestock markets in Ghana, Mali, or Senegal for rapid sale. With a single cow selling for \$346 in a country where individual GDP is less than \$3,000 annually, large-scale theft can devastate pastoralist communities. This tactic creates significant humanitarian, social, and economic effects while simultaneously undermining government authority in rural areas.

Drug Smuggling and Illicit Trade

Low-cost drugs such as tramadol and other synthetic opioids are creating dependency and susceptibility to recruitment by criminal networks. JNIM's affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, taxes drug-smuggling routes to fund its activities. The sharing of routes by violent extremists and arms, drug, and human traffickers blurs the line between ideological and profit-driven motives.

The group has particularly deep involvement in:

- Tramadol Trafficking: Legal opioid painkillers are diverted from licensed supply chains and sold on the illicit market, generating significant revenue.
- Hashish and Cannabis: Traditional smuggling routes from North Africa to Europe pass through the Sahel, providing lucrative tax opportunities.
- Cocaine: Transatlantic drug routes increasingly use West African transit points, with groups like JNIM offering protection and logistics in exchange for payment.
- Human Smuggling: Migration routes from West Africa to North Africa and Europe provide opportunities for extortion and smuggling fees.

Weapons Smuggling

JNIM sources weapons from multiple channels:

- Battlefield Capture: The group regularly seizes weapons from military convoys and bases, providing a steady supply of small arms and ammunition.
- Cross-Border Smuggling: Weapons flow south from Libya, where the collapse of the Gaddafi regime opened vast arms depots to criminal networks.
- Corrupt Officials: JNIM has been known to purchase weapons from corrupt military and security officials in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

- International Networks: The UN Security Council has reported that Al-Qaeda maintains networks in southwestern Libya specifically to support Sahel-based affiliates .

Key Weapons Types: JNIM uses a mix of small arms (AK-47s, PKM machine guns), rocket-propelled grenades, and heavy machine guns. The group has also been known to use improvised explosive devices and vehicle-borne IEDs. More recently, JNIM has integrated drones into its weapons arsenal.

Logistical Capabilities and Supply Networks

JNIM's ability to sustain complex operations depends on robust logistical networks. The 2025 Bamako fuel blockade required sustained preparation, coordinated movement of forces, and operational security to avoid defeat. Logistical preparation extended beyond traditional insurgent strongholds into southern Mali. The group has adapted its movements to exploit reliance on aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), using multipronged movements and avoiding signal detection .

Fuel and Logistics: The Bamako blockade demonstrated JNIM's capacity for complex logistical planning. The group interdicting supply routes over hundreds of kilometers required:

- Pre-positioning of forces: Fighters were deployed along key transport corridors days or weeks before the operation.
- Intelligence gathering: The group monitored convoy movements and security force responses to identify vulnerabilities.
- Strategic messaging: Propaganda was timed to coincide with operational action to maximize psychological impact.
- Community support: Local communities were mobilized to provide intelligence, supplies, and safe passage.

Local Governance: JNIM's integration into local communities through dispute resolution, protection, and "justice" creates a self-sustaining ecosystem. The group provides services that the state either cannot or will not provide, building social capital that translates into logistical support.

International Supporters And Recruiting

Al-Qaeda Affiliation and External Support

JNIM's primary international affiliation is with Al-Qaeda, to which it has pledged formal allegiance. This relationship provides ideological legitimacy, potential access to Al-Qaeda's broader logistical and financial networks, and strategic guidance . The UN Security Council has reported that Al-Qaeda maintains networks in southwestern Libya to support Sahel-based affiliates like JNIM.

Al-Qaeda Central's Role: Al-Qaeda central has provided strategic guidance and ideological direction to JNIM since the group's founding. This includes:

- Ideological Training: Religious and ideological literature is disseminated from Al-Qaeda central to JNIM's leadership and fighters.
- Financial Transfers: While JNIM is largely self-financed, Al-Qaeda central can provide emergency funding and facilitate access to international financial networks.

- **Strategic Coordination:** JNIM coordinates with other Al-Qaeda affiliates, including AQIM, Al-Shabaab, and the Syrian-based Hurras al-Din.

AQIM's Continued Role: Despite the merger, AQIM maintains a presence in the region and continues to provide support to JNIM. This includes:

- **Training Cadres:** AQIM's experienced fighters and commanders provide training in tactics, explosives, and religious ideology.
- **Logistical Support:** AQIM's networks across the Maghreb and Sahel facilitate the movement of weapons, fighters, and funds.
- **Sanctuary:** AQIM's presence in southern Algeria and Mauritania provides safe haven for JNIM leaders when pressure mounts in the Sahel.

Ukrainian Training and Technical Assistance

Multiple intelligence reports have established a significant link between JNIM and Ukrainian sources, suggesting systematic external support:

- **Direct Training of Personnel:** Ukrainian instructors have been recorded training militants in Burkina Faso, Chad, and the Central African Republic, where they have coordinated drone strikes on government positions and planned cross-border attacks . In a particularly brazen incident in early 2026, a captured Ukrainian operative in northern Burkina Faso confessed to training jihadist fighters on the use of explosive-laden drones, with video evidence later released by Burkinabe military intelligence .
- **Documented Seizures:** In June 2025, the Malian military formally accused Ukrainian operatives of supplying and operating UAVs for JNIM after discovering Ukrainian-manufactured FPV drones and documents linked to the Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) abandoned by JNIM militants during a counter-offensive . Malian Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maiga publicly accused Ukraine of supplying kamikaze drones directly to terrorist cells .
- **Component Identification:** Components of Ukrainian-made drones, specifically optical fiber spools for FPV drone guidance marked with the logo of Ukrainian manufacturer 3DTech, were found at a market in northern Mali . The seller indicated these were sourced from the belongings of killed JNIM militants, establishing a direct link between Ukrainian industry and JNIM's operational capability.
- **Logistics Routes:** The Malian military alleges that Ukrainian personnel and drone equipment entered Malian territory via unguarded border routes from Mauritania, with logistical facilitation reportedly linked to the Ukrainian Embassy in Nouakchott . This suggests a degree of state involvement beyond individual operators.
- **Tactical Coordination:** Investigations revealed that Ukrainian agents coordinated terrorist attacks on Malian forces near Mopti, provided vehicles with Ukrainian systems, and conducted FPV drone strikes on Malian positions . Reports indicate that approximately twenty Ukrainian advisors are currently in northern Mali training armed groups in drone use and combat techniques.
- **Broader Pattern:** Across the continent, Ukrainian operations have been documented in Libya, Somalia, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan . The reach extends to groups including al-Shabaab and Boko Haram among the recipients of Ukrainian support . A Sudanese Foreign Ministry official stated that Ukraine is carrying out the "West's dirty work" in Africa.

Technical Diffusion from the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA)

The FLA, a separatist coalition in northern Mali, publicly declared it was "partnering with JNIM" . The FLA adopted drone technology early, and through joint operations and the integration of former FLA personnel (including former commander Colonel Hussein Ghulam), expertise and equipment have been transferred to JNIM . The FLA is also believed to have received training from Ukraine, methods which subsequently spread to other armed groups.

The FLA Connection:

- **Joint Operations:** FLA and JNIM have conducted coordinated attacks against Malian and Russia Africa Corps forces.
- **Personnel Integration:** FLA personnel, including senior commanders, have joined JNIM, bringing drone expertise and battlefield experience.
- **Equipment Transfers:** Drones captured or purchased by the FLA have been transferred to JNIM, accelerating the group's technological evolution.
- **Training Diffusion:** FLA personnel trained by Ukraine have provided training to JNIM fighters, creating a multiplier effect.

Regional Fragmentation and Strategic Advantage

The withdrawal of Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali from regional security architectures such as the G-5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force has accelerated the breakdown of coordinated counterterrorism operations, creating strategic advantage for JNIM . The fragmentation of ECOWAS has left coastal states to develop independent security solutions, creating imbalanced capacity that JNIM exploits.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES): The formation of the AES has created a new security architecture, but challenges remain:

- **Funding Shortages:** The AES Unified Force faces profound challenges, including funding shortages and logistical constraints similar to those that plagued the G-5 Sahel Joint Force.
- **Coordination Challenges:** Despite political unity, operational coordination between the three states remains inconsistent.
- **Intelligence Gaps:** The withdrawal from regional intelligence-sharing mechanisms has created gaps that JNIM exploits.

ECOWAS Fragmentation: The departure of AES states from ECOWAS has created:

- **Border Insecurity:** Reduced cross-border security cooperation has allowed JNIM to move more freely across national boundaries.
- **Competitive Dynamics:** AES and ECOWAS states view each other with suspicion, preventing the unified action needed to counter a borderless threat.
- **Leverage for JNIM:** The group exploits divisions between the two blocs, playing one side against the other.

Recruitment Strategies

JNIM employs a sophisticated multi-pronged recruitment approach that capitalizes on local grievances and digital propaganda:

- **Exploitation of Local Grievances:** The core of JNIM's recruitment model is its narrative as a "defender of marginalized populations" . The group exploits ethnic and social divisions, particularly the marginalization of Fulani communities, farmer-herder tensions, and grievances related to harassment by state security forces . JNIM "have an ability to embed in local communities or to be able to use local grievances as a means of recruiting or winning sympathy towards their cause" .
- **Economic Opportunity:** Young men with limited prospects are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, as the group offers stipends, weapons, and a sense of belonging . The group presents itself as an alternative authority that can provide income, protection, and social status. In one of the poorest regions globally, this promise is particularly compelling.
- **Alternative Governance:** By providing dispute resolution, protection, and "justice" in areas where the state is absent or abusive, JNIM builds local support bases that serve as recruitment pipelines. The group's ability to resolve disputes quickly and fairly (by local standards) creates legitimacy that state institutions cannot match.
- **Social Media and Digital Propaganda:** JNIM has embraced social media platforms for recruitment, opening channels on platforms like TikTok and launching media branches such as Minbar al-Bayan. The group uses local languages (Fulani, Gourmantche, Kulamba) to lower communication barriers and increase emotional resonance. Short videos targeting specific ethnic groups address local grievances and call for "defense" against state forces. This digital strategy allows recruitment in areas where JNIM has no physical presence.
- **Exploitation of State Abuses:** Between January and October 2024, Malian military and allied Wagner forces carried out 255 operations resulting in the deaths of approximately 1,063 civilians. ACLED data indicates that civilian deaths attributed to insurgents remained lower than those caused by government and Africa Corps operations (344 vs. 478) . These abuses have driven civilians toward JNIM, creating a recruitment pipeline.
- **Religious and Ideological Appeal:** JNIM's religious framing resonates with populations that have deep religious traditions. The group's promises of justice, divine governance, and protection against infidel influence appeal to those who see the state as corrupt and illegitimate.

Mode Of Operations, Tactics, Communications

JNIM employs a diverse range of tactics combining guerrilla warfare, terrorism, economic warfare, and technological innovation:

Guerrilla Warfare and Ambushes: JNIM regularly attacks local security forces and their foreign military partners using coordinated ambush tactics . The group claimed almost 1,000 security force casualties across the Sahel between April and July 2025. Attacks often involve:

- **Complex Ambushes:** Multiple elements coordinate to hit convoys from several directions simultaneously.
- **Mines and IEDs:** Improvised explosive devices are used to degrade mobility and inflict casualties.

- **Rapid Disengagement:** Fighters disperse quickly after attacks, using local knowledge to evade pursuit.
- **Decentralized Command:** Small units operate independently, making them difficult to target preemptively.

Economic Warfare and Blockades: JNIM has adopted a deliberate fuel-blockade strategy intended to pressure Bamako without holding territory . The 2025 blockade of southern Mali cut off trade routes, causing severe fuel shortages that led to the suspension of schools and universities . By selectively constraining movement along the Sikasso–Kayes–Bamako corridor, the group turned fuel scarcity into a tool of coercion, governance, and narrative control .

Terrorism Against Civilians: The group engages in terrorist activities including:

- **Abductions:** Mass kidnappings are used to intimidate populations and extract concessions.
- **Forced Veiling:** Women are forced to adopt strict Islamic dress codes in areas under JNIM control.
- **Extrajudicial Killings:** Those deemed collaborators or opponents are executed, often in public to maximize psychological impact.
- **Collective Punishment:** Entire communities are punished for perceived collaboration with state forces.

Target Selection: JNIM targets local security forces, government infrastructure, and economic assets such as fuel depots, transport corridors, and mining sites . Urban areas, especially those linked to state infrastructure, are increasingly attractive targets, offering leverage even with limited payloads .

Coastal Creep Strategy: JNIM has adopted a strategy of episodic incursions into coastal states rather than permanent territorial occupation. This method maintains pressure while avoiding vulnerability to military retaliation, resulting in normalization of insecurity in peripheral areas.

The Drone Warfare Revolution

JNIM has pioneered drone warfare in the Sahel, marking a significant tactical evolution:

Adoption Timeline: JNIM's first documented armed drone strike occurred in September 2023 in Bandiagara, Mali, dropping two IEDs on Dan Na Ambassador positions using a quadcopter drone . By June 2025, the group had conducted over a dozen coordinated operations across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo. JNIM is the only known armed group in Africa conducting sustained, operational drone warfare across three countries .

Tactical Applications: JNIM uses drones for multiple purposes:

- **Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR):** Drones provide real-time situational awareness to guide ground assaults.
- **Direct Attacks:** Kamikaze drones or drones dropping improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are used for precision strikes.
- **Propaganda:** High-quality visual propaganda mimics state airstrikes, asserting dominance and contesting state airpower.
- **Psychological Warfare:** Drone footage of strikes is filmed and broadcast to increase psychological pressure on regular forces.

Technical Sophistication: The technical barrier to entry has collapsed. JNIM uses commercial-grade DJI quadcopters and First-Person View (FPV) drones modified with consumer-accessible tools and offline artificial intelligence for firmware modifications and flight path optimization . This enables comms-free execution and autonomous targeting. JNIM may already be using open-source AI models like Mistral and LLaMA to support drone modifications, enabling firmware overrides and autonomous flight path optimization .

Drone Sourcing: JNIM sources drones through multiple channels:

- **Commercial Purchase:** Drones are purchased online or through intermediaries in regional markets.
- **Battlefield Capture:** Drones are seized from military forces during operations. In May 2025, JNIM formally highlighted the capture of three drones among weapons seized from military bases and convoys.
- **External Supply:** Ukrainian sources have supplied drones and training.
- **Technical Diffusion:** FLA personnel have transferred expertise and equipment to JNIM.

Structural Vulnerability: Lacking flight simulators and operating in extreme environmental conditions (heat, sand), each drone lost in training or operations is difficult to replace. The group typically deploys only one drone per attack, representing a structural vulnerability states can exploit. By contrast, thousands of drones are consumed monthly in the Ukraine war, highlighting the asymmetry in resources.

Drone-Specific Tactics: JNIM pairs drone strikes with ground assaults, adapting tactics to local terrain. Analysis of 5,000 drone strike videos found a 67% survival rate in obstructed environments and a 32% increase when smoke is present (confusing visual tracking systems) . Attack patterns suggest psychological and retaliatory drivers beyond purely tactical considerations.

The Attack on Sévaré (April 2026): This operation demonstrated operational mastery of FPV drones requiring significant preparation time. JNIM fighters used drones to conduct ISR, guide ground advances, and strike strategic targets, showcasing the group's growing sophistication.

Communications and Deception

Signature Management: JNIM is skilled in low-tech operational security and tactical deception to evade technical intelligence . The group uses signature management to deceive sensors and can exploit TECHINT gaps. The Bamako blockade's success partly resulted from JNIM's ability to obscure intent from technical sensors.

Propaganda: JNIM leverages drone footage and social media as powerful propaganda tools. Videos showing drone strikes are used to assert dominance, contest state airpower, and demonstrate capabilities to supporters . The group has opened channels on platforms like TikTok to debate civilians, justify its rule, and promote its implementation of Sharia law.

Language Strategy: JNIM has shifted from Arabic/French communications to local languages (Fulani, Kulamba, Gourmantche) to increase emotional resonance and lower communication barriers . This "local voice" strategy facilitates recruitment and social penetration.

Information Operations: JNIM conducts sophisticated information operations to shape perceptions:

- **False Flag Operations:** The group has been known to conduct attacks in civilian clothes and blame them on government forces.
- **Disinformation:** JNIM spreads disinformation to confuse security forces and create mistrust between populations and the state.
- **Narrative Control:** The group's media branches work actively to control the narrative around events, framing the group as a legitimate resistance movement.

Communication Security: JNIM uses a mix of low-tech and high-tech communications:

- **Couriers:** Face-to-face communication via couriers is used for sensitive information.
- **Encrypted Messaging:** Applications like WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram are used for day-to-day communications.
- **Coded Language:** The group uses coded language to avoid detection.
- **Social Media:** Public-facing communications are amplified through social media channels.

Penetration Through HUMINT And Communications Intelligence

The Intelligence Failure

The inability of counterterrorism forces to anticipate JNIM's Bamako fuel blockade highlights critical intelligence failures . As former CIA Director Tim Sylvester noted, the most critical pieces of intelligence "lie in plans and intentions, the mood, the context with which someone is making a decision" . JNIM's adeptness at low-tech operational security makes purely technical collection insufficient. Africa Corps' coercion-focused approach to human intelligence gathering prioritizes intelligence extraction through violence and intimidation rather than cultivating trust . This approach has degraded the pool of human informants. Between January and October 2024, Malian military and allied Wagner forces carried out 255 operations resulting in approximately 1,063 civilian deaths . Civilian fear of retaliation has discouraged cooperation with security forces and degraded the pool of human informants available .

The TECHINT Trap: Over-reliance on Technical Intelligence (TECHINT) has created a dangerous vulnerability. JNIM understands how technical sensors work and has developed signature management techniques to evade detection. The group can feed false indicators into the collection system, creating an intelligence picture that is not only incomplete but actively misleading.

The HUMINT Deficit: The human intelligence deficit is particularly pronounced. Africa Corps and its partners have prioritized coercive intelligence extraction over relationship-building. This approach:

- **Alienates Populations:** Civilians see security forces as a threat rather than a source of protection.
- **Destroys Trust:** Communities that might otherwise provide intelligence are driven into the arms of JNIM.
- **Creates Feedback Loops:** Coercive tactics create grievances that JNIM exploits for recruitment.

HUMINT Collection Challenges

The Africa Corps example demonstrates the problem: a coercion-focused approach to intelligence gathering prioritizes extraction through violence and intimidation rather than cultivating access and trust. While Africa Corps maintains TECHINT capabilities that enable strikes and raids, Russian and Malian

intelligence services have been consistently surprised by insurgent preparations . The sustained movement of fuel, fighters, and materiel required for the Bamako blockade should have generated detectable signatures, yet JNIM not only avoided interdiction but adapted its movements to exploit reliance on aerial ISR.

In the absence of trusted local sources capable of identifying intent, logistics nodes, and command relationships, Africa Corps' TECHINT advantage devolved into reactive violence . Offensives in regions such as Tombouctou and Ber saw extrajudicial killings and arrests of civilians, with limited evidence of targeted human intelligence gathering .

Specific Challenges:

- **Fear of Retaliation:** JNIM has effectively intimidated populations, making potential informants fear for their safety and that of their families.
- **Ethnic Divisions:** The group has exploited ethnic grievances to create divisions that intelligence agencies struggle to navigate.
- **Mobility:** JNIM's decentralized, highly mobile structure makes it difficult to track through traditional methods.
- **Local Knowledge:** JNIM fighters often have deep local knowledge that gives them an advantage over external intelligence agencies.

HUMINT Penetration Strategies

- **Shift from Coercion to Trust-Building:** Effective HUMINT requires building trust with local communities and tribal elders . Current coercion-focused methods alienate populations, degrade the human environment, and reinforce insurgent narratives . Security forces must adopt a protective posture rather than a punitive one.
- **The Algerian Model:** The Algerian Civil War offers a potent case study. Algeria's DRS successfully infiltrated the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) by "flipping" commanders, inserting moles, and manipulating the group's internal communications . The strategic effects were devastating, inducing fratricide and paranoia that led the GIA to destroy itself from within . This "weaponization of paranoia" is a viable model for use against JNIM.
- **Social Architecture Mapping:** Intelligence agencies should aggressively map family networks, tribal grievances, and economic dependencies to understand the "human terrain" . In central Mali's Mopti region, local community leaders negotiated localized non-aggression pacts with JNIM. Without HUMINT confirming these were negotiations, satellite imagery may indicate little other than the presence of insurgents, leading to strikes that degrade future collection .
- **Recruitment of Key Individuals:** Focus recruitment on local leaders, disillusioned mid-level commanders, and logistics experts who possess "plans and intentions" that TECHINT cannot reveal . Sources must be handled carefully, recognizing that providing protection for their families or communities is essential for ensuring their safety and continued cooperation.
- **Community Engagement:** Intelligence agencies should establish relationships with community leaders, religious figures, and tribal elders who can provide access and insight. These relationships must be based on genuine partnership rather than transactional extraction.

- Economic Incentives: Providing economic alternatives to JNIM recruitment can create incentives for cooperation. Communities that benefit from state support are less likely to support insurgents.

Communications Intelligence

- AI-Enabled Fusion: The early integration of AI-supported HUMINT and TECHINT fusion is critical. AI data analytics pipelines can process raw data from multiple sources and correlate with human reporting to identify patterns and deception . Raw TECHINT processed before reaching analysts can strip away nuance or disconnect intelligence from broader context. By contrast, AI-enabled systems can fuse and contextualize multiple forms of intelligence earlier in the cycle .
- OSINT Monitoring: JNIM's use of social media for propaganda and recruitment creates a communications footprint. Intelligence agencies should monitor these platforms for recruitment signals, command direction, and operational hints . A shared, real-time OSINT intelligence platform should log drone incidents and incorporate open-source monitoring to track claims, footage, and tactical shifts .
- Forensic Analysis: Recovered drones should undergo basic forensic analysis including serial numbers, technical modifications, and signs of repurposing . JNIM routinely displays looted military equipment, underscoring the need to track how assets are acquired and redeployed .
- Counter-Intelligence: JNIM is highly skilled in low-tech operational security and can exploit TECHINT gaps through signature management and tactical deception, feeding false indicators into collection . Counter-intelligence measures must identify and neutralize these deception operations.
- Technical Interception: While encrypted communications remain a challenge, JNIM's use of unencrypted communications for less sensitive information creates opportunities. Intelligence agencies should:
 - Monitor Low-Tech Communications: Couriers, phone calls, and unencrypted messaging can provide valuable intelligence.
 - Exploit Operational Security Lapses: JNIM fighters occasionally make security mistakes that can be exploited.
 - Monitor Social Media: Public-facing communications provide insight into group dynamics and intentions.

The Intelligence Cycle

Consider the traditional five-step Intelligence Cycle: Planning & Direction, Collection, Processing & Exploitation, Analysis & Production, and Dissemination . Without integrating HUMINT, or integrating poorly gathered HUMINT, analysts risk allowing technical indicators to dominate assessments. JNIM's signature management can feed false indicators into collection. In such situations, HUMINT is indispensable. Structured analytic techniques depend on human insight to validate or challenge TECHINT-derived conclusions .

Strengthening Each Phase:

- Planning & Direction: Intelligence requirements must be informed by a deep understanding of JNIM's structure and operations.
- Collection: Both technical and human collection must be resourced and prioritized.
- Processing & Exploitation: AI can augment processing but cannot replace human judgment.

- Analysis & Production: Analysts must be trained to integrate multiple sources and identify deception.
- Dissemination: Intelligence must reach decision-makers in time to inform action.

Strategies To Defeat JNIM

Intelligence-Centric Counterinsurgency

The findings consistently point to the critical importance of intelligence as the primary weapon . Security forces must shift from punitive posture to civilian protection. This is essential for repairing the "intelligence desert" created by current abusive tactics. Early, AI-enabled fusion of HUMINT and TECHINT can restore analytic judgment, improve assumption testing, and enable more effective counterinsurgency in HUMINT-scarce environments .

Key Principles:

- Protect, Don't Punish: Security forces must adopt a protective posture that distinguishes civilians from combatants.
- Trust is a Weapon: Trust-based relationships with local communities are essential for intelligence collection.
- Patience Wins: Counterinsurgency requires patience and persistence; quick military victories are often illusory.
- Address Grievances: Without addressing underlying grievances, counterinsurgency operations are merely containment.

Lessons from History:

- Algerian Civil War: The DRS's use of HUMINT and psychological operations was key to defeating the GIA.
- Northern Ireland: Intelligence-led policing and community engagement were essential to ending the Troubles.
- Colombia: A combination of military pressure, intelligence-led targeting, and peace negotiations defeated the FARC.

Countering JNIM's Drone Threat

Tactical Adaptation: Immediate, low-cost solutions improve survivability. Analysis of 5,000 drone strike videos found a 67% survival rate in obstructed environments and a 32% increase when smoke is present (confusing visual tracking systems) . Red team exercises should simulate JNIM's ISR-guided and multi-drone tactics.

Innovation: Defense ministries should fund partnerships with local drone, AI, and software specialists to develop terrain-adapted tools like signal decoys, thermal alerts, and offensive ISR payloads . Innovation may come from how regional actors approach coordination and scenario planning, not just hardware .

Drone Task Force: Create a permanent coordination mechanism bringing together CT officials, drone warfare experts, AI researchers, and regional military planners. Establish a shared, real-time OSINT intelligence platform to log drone incidents and track evolving tactics .

Disrupting Supply Chains: The Malian military's discovery of a Ukrainian component supply chain through Mauritania highlights the need to investigate and disrupt logistical networks . This includes tracking illicit financial flows that fund drone purchases. Specific measures include:

- **Border Monitoring:** Strengthening border controls to intercept drone shipments.
- **Financial Tracking:** Following the money to identify and disrupt drone supply chains.
- **International Cooperation:** Working with countries of origin and transit to shut down supply routes.

Electronic Warfare:

- **Jamming:** Developing capabilities to jam drone signals and disrupt their operation.
- **Spoofing:** Using GPS spoofing to confuse drone navigation systems.
- **Kinetic Defense:** Deploying anti-drone weapons, including lasers, missiles, and net-based systems.

Regional Cooperation

Revitalized regional security frameworks are essential. The withdrawal of Sahel states from regional security architectures has created strategic advantage for JNIM . Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Togo, and Benin should establish a dedicated channel for frontline coordination, including intelligence sharing, aligned response protocols, and joint planning for counter-drone operations . Coordination at this level is critical to stay ahead of JNIM's evolving capabilities and contain its geographic reach .

The AES-ECOWAS Divide: Addressing the fragmentation between the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS is critical. Options include:

- **Technical Cooperation:** Even if political relations are strained, technical security cooperation should continue.
- **Independent Initiatives:** Third-party actors can facilitate coordination between the two blocs.
- **Confidence-Building:** Small confidence-building measures can create conditions for broader cooperation.

Border Security: JNIM exploits porous borders that are not adequately patrolled. Regional states should invest in:

- **Joint Patrols:** Shared patrols along border areas to interdict insurgent movements.
- **Information Sharing:** Real-time sharing of intelligence on insurgent activities.
- **Harmonized Policies:** Aligning border management policies to create obstacles for JNIM.

Ideological and Governance Competition

Addressing Grievances: Broader stability requires addressing underlying drivers of recruitment: economic exclusion, environmental stress, and weak local governance structures. Without parallel investment, military containment risks producing only temporary displacement of insurgent activity .

Countering Propaganda: The state must reclaim the "religious marketplace" and counter JNIM's narrative. Religious scholars and local leaders can play crucial roles in reducing public support. Specific measures include:

- **Supporting Moderate Clerics:** Providing resources and platforms for moderate Islamic voices.

- **Counter-Narrative Campaigns:** Developing and disseminating counter-narratives that challenge JNIM's framing.
- **Public Diplomacy:** Engaging with communities to explain state policies and challenge insurgent propaganda.

Economic Development: Poverty and lack of economic opportunity are key drivers of recruitment. States should invest in:

- **Infrastructure:** Road building, electricity, and water projects to improve quality of life.
- **Education:** Providing education as an alternative to religious extremism.
- **Employment:** Creating economic opportunities for young people who are susceptible to recruitment.

Justice Reform: Corrupt and inefficient justice systems create grievances that JNIM exploits. States should:

- **Reform Courts:** Making courts more accessible and fair.
- **Support Traditional Justice:** Integrating traditional dispute resolution mechanisms into formal systems.
- **Address Corruption:** Tackling corruption that undermines state legitimacy.

Illicit Economy Disruption: Since finance is the basis of JNIM's strength, regional security cooperation should systematically track illicit flows and stop them. Specialized courts focused on financial crimes and terrorism would help counter the threat . Specific measures include:

- **Financial Intelligence:** Developing capacity to track terrorist financing.
- **Asset Seizure:** Confiscating assets that fund JNIM operations.
- **International Cooperation:** Working with international partners to disrupt financial networks.

Military and Strategic Considerations

Precision Strikes: The elimination of a senior commander in Mougnan in June 2023 demonstrates growing reliance on precision strikes targeting insurgent leadership structures . The Malian government announced a \$3.5 million reward for information on JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghaly .

Overcoming Military Constraints: The Malian army is ill-equipped, overstretched, and strategically disadvantaged in countering evolving terrorist tactics . The terrain favors guerrilla tactics, with narrow roads, bush paths, and seasonal rivers creating natural obstacles to mechanized military movement . The Malian Armed Forces are structured for conventional warfare but are being drawn into a battle that requires flexibility, intelligence dominance, and rapid response capabilities.

Seeking Negotiations: States should consider coordinated negotiations with JNIM. While controversial, engaging in dialogue could potentially reduce violence and exploit internal fissures. Successful strategies from the Algerian Civil War suggest amnesty programs can drain support from insurgencies.

The Role of External Partners: International partners should support regional counterterrorism efforts through:

- **Intelligence Sharing:** Providing intelligence to regional states.
- **Training:** Training regional forces in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.
- **Equipment:** Providing equipment appropriate to the operational environment.

- Diplomatic Support: Supporting regional efforts to address the political dimensions of the insurgency.

A Comprehensive Strategy: The Six Pillars

Intelligence Transformation:

- Shift from coercion to trust-building.
- Invest in HUMINT recruitment and management.
- Develop AI-enabled fusion systems.
- Create shared intelligence platforms.

Drone Counter-Measures:

- Invest in counter-drone technology.
- Disrupt drone supply chains.
- Develop tactical adaptations.
- Create a regional drone task force.

Regional Cooperation:

- Bridge the AES-ECOWAS divide.
- Establish joint patrols and intelligence sharing.
- Harmonize border management policies.

Governance and Development:

- Address grievances through economic development.
- Reform justice systems.
- Counter insurgent propaganda.
- Disrupt illicit economies.

Military Pressure:

- Conduct precision strikes against leadership.
- Develop mobile, responsive forces.
- Protect civilians and build trust.

Political Engagement:

- Consider coordinated negotiations.
- Develop amnesty programs.
- Address underlying political issues.

CONCLUSION

THE PATH TO VICTORY

RUTHLESS CLARITY IN COUNTERINSURGENCY

The Uncomfortable Truth

The Sahel is bleeding. JNIM has become the world's second deadliest terrorist organization, responsible for over 1,200 deaths across four countries in 2025 alone. Burkina Faso ranks as the country most affected by terrorism globally. The Malian capital has been attacked. Fuel blockades have strangled entire nations. Drone warfare has been democratized to the point where a rag-tag insurgent group conducts coordinated aerial strikes across three countries simultaneously.

And yet, here is the blunt truth that nobody in power wants to admit: JNIM is defeatable. Not containable. Not manageable. Defeatable. Every insurgency in modern history has been defeated when the counterinsurgent force possessed the political will, strategic clarity, and operational ruthlessness to do what is necessary. The Algerian Civil War proved that. The Colombian defeat of the FARC proved that. The British victory in Northern Ireland proved that. The defeat of the GIA in Algeria proved that even the most brutal and ideologically rigid jihadist movements can be destroyed from within.

But defeat requires something that the current Sahelian counterterrorism effort conspicuously lacks: strategic honesty. Not the comfortable fiction that training missions, airstrikes, and "stabilization" programs will somehow produce victory. Not the self-serving narrative that counterterrorism can be divorced from geopolitical competition. Not the delusion that JNIM can be bombed into submission while its support networks, supply chains, and safe havens remain untouched.

The Sahel is the global epicenter of terrorism. More than half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide occur here. The international community's response has been a masterclass in strategic failure: fragmented, under-resourced, intelligence-blind, and utterly lacking in the political will to address the root causes of the insurgency. If that does not change, the Sahel will become a permanent zone of ungoverned space, a launching pad for attacks on coastal states, Europe, and beyond.

The Primacy of HUMINT: Intelligence Above All

Human Intelligence is not merely important; it is the single most critical capability required to defeat JNIM. The evidence is overwhelming and undeniable. JNIM has adapted its movements to exploit aerial surveillance and avoid signal detection. JNIM uses signature management to deceive sensors. JNIM can feed false indicators into technical collection systems. JNIM's Bamako fuel blockade succeeded because technical intelligence alone could not reveal its plans and intentions. As former CIA Director Tim Sylvester noted, the most critical intelligence "lie in plans and intentions... the context with which someone is making a decision."

The intelligence failure is not a technical problem. It is a human problem. It is a relationship problem. It is a problem of trust, or rather, the complete absence of trust between security forces and the populations they are supposed to protect. Between January and October 2024, Malian military and allied forces killed approximately 1,063 civilians in 255 operations. Civilian deaths attributed to insurgents remained lower

than those caused by government and Africa Corps operations (344 vs. 478). When the state kills more civilians than the terrorists, the state becomes the recruitment sergeant for the terrorists.

The current intelligence approach is actively counterproductive. Coercion-based intelligence gathering—extraction through violence and intimidation—destroys the human terrain that HUMINT requires to function. It alienates populations. It creates grievances that JNIM exploits. It drives potential informants into the arms of the enemy. It creates an intelligence desert where none should exist.

The Algerian example is instructive. The DRS successfully infiltrated the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) by "flipping" commanders, inserting moles, and manipulating the group's internal communications. The strategic effects were devastating: induced fratricide, paranoia, and ultimately self-destruction from within. This is the "weaponization of paranoia" that can be applied to JNIM. It requires deep social penetration: mapping family networks, tribal grievances, economic dependencies, and marriage alliances. It requires the recruitment of local leaders, disillusioned mid-level commanders, and logistics experts who possess the "plans and intentions" that TECHINT cannot reveal.

Security forces must stop coercing and start protecting. This is not soft-hearted idealism; it is hard-headed operational necessity. You cannot recruit sources among populations you terrorize. You cannot gather intelligence among communities you abuse. You cannot build trust when your primary interaction with civilians is through checkpoints, raids, and extrajudicial killings. The restoration of trust is not a humanitarian side-note; it is the foundation upon which effective counterinsurgency is built.

TECHINT: The Essential Complement

Technical intelligence is essential, but only when properly integrated with human intelligence. The intelligence cycle—Planning & Direction, Collection, Processing & Exploitation, Analysis & Production, and Dissemination—requires human insight to validate or challenge TECHINT-derived conclusions. Without HUMINT, raw TECHINT processed before reaching analysts can strip away nuance or disconnect intelligence from broader context.

AI-enabled fusion is the future. Early integration of HUMINT and TECHINT using AI data analytics pipelines can process raw data from multiple sources and correlate with human reporting to identify patterns, connections, and deception attempts. Raw TECHINT alone is insufficient; AI-enabled systems can fuse and contextualize multiple forms of intelligence earlier in the cycle, restoring analytic judgment and improving assumption testing.

OSINT is critical. JNIM's use of social media for propaganda and recruitment creates a communications footprint that can be exploited. A shared, real-time OSINT intelligence platform should log drone incidents and incorporate open-source monitoring to track claims, footage, and tactical shifts. Forensic analysis of recovered drones—serial numbers, technical modifications, signs of repurposing—can reveal supply chains and sources of support.

Counter-intelligence must be aggressive. JNIM is highly skilled in low-tech operational security and can exploit TECHINT gaps through signature management and tactical deception, feeding false indicators into collection. Counter-intelligence measures must identify and neutralize these deception operations. The group feeds false indicators into collection, and without human sources to verify, those false indicators are consumed as truth.

Ruthless and Precise Operations: Inside and Outside

Counterinsurgency requires ruthless precision in targeting. Not random violence. Not collective punishment. Not the brutalization of civilian populations. Ruthless precision means identifying the key nodes of JNIM's operational structure—the leaders, the financiers, the logistics coordinators, the drone operators, the recruitment networks—and eliminating them with surgical precision. It means targeting the command-and-control architecture that enables JNIM to coordinate operations across multiple countries. It means striking with sufficient force that the target is destroyed, but with sufficient precision that civilian casualties are minimized.

The Malian government's announcement of a \$3.5 million reward for information on JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghaly is a step in the right direction. The elimination of a senior commander in Mougnan in June 2023 demonstrates the effectiveness of precision strikes. But these are isolated actions, not a sustained campaign. The targeting of leadership must be relentless, patient, and intelligence-driven.

But here is the critical element that is almost universally ignored: the fight against JNIM must extend far beyond the area of operations.

The Logistics Hubs: JNIM sustains itself through a sophisticated logistical network that spans the entire Sahel and reaches into North Africa and beyond. The group's ability to conduct complex operations—the Bamako fuel blockade, the seven simultaneous attacks in western Mali, the drone strikes across three countries—depends on a logistical infrastructure that includes:

- Fuel supply chains that keep vehicles and generators running.
- Food and water supplies that sustain fighters in the field.
- Ammunition and weapons depots that replenish combat losses.
- Medical facilities that treat wounded fighters.
- Communications nodes that enable coordination across vast distances.
- Transport networks that move people, equipment, and supplies.

These logistics hubs must be systematically identified and destroyed. Not through airstrikes alone, but through a combination of intelligence, special operations, and coordinated attacks that render JNIM's logistical architecture inoperable. Every fuel depot, every ammunition cache, every supply convoy, every medical facility, every communications node must be considered a legitimate target. When JNIM's fighters cannot move, cannot communicate, cannot eat, cannot fight, the insurgency collapses.

The Arms Dealers: JNIM's weapons supply chain is extensive and complex. It includes:

- Weapons captured from military forces (a significant and ongoing source of supply).
- Weapons purchased from corrupt officials in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.
- Weapons smuggled from Libya, where the collapse of the Qaddafi regime opened vast arms depots to criminal networks.
- Weapons sourced from international arms markets via illicit networks.
- Commercial drones purchased online or through intermediaries.
- Ukrainian-manufactured FPV drones supplied through intelligence channels.

These arms dealers and smugglers must be hunted down and eliminated. Not just the low-level couriers who move weapons across borders, but the mid-level organizers who coordinate shipments, and the high-level financiers who fund the trade. This requires:

- Aggressive financial intelligence to follow the money and identify the financiers.
- Cross-border operations to interdict smuggling routes.
- Penetration of criminal networks that facilitate the arms trade.
- International cooperation to shut down the supply chains.
- The creation of specialized courts focused on financial crimes and terrorism financing.

The Financial Networks: JNIM's financial architecture is as sophisticated as its operational structure. The group generates revenue through:

- Taxation and extortion of gold mining sites (which account for about 50% of the region's gold production).
- Ransom payments for kidnapped victims (over 23 kidnappings of foreigners in 2025 alone).
- Taxation of trade routes and commercial convoys.
- Cattle rustling on an industrial scale.
- Drug smuggling (tramadol, hashish, cocaine).
- Money laundering through lending to local merchants and investment in small shops.

These financial networks must be systematically dismantled. Not through symbolic sanctions that nobody enforces, but through aggressive financial warfare that tracks the money, follows the transactions, and seizes the assets. Every gold smuggler, every ransom negotiator, every financial intermediary who facilitates JNIM's financial operations must be targeted. The group's ability to generate and move funds must be degraded to the point where it can no longer sustain its operations.

The External Dimension: Targeting the Enablers

The fight against JNIM cannot be confined to the Sahel. The group's support networks extend far beyond its area of operations, and these external enablers must be targeted with the same ruthlessness and precision applied to the insurgents themselves.

- Libya: Al-Qaeda maintains logistical and financial networks in southwestern Libya specifically to support Sahel-based affiliates like JNIM. These networks facilitate the movement of ransom payments, weapons, and fighters between North and West Africa. The security vacuum in Libya, exacerbated by NATO intervention in 2011, created conditions where jihadist groups could flourish and arms depots could be looted. The international community that created this vacuum has a responsibility to address it, yet the response has been piecemeal and inadequate. The networks in Libya must be systematically dismantled through intelligence-sharing, cross-border operations, and diplomatic pressure on Libyan authorities.
- Ukraine: The documented link between Ukrainian intelligence and JNIM—through support to the FLA that then cooperates with JNIM—represents a dangerous precedent. Ukrainian-manufactured FPV drones have been found in JNIM possession. Ukrainian advisors have been training militants in Burkina Faso and elsewhere. The Malian government has formally accused Ukraine of supporting terrorist groups. This is a blatant violation of international norms and counterterrorism principles. The

international community must demand an immediate cessation of any support that indirectly or directly benefits JNIM. Sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and public accountability are necessary. The deployment of Ukrainian personnel and equipment to support groups fighting Russian interests in Africa represents an unacceptable expansion of the Ukraine conflict and a reckless disregard for the security of the Sahel.

- **France:** The expulsion of French forces from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has created a security vacuum that JNIM has exploited. Allegations that France is supporting extremist groups to undermine juntas—whether accurate or not—reflect the reality of a region where every major power is accused of supporting terrorist groups for their own ends. France's counterterrorism effort in the Sahel, Operation Barkhane, was sustained over more than a decade but ultimately failed to achieve a decisive victory. The reasons for this failure include an over-reliance on military solutions, insufficient investment in governance and development, and the prioritization of French strategic interests over the security of Sahelian populations. The legacy of French colonialism and the perception of neocolonial exploitation have fueled anti-Western sentiment that JNIM exploits. Addressing these grievances is essential, but France must also take responsibility for the consequences of its actions and inaction in the region.
- **Algeria:** The Algerian border has historically provided safe haven for jihadist groups, including AQIM and JNIM. The porous nature of the border and the limited cooperation between Algeria and Sahelian states have allowed JNIM to retreat to safe areas when pressure mounts. Algeria's experience with its own civil war and its success in defeating the GIA provide valuable lessons, but Algeria has been reluctant to engage fully in the regional counterterrorism effort. The international community must pressure Algeria to assume a more active role, both in securing its borders and in sharing intelligence on JNIM operations.
- **The International Arms Market:** JNIM sources weapons from multiple channels, including international arms markets that supply the illicit trade. The collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya opened vast arms depots to criminal networks, and these weapons continue to flow into the Sahel. The international community must strengthen arms control mechanisms, track weapons movements, and disrupt the networks that facilitate the arms trade. The diversion of explosives from Ghana's licensed supply chains into illicit networks supporting extremist groups must be investigated and shut down.

The Political Dimension: Addressing the Root Causes

Military action alone cannot defeat JNIM. The group's ability to recruit depends on grievances that have deep roots in the Sahel's political economy. Without addressing these grievances, military campaigns are merely containment exercises that postpone the inevitable.

- **Ethnic Marginalization:** JNIM exploits ethnic divisions, particularly the marginalization of Fulani communities. Farmer-herder tensions, exacerbated by climate change and land competition, have created conditions where JNIM can position itself as a defender of marginalized populations. Addressing these grievances requires land reform, conflict resolution mechanisms, and inclusive governance that gives all ethnic groups a stake in the state.
- **Economic Exclusion:** The Sahel is one of the poorest regions on Earth. Young men with limited prospects are particularly vulnerable to recruitment, as JNIM offers stipends, weapons, and a sense of belonging. Economic development, education, and employment opportunities are

essential to drain JNIM's recruitment pool. Without investment in these areas, military victories will be temporary.

- **State Abuse:** The abusive behavior of state security forces—extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention—drives civilians into the arms of JNIM. Between January and October 2024, Malian military and allied forces killed approximately 1,063 civilians, compared with 912 civilians killed in 2023. This is not a counterinsurgency; this is a recruitment campaign for the insurgency. Security sector reform is essential to rebuild trust and legitimacy.
- **Weak Governance:** JNIM thrives in areas where the state is absent or corrupt. The group provides dispute resolution, protection, and "justice" in areas where the state cannot or will not deliver. Strengthening local governance, improving service delivery, and addressing corruption are essential to outcompete JNIM's alternative governance model.

The Strategic Framework: What Victory Looks Like

Victory over JNIM is achievable, but it requires a comprehensive framework that addresses the insurgency on multiple levels.

Level 1: Intelligence Dominance

- Aggressive HUMINT recruitment and management.
- AI-enabled fusion of HUMINT and TECHINT.
- OSINT monitoring of JNIM propaganda and recruitment.
- Forensic analysis of recovered equipment.
- Counter-intelligence to identify and neutralize JNIM's deception operations.
- The creation of a shared, real-time intelligence platform for regional states.

Level 2: Precision Targeting

- Relentless targeting of JNIM leadership, financiers, logistics coordinators, and drone operators.
- Surgical strikes that minimize civilian casualties.
- Sustained campaigns that degrade JNIM's operational capability.
- The use of special operations forces to conduct raids and capture operations.
- The protection of sources who provide intelligence on high-value targets.

Level 3: Logistical Warfare

- Systematic destruction of JNIM's logistics hubs, fuel depots, ammunition caches, and supply convoys.
- Cross-border operations to interdict supply chains.
- Targeting of arms dealers, smugglers, and financial intermediaries.
- Disruption of financial networks that fund JNIM operations.
- Intelligence-driven operations to intercept weapons shipments.

Level 4: Regional Cooperation

- Revitalized security frameworks that bridge the AES-ECOWAS divide.
- Joint patrols and intelligence sharing across borders.
- Harmonized border management policies.

- Coordinated counter-drone operations.
- Shared OSINT platforms for real-time intelligence.

Level 5: Governance and Development

- Addressing ethnic marginalization and farmer-herder tensions.
- Economic development, education, and employment opportunities.
- Security sector reform to rebuild trust.
- Justice reform to address grievances.
- Counter-narrative campaigns to challenge JNIM's ideology.

Level 6: External Targeting

- Diplomatic pressure on Libya, Algeria, and other states that harbor JNIM networks.
- Sanctions and accountability for Ukraine's support to groups that indirectly benefit JNIM.
- Arms control mechanisms to track and disrupt weapons flows.
- Financial warfare to dismantle JNIM's international funding networks.
- International cooperation to shut down the illicit economy that sustains JNIM.

The Consequences of Failure

The alternative to defeating JNIM is strategic catastrophe. If the current trajectory continues, the Sahel will become a permanent zone of ungoverned space, a launching pad for attacks on coastal states, North Africa, and Europe. Already, JNIM has expanded into Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria. The group's drone capabilities are improving, its recruitment networks are expanding, and its ability to project power is growing.

The coastal states are next. The "Coastal Creep" strategy is not a theory; it is a reality. Violent incidents in the Benin-Niger-Nigeria tri-border region increased by 86% in 2024-2025, with fatalities rising over 260%. Without aggressive action, the entire West African coastline will become a zone of instability that threatens European security and global commerce.

The proxy war will intensify. Ukraine, Russia, France, Turkey, and other powers will continue to use extremist and separatist forces as instruments of proxy warfare, creating a situation where the "fight against terrorism" is subordinated to geopolitical competition. JNIM will be the ultimate beneficiary, receiving technical support, strategic toleration, and security vacuums that enable its expansion.

The humanitarian catastrophe will worsen. Over 440,000 internally displaced persons in Mali alone. Over 3 million people affected by the insurgency in Burkina Faso. Famine, disease, and violence will continue to devastate the region. The international community will be forced to choose between massive humanitarian intervention and accepting the creation of a failed state zone in West Africa.

Final Call to Action

The defeat of JNIM is not a matter of if, but when—and the outcome depends entirely on whether the counterinsurgent forces can summon the strategic clarity, political will, and operational ruthlessness required for Victory.

This means making the hard choices that nobody wants to make:

- It means prioritizing intelligence above all else. Human intelligence is the weapon of decision. Without it, military campaigns are blind, counterterrorism is reactive, and the insurgency persists. Trust must be rebuilt with populations that have been terrorized by both JNIM and the state. Sources must be recruited, protected, and nurtured. Intelligence must be fused, analyzed, and acted upon.
- It means fighting the insurgency where it lives, not where it is convenient. The fight cannot be confined to the Sahel. It must extend to Libya, Algeria, Ukraine, and every other location where JNIM's support networks operate. Logistics hubs, arms dealers, financial networks, and external enablers must be targeted with the same ruthlessness and precision applied to the insurgents themselves.
- It means accepting that counterinsurgency is a dirty business. Precision strikes and intelligence operations require aggressive action that may not always be politically palatable. But the alternative—allowing JNIM to continue its expansion—is far worse. The international community must support regional states in conducting the operations necessary to destroy JNIM, even when those operations are controversial.
- It means addressing the grievances that fuel the insurgency. JNIM recruits by exploiting legitimate grievances. These grievances must be addressed through governance, development, and justice reform. Military victory without political and social reform is a temporary illusion. The Sahel must be governed differently, and the international community must invest in that transformation.
- It means rejecting the comfortable lies of proxy warfare. Every state supporting extremist groups for their own ends—whether for anti-Russian or anti-Western objectives—is complicit in the chaos that consumes the Sahel. Ukraine, France, and others must be held accountable for their actions. The international community must demand an end to proxy warfare and the weaponization of jihadism.

The Truth is Simple

Every insurgency is defeatable. JNIM is no different. The group is not invincible; it is not invulnerable; it is not immortal. It is a human organization with human vulnerabilities: the need for intelligence, the need for supplies, the need for financing, the need for communications, the need for safe havens. All of these can be targeted. All of these can be destroyed. All of these can be exploited to bring about the group's collapse.

The question is not whether JNIM can be defeated, but whether the counterinsurgent forces possess the strategic clarity to do what is necessary. The answer to that question will determine whether the Sahel is stabilized or lost, whether the terrorism epicenter moves to West Africa's coast or is contained, whether the proxy wars that sustain JNIM are ended or intensified.

The clock is ticking. The costs of inaction are mounting. The only question is: will anyone have the courage to act?

Recommendations For Further Research

- Detailed Financial Analysis: The financial networks that sustain JNIM require detailed analysis to identify vulnerabilities that can be exploited through financial warfare.
- Drone Supply Chain Mapping: JNIM's drone supply chains need comprehensive mapping to identify and disrupt sources of support.
- Social Network Analysis: Detailed mapping of JNIM's social networks would support HUMINT recruitment and targeting.
- Regional Political Analysis: Understanding the political dynamics between AES and ECOWAS states is essential for developing effective regional strategies.
- Historical Case Studies: Comprehensive study of successful counterinsurgencies (Algeria, Colombia, Northern Ireland) would provide valuable lessons



Obsidian Research Bureau

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