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JNIM (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) Continues to Expand in Mali and Burkina Faso

Dr. David Doukhan

Abstract

This study examines the expanding operations of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen (JNIM), an al-Qaeda-affiliated coalition, in central and southern Mali and northern Burkina Faso. Through detailed analysis of recent sophisticated attacks by the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), a key JNIM faction, the paper reveals JNIM's enhanced tactical capabilities and strategic intent to extend its influence. It highlights the coalition's tactical innovation, including significant assaults and use of suicide bombings, which underline the growing challenge JNIM poses to regional security and the efficacy of state and international response mechanisms. The research also explores the socio-political impact of JNIM's activities on local communities, the ongoing conflict with the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and the dynamics of regional military strategies against jihadist threats. The evolving tactics of JNIM, alongside its recruitment and propaganda efforts, are critically analyzed to assess future threats and propose countermeasures. By consolidating insights into JNIM's operational expansion and its implications, this paper contributes to understanding the complexities of counter-terrorism in the Sahel, highlighting the urgent need for effective strategies to combat the growing jihadist insurgency.

Keywords: JNIM; Mali; The Sahel Region; Burkina Faso; Al-Qaeda; Terrorist Attacks.

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The al-Qaeda-linked subgroup in central and southern Mali and northern Burkina Faso is gaining power throughout its operating region. The Macina Liberation Front (Katiba Macina),¹ The MLF (The Macina Liberation Front) launched three major attacks on the bases of the state security forces of the Malian army in three different regions in Mali in December 2023, including one complex attack that included an SVBIED (suicide

1 The Katiba Macina, also known as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF), is a militant Salafi-Jihadist unit (Katiba) that arose in January 2015 during the Mali War. The organization is active in the Mufti region and the Région de Ségou, affiliated to the Ansar Dine organization and then to the group for the support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) led by Iyad ag Ghali.

"Macina" refers to the entire flooded area of the inner Niger Delta, i.e., the area between the circles of Mopti Ténenkou and Youwarou. The term also refers to the Fulani Empire of Machina, founded in the 19th century by the Marat Seko Amado.

Amadou Kouffa is a jihadist from Mali; as a descendant of the Fulani people, he is the leader of the Katiba from China. With the support of Ansar Din, the organization is responsible for expanding the jihadist insurgency in southern Mali. Amadou Kopa accuses the 'discreet' state of wanting to destroy Islam and its representatives and rejects its political and administrative representatives who organize its functioning, including the National Assembly. According to his method, an Islamic halachic state should be established.

vehicle-borne improvised explosive device), the MLF was apparently also involved in a series of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso.² The MLF is a subgroup of the coalition linked to al-Qaeda, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen - JNIM (al-Qaeda linked coalition Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen).³

It should be emphasized that the MLF began to increase the rate of terrorist attacks in central Mali at the end of November 2023 based on an assessment that the offensive will most likely result in extensive support regions where JNIM can operate and will be able to launch large and highly sophisticated attacks in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso in the future.⁴ The extent of the attacks demonstrates the group's ability to carry out large-scale strikes over a vast area and on a regular basis despite the presence of security personnel.

As part of the December 12 attack, MLF fighters took over a Malian army camp in Farabougou, in the center of Niono, in the Segou region of central Mali. At least five civilians and 'several dozen' soldiers were killed in the attack. Before the withdrawal, the JNIM cut off internet access to the area and warned residents not to return to their homes.⁵

In October 2020, Farabougou was one of the first villages in Mali to come under intense siege by the jihadists of JNIM. Assassinations, kidnappings, traffic bans: the village then became a symbol of the suffering of the population in Mali. Colonel Assimi Goïta, the interim vice president, flew to Farabougou by helicopter to show the support of the transitional authorities (Colonel Assimi Goïta officially became the transitional president only in June 2021, after a second coup).

A year later, in March 2021, an unprecedented local peace agreement was reached with

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- 2 Dozens killed in double attack on Mali army camp and village. (13.1.2023) Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/dozens-killed-double-attack-mali-army-camp-village-2023-12-13/> ; SITE Intelligence Group, "JNIM Issues Formal Statement on Dinangourou Raid, Photos of Suicide Bomber, War Spoils, and FAMa Casualties," December 22, 2023. https://twitter.com/Wamaps_news/status/1739564501798629818?s=20; https://twitter.com/Nomade_Sahelien/status/1739750114577551802?s=20 'Dozens' Killed in Week of Burkina Faso Attacks: Security Sources VOA (31.12.2023). <https://www.voanews.com/a/dozens-killed-in-week-of-burkina-faso-attacks-security-sources/7419473.html> SITE Intelligence Group, "JNIM Claims Capture of FAMa Base in Central Mali, Multiple Ambushes and Raids in Burkina Faso," December 26, 2023.
 - 3 Jama'ah Nusrat Al-Islam and Al-Muslimeen (JNIM) is a militant jihadist organization in the Maghreb and West Africa that was created in 2017 by the merger of Ansar Dine, the Macina Liberation Front), Al-Mourabitoun (Al-Mourabitoun) and the Saharan branch of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Its leaders swore allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri. All of these Islamist groups have a certain degree of autonomy in their operations, and each is subject to the orders of an independent leader. All groups operate in a defined territory starting from northeast Mali to southwest Burkina Faso and the central area of the three borders between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.
 - 4 Liam Karr, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, December 13, 2023: Al-Qaeda Strengthens in Central Mali," Critical Threats Project (15.12.2023). <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-december-13-2023>.
 - 5 See link: https://twitter.com/Wamaps_news/status/1734951822782058853?s=20 ; <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231213-mali-attaque-sanglante-du-jnim-dans-le-village-symbole-de-farabougou> ; <https://fr.al-ain.com/article/farabougou-mali-carnage-terroriste-symbole>

the JNIM, allowing residents to return to cultivating their fields and providing supplies to the village. However, the agreement only lasted a few months, and in February 2022, the army was finally deployed in Farabougou, where it maintained a permanent presence to protect the population. Despite this, the jihadists of JNIM are present and very active in the Niono district where Farabougou is located and regularly carry out deadly attacks, specifically the laying of improvised mines against the army and Wagner's auxiliary force.

On December 20, the JNIM staged an attack that involved the use of a suicide car bomber (SVBIED) that they claimed destroyed another Malian army base in central Mali's neighboring Mopti region.

The JNIM fighters, together with the sub-organization from Burkina Faso JNIM's Burkinabe subgroup Ansarul Islam took over a military base in northern Burkina Faso (Sollé-Mossi) on December 24, killed dozens of soldiers (90) from the Burkinabe army and looted the base before the air support arrived and then they fled.

The military and security forces in the region apparently do not have the capacity to withstand these attacks and do not affect the civilians inhabiting the expanding JNIM support areas.

In Mali, it appears that the governmental priority, with the support of the Wagner force, has been fighting Tuareg rebels in northern Mali since August 2023. In mid-November, the army, accompanied by the Russian Wagner militia, recaptured the city of Kidal, a central stronghold of the Tuareg that they had controlled for a decade.⁶ This choice significantly reduces the pace of countermeasures and the overall presence of the security forces in central Mali.⁷ A decrease in Mali's military and security forces' activity in the Mopti area leads to an expansion of the influence of the JNIM elements.

In the case of Burkina Faso, the army has been operating drones to compensate for the lack of manpower since April 2023. The drones have improved the performance of the military, which has avoided close and short-range battles with Islamic rebel organizations. It is clear that drone attacks do not have the power to prevent the spread of radical organizations.

The situation that emerges from the end of 2023 and the beginning of 2024 in the region shows that the JNIM will undoubtedly continue to attack to delegitimize the governments of the two countries (Mali and Burkina Faso) and expand its areas of influence and support without establishing direct territorial control. It seems that the organization does not aim to hold large population centers where it risks counterattacks and absorbing significant losses, mainly from drone and UAV strikes.⁸ However,

6 See the link: Mali: l'armée reprend le contrôle de la ville de Kidal, bastion de la rébellion Touareg (france24.com).

7 Liam Karr, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, October 25, 2023: Malian Junta and Its Wagner Group Allies Are Unprepared for Ongoing UN Withdrawal," Critical Threats Project (25.12.2023). <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-october-25-2023>.

8 See how the rebels are eliminated from the air in the link: <https://twitter.com/ZagazOlaMakama/status/1729820594781192354?s=20>

the attacks allow JNIM to influence the local population by its presence in the area despite the complete lack of control and grip on the territory and local resources.⁹ This is precisely the situation that shows to the population the central government's shortcomings and the ineffectiveness of its security forces.

The Clash Between JNIM and ISGS and its Impact on the Local Population

The JNIM has been fighting Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) factions since 2019. This open battle between jihadist organizations is most lethal in the border triangle of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and it is expected to worsen by mid-2022. Neither side can gain a military advantage. The JNIM enjoyed a winning streak until the summer of 2022, but it has recently experienced severe falls.

The intensity of the war between them has waned - declined due to financial difficulties that both groups are suffering from, difficulties that force them to limit the frontal confrontation between them and focus on renewing their cash flow. They pay the price of the struggle for control and influence over the entirety of the local population. They are victims of everyday violence that includes attacks on food, medicine, or fuel convoys, indiscriminate or targeted attacks, and theft of cattle or vehicles. At the same time, there was a significant surge in kidnappings for ransom, extortion of gold mining sites and other minerals, and explicit warnings that locals must abandon their houses and places of residence. In the territories controlled by both organizations, the residents must obey Sharia (Islamic law) and pay 'zakat', a tax imposed in the name of Islam, in exchange for some form of protection and personal security.

Struggle Against the JNIM and Internal Conflicts

The JNIM also faces the armed forces of the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The fighting against the JNIM is prominent in Burkina Faso. Since the seizure of power by Captain Ibrahim Traoré on September 30, 2022, the country has considerably strengthened the recruitment of volunteers for the defense of the homeland and focused the operations of its armed forces on recapturing territories occupied by Islamic groups. The effort was somewhat successful, especially in and around Solenzo, after the launch of Operation Féleho on December 2, 2022, which in Bwamou (local dialect) means "reconquest of our country".¹⁰

Chinedu Asadu, "Burkina Faso's state media says hundreds of rebels have been killed trying to seize the vulnerable town," AP (28.11.2023). <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-djibo-rebels-islamic-state-al-qaida-a6dd07b6d587156a8ba48b352c3ae238>

9 See the link: https://twitter.com/Wamaps_news/status/1734951822782058853?s=20

10 L'Opération FELEHO pour redonner vie à Solenzo, une quarantaine de terroristes neutralisés. See the link: <https://burkina24.com/2022/12/16/burkina-faso-loperation-feleho-pour-redonner-vie-a-solenzo-une-quarantaine-de-terroristes-neutralises/>

After almost seven years, the JNIM is reaching a decisive period that will affect its continued survival. It is about his ability to create financial streams to ensure long-term survival. This is because the activity has worsened, resulting in a lot of pushback from the military forces and the local populace, resistance that limits the number of people joining the organization and affects the recruitment process. The JNIM is also facing internal disputes, defections, and betrayals amid the standoff with the ISGS.

Recently, the JNIM has been calling on the citizens of Mali to join its ranks and its jihad against the Wagner force and the military, or at least support the presence of al-Qaeda to confront the Russian “invaders” and local collaborators. The JNIM called on the Muslims united in the CSP-PSD (Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement) to reject the calls for dialogue and peaceful coexistence, as al-Qaeda fears that this will leave them with less leverage and influence.¹¹ The JNIM replaced ‘French imperialists’, a phrase it had used for years to justify its jihad in the Sahel, with ‘Russians’. The renewed increase in violence is accompanied by carefully designed messages about the horrors that the Wagner Force fighters are perpetrating against the country’s citizens and against the ethnic cleansing allegedly carried out by the Malian army.

11 The Permanent Strategic Framework for Peace, Security, and Development (PSF-PSD) is a coalition of political and military movements in northern Mali established on May 6, 2021. It initially brought together the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform of the Movements of June 14, 2014, in Algiers.

The Platform of the June 14 Movement of Algiers (Platform of the June 14 Movement of Algiers) is an alliance of pro-government armed groups from Mali that was established during the Mali War on June 14, 2014, in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, where it took place Negotiations between Mali and the CMA rebels. Due to the deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel in general and in Mali in particular, especially in the northern/Azawad regions of Mali, the new coalition of armed movements has set several objectives. These include, among others, the concretization of efforts for the determined implementation of the peace and reconciliation agreement in Mali as a result of the Algiers process” and the activation of joint mechanisms to combat insecurity in all its forms to ensure the free movement of people and their goods. The CSP called on all communities to support his initiatives and movements for peace and social cohesion to join him and called on the Malian government and international mediation to accompany him. See the link: Mali: Les mouvements armés du nord créent le “Cadre stratégique permanent” (aa.com.tr).