

Current Trends IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY

VOLUME 38

July 2026

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Hudson Institute

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ISSN: 1940834X

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The Pandemonium Narrative and Its Limits: Artificial Intelligence and the Islamic State's Innovation Pattern

*Clara Broekaert
and Colin P. Clarke*

A TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AT TIMES PLAGUES THE STUDY OF terrorism and violent extremism. In summary, it characterizes violent extremists of any creed (the “red team”) as swift and skilled adopters of emerging technologies to optimize their organizational processes, scale their violence, and avoid countermeasures. Meanwhile, it portrays counterterrorism forces (the “blue team”) as overly bureaucratic, cumbersome, and slow to respond to changes in the operational environment. The conventional wisdom holds that nonstate actors will almost always outpace the security services and intelligence agencies seeking to curb their violent activity, often with catastrophic consequences.

Analysts have traditionally understood new or emerging technologies as an amplifier or force multiplier for terrorists, with metrics such as gains in operational planning, increased attack lethality, or improved volume and sophistication of propaganda. Evidence has often borne this out: Extremists built entire recruitment pipelines for years on social media platforms and chat applications before those platforms assembled content moderation teams to counter such illicit use.¹

But this technological determinism has proven faulty too, specifically by presupposing that the new destructive tactics that an emerging technology unlocks are, by definition, paradigm-shattering or facilitate mass radicalization or violence. This may be only normal, considering that scholarship in the field of terrorism studies proliferated after the al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, turning the feats of aviation technology into a crude but spectacular weapon of mass destruction.

Twenty-five years after that devastating attack, terrorists continue to experiment with emerging technologies to enhance their operational capabilities. Artificial intelligence (AI),² the technology that dominates the headlines and seems poised to have a drastic impact on society writ large, is not just for drafting emails and vibe-coding. On the contrary, it is a novel yet dangerous tool at the disposal of terrorists, including Salafi-jihadists, who can weaponize it.

Since as early as 2018, fellow analysts and scholars of terrorism and technology have warned about the potential misuses of AI by nonstate actors.³ Every wave of technology adoption has a dark, sordid underbelly, and it is possible to harness or repurpose all trappings of globalization for nefarious ends. AI is bound to be misused by the worst of humanity—our work has examined terrorists deploying AI in propaganda⁴ as well as chatbot-enabled radicalization of lone wolves.⁵ Violent extremists have also used it for operational planning,⁶ and it has the potential to augment various weapons systems⁷ and to improve intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

The highly decentralized nature of the two most dangerous global Salafi-jihadist terrorist organizations, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (and their regional affiliates), together with legions of “inspired” attackers⁸ who carry out violence in their name, makes technologies that reduce the friction of planning and preparing an attack especially useful. But current narratives of pandemonium or, on the flip side, naive predictions of AI as a tool usable only for indisputable good and ripe for “fine-tuning” into perfection, will not age well. Put simply, predictions by those wearing rose-colored glasses do not align with established knowledge about terrorist innovation.

This paper seeks to contribute to a grounded and sober understanding of the threat that AI poses in the hands of Salafi-jihadists, and especially the Islamic State, based on knowledge of their innovation patterns and adoption of technologies more broadly. It does so by assessing why terrorists innovate tactically, operationally, and strategically and how Salafi-jihadists have adopted, iterated on, and refined their use of other technologies. It then turns to AI adoption by the Islamic State and its supporters, examining what is known about their past adoption and what is plausible in the future based on their adoption patterns. The paper concludes with an overview of two issues that counterterrorism agencies should not overlook when considering the AI-enabled terrorism threat landscape: the potential for Black Swan events and the conundrum posed by open-source AI models. It finds that while AI and its various applications raise the severity of worst-case scenarios, they only moderately increase the severity of more likely scenarios, such as propaganda generation or operational planning. Even so, small incremental efficiencies can compound into large-scale effects over time.

Why Terrorists Innovate: Adapt or Die

TERRORIST INNOVATION IS THE PROCESS WHEREBY A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION reformulates substantial components of its preexisting codes and norms.⁹ This does not necessarily mean an escalation in violence, as many presume, and innovation need not translate into enhanced operational efficiency. It is merely a change in functioning. It can occur at the tactical level, altering the method and location of an attack, for example. But innovation can also take place at the operational and strategic levels.¹⁰ Innovation at the operational level could take the form of shifts in a terrorist group's structure to become more resistant to law-enforcement infiltration. It could also manifest in changes to propaganda production tools or financing methods as groups confront counterterrorism pressure. At the strategic level, innovation may assume a shifting approach to achieving the group's goals or even a pivot in the organization's overall objectives.

The debate over the drivers of terrorist innovation, technological adoption, and organizational learning remains unsettled. However, analysts have identi-

fied a broad set of endogenous and exogenous factors that influence terrorists' adoption of new or emerging technologies.¹¹ Audrey Kurth Cronin has proposed a lethal empowerment theory to explain which new technologies are adopted by violent extremists.¹² Typically, these technologies are easy to access, relatively inexpensive, transportable, concealable, simple to use, and available commercially off the shelf. They are also part of a cluster of emerging technologies that reinforce each other. This framework can help explain why terrorists adopted certain technologies in specific plots.¹³ In the Islamic State-inspired New Year's Day attack in New Orleans in 2025, the terrorist used smart glasses to conduct reconnaissance of the French Quarter during the operational planning phase. He also used peer-to-peer rental services and leveraged an electric truck for the vehicle-ramming attack component of his overall terrorist act, perhaps looking for ways to reduce noise that would have given advance warning to pedestrians in the street.

Analysts have widely understood terrorists' innovation, learning, or adaptation as a result of operating in an inherently hostile environment, where terrorist groups continuously seek ways to gain a competitive advantage, sparking malevolent creativity. As a Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) report summarizes, "Terrorist groups who fail to innovate will either 'be degraded to the point of irrelevance' or fail to attract resources, recruits and supporters."¹⁴ Fundamentally, the question of terrorist innovation is one of survival underpinned by a straightforward cost-benefit calculation: Innovation is a strategic necessity, but it often carries inherent risk.

It is ideal to understand the adoption curve of technology by violent non-state actors as a four-phase process.¹⁵ Often, adoption is not immediately successful, but failure to use a new technology efficiently should be interpreted as a learning opportunity rather than a failure. Early adoption often involves flawed experimentation. A phase of iteration follows, typically centered on a combination of commercial improvements to the technology and tactical refinement, which then spurs a breakthrough and a sharp rise in effective use. Finally, this leads to competition, in which various "blue team" actors seek to curb the use of the technology by violent nonstate actors, leading to adaptation-counteradaptation dynamics.

In some ways, there is a parallel to the private sector and the wave of start-up companies that inevitably proliferate around new technologies and software development. Many adopt the mantra "Fail fast"—in other words, experiment rapidly to identify potential failures or weak points early and minimize wasted time and resources. But terrorists have different incentive structures than corporations. The latter focus on profit, while the former are concerned with pol-

itics. For a terrorist group, innovation is about fine-tuning specific approaches to achieve a specific objective or improve a capability.

Myriad factors drive a terrorist group to innovate, as Assaf Moghadam has noted, and among these is opportunism: The emergence of a new technology can be the enabling factor in a terrorist group's innovation.¹⁶ Moreover, as Moghadam observed, technological innovation is more multidirectional and integrative, complementing the shift in recent years from hierarchical structures to more networked organizations, as well as the penchant among some groups to associate with terrorist entrepreneurs.¹⁷ Michael Horowitz's work on why some groups resort to suicide terrorism applies the concept of adoption capacity theory and suggests that, beyond ideology, a terrorist group's internal capacity for innovation and external linkages to other groups, especially those also seeking to innovate technologically, will be determining factors.¹⁸ Brian Jackson has emphasized the importance of complementing explicit knowledge with tacit knowledge for successful terrorist innovation.¹⁹ An example of explicit knowledge could be a manual for making 3D-printed weapons, whereas tacit knowledge would be the actual experience, practice, and tradecraft of designing, printing, and testing these weapons, with a focus on incremental improvement through subsequent iterations. Michael Kenney's research builds on Jackson's and explores the differences between abstract technical knowledge and practical, experiential knowledge.²⁰ The latter, in Kenney's view, is far more valuable and leads groups to prioritize "learning by doing."

Salafi-Jihadists' Adoption of Technology

TO UNDERSTAND AI ADOPTION BY SALAFI-JIHADISTS, BOTH EXOGENOUS FACTORS AND endogenous factors matter. Ideology, resources, self-image, organizational structure, and leadership can all shape which kinds of innovation these groups view as feasible or legitimate. Exogenous factors, such as counterterrorism measures and state support or repression, can also create pressures that prompt groups to alter their behavior. The properties of a technology itself explain why and how adoption occurs,²¹ but ideology, too, can encourage or constrain innovation. In a cross-ideological study of innovation by violent

extremists, looking at (1) Salafi-jihadists and (2) racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists, researchers found that “Salafi-jihadist convention states that technology, whoever develops it, is generally characterized by material neutrality.”²² These two groups stand in contrast, as the second group views technology companies with suspicion and tends to favor grassroots, autonomous innovation. Don Rassler and Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, meanwhile, focus on the cycle of tech innovation, typically starting with properties of technology itself: Dual-use and democratized access lead to accessibility, which in turn feeds into diffusion (spread of tactics) and directionality (new threat variants).²³

For Salafi-jihadists, the adoption of a technology often stems from a combination of the tool’s characteristics and the organization’s ideological pillars. Ideologically, it is most appropriate to understand innovation as something normatively embedded. Salafi-jihadists treat many cultural artifacts tied to non-Islamic worldviews as strictly forbidden but treat certain technologies themselves as morally neutral. This effectively allows them to adopt technology developed by the “enemy” without ideological friction. Within both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, official propaganda materials relay many opinions on technology that emanated from practical experimentation by fighters and supporters.²⁴ Innovation often emerges bottom-up; it begins with successful testing on the battlefield or by supporters, and only later do groups codify it through propaganda. Salafi-jihadist propaganda is thus a crucial linchpin in the innovation propaganda of such groups.

There are several illustrative examples of successful innovation over the past decade. The Islamic State went to great lengths in the mid-2010s to enhance its ability to construct various forms of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) in Iraq and Syria, including by experimenting with other exploding vehicles such as scooters, tanks, armored personnel carriers, and bulldozers.²⁵ Islamic State members, through the trial and error of continued technical improvisation, produced increasingly lethal VBIEDs to deploy against their adversaries. However, toward the end of the Battle of Mosul in 2017, the quality of these weapons deteriorated and attack lethality ebbed, mainly because so many of their skilled engineers were being killed. Personnel turnover negatively affected institutional memory,²⁶ leading to the loss of both know-how and other forms of tacit knowledge related to the production of VBIEDs.

The Islamic State has also displayed a knack for innovation in the use of drones. In their study of nonstate violent drone use in the Middle East, Veil-

leux-Lepage and Emil Archambault outlined four specific ways the Islamic State was innovative in its approach to drones:

1. Using drones as flying artillery for the purposes of explosive delivery (not as loitering munitions)
2. Using drones for observation in combination with kinetic activities, such as artillery fire or VBIEDs
3. Featuring drones as an integral part of the group's propaganda
4. Developing a drone program without state sponsorship, and in doing so, "displaying significant technical prowess in assembling weaponized drones"²⁷

The Islamic State has thus demonstrated a remarkable ability to innovate using emerging technologies. This has led many scholars and analysts to believe the group will continue to take advantage of other technologies, including AI, which itself can serve as a force multiplier for drone attacks, media operations, and the development and deployment of various types of weapons.

Artificial Intelligence and the Islamic State

EARLY EXPERIMENTATION WITH GENERATIVE AI BY ISLAMIC STATE SUPPORTERS BEGAN in or around 2023. In our analysis of the sprawling Islamic State digital ecosystem, which comprises a collection of official media foundations, publications, and accounts as well as aligned media foundations and supporter networks, we first observed the use of generative AI to create propaganda imagery by the group's supporters.²⁸ These supporters, active on both the "fringe" messaging applications and self-hosted forums of the Islamic State as well as on mainstream social media platforms, were the first to include

AI-generated images in their messaging. Many of them have been increasingly young and have experimented with “Alt-Jihad” aesthetics that appropriate some of the aesthetics of extreme-right groups to generate appealing memes.²⁹ AI integration was thus a logical next step. Both individuals and networks of supporters sustain the Islamic State’s digital ecosystem, largely by creating appealing, resonant content that supports official narratives and messaging. The ecosystem’s decentralized nature appears to be the natural starting point for AI integration.

In August 2023, Qimam Electronic Foundation, a well-established but unofficial pro-Islamic State media outlet focused on technology and operational security (OPSEC), published an article on how to use ChatGPT safely. It did not comment on the permissibility of the technology—which would also not fit its role as a supporting rather than official media outlet. However, it did provide basic OPSEC pointers in the article, which was published on one of the many pastebin sites Islamic State supporters use to safeguard their content from takedowns by content moderators.³⁰

A year later, as the quality of generative AI outputs improved and more AI tools for multimedia creation became available, online Islamic State supporters discussed the permissibility of using the technology. In the aftermath of the Islamic State’s deadly attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow on March 22, 2024,³¹ a supporter circulated an AI-generated video news bulletin about the attack on the group’s self-hosted Rocket.Chat communications platform. This sparked a debate within pro-Islamic State networks about whether using AI tools, a set of technologies that developers had trained on data belonging to the “disbeliever,” was justifiable. It also led Islamic State supporters to blur the face of the AI-generated newscaster in subsequent propaganda videos claiming different attacks, apparently to avoid the prohibition against creating animate beings that resemble the creations of Allah.³²

In May 2024, an Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) supporter published a similar series of news-bulletin-like AI-generated videos to claim attacks in Afghanistan. Our open-source intelligence (OSINT) research shows that supporters also experimented with text-to-speech tools and used chatbots to translate text, though they often did not explicitly acknowledge it. Accordingly, generative AI’s first and most natural adoption by IS supporters has been for generating unofficial supporter-facing propaganda, including *anasheed* (“chants”), compelling imagery, and news bulletins, as well as imagery to accompany text statements. Official Islamic State media institutions

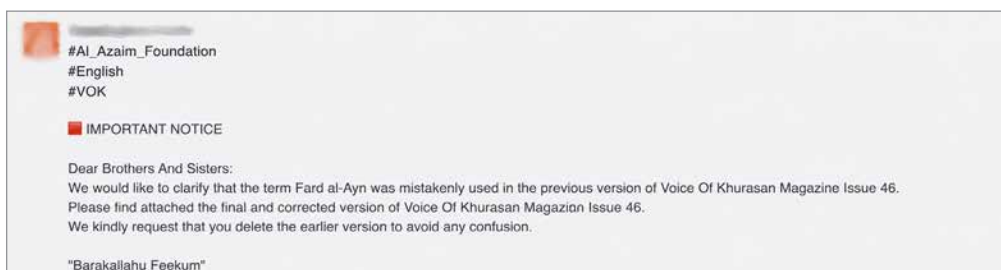


Figure 1. Retraction Notice of the “Fard al-Ayn” Designation of AI in Voice of Khorasan

also appear to have used generative AI to create imagery and for translation purposes.³³

Doctrine: AI as *fard al-’ayn*?

ISKP, the branch of the Islamic State that metastasized in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2015 and has since become one of the most active provinces in terms of external operations, became the first branch to provide guidance about AI usage to its supporters. In the June 2025 edition of its flagship magazine, *Voice of Khorasan*, Al Azaim Media Foundation dedicated an entire spread to OPSEC, the use of generative AI, and the religious obligation to use AI as a Muslim. It is not entirely surprising that this specific propaganda magazine is the first to address the subject. It is known as a visually compelling, “young,” and very readable monthly publication,³⁴ especially in contrast to *al-Naba*, the sometimes hard-to-parse, formulaic magazine that the Islamic State’s central media apparatus Al publishes weekly. ISKP’s magazine touches on various international developments and is aesthetically pleasing: Striking, modern collages accompany articles on global politics, women’s affairs, and religious matters. The magazine’s *Light of Darkness* bulletin contains ISKP’s advice on technology, digital tools, and OPSEC.

In June 2025, this bulletin described AI as *fard al-’ayn* (نبي عا لاضر ف), a personal duty incumbent upon each believer in Islam. Not long after Al Azaim Media Foundation distributed the issue across its channels, it issued a retraction along with a short statement that the magazine had designated as *fard al-’ayn* mistakenly (figure 1). Some researchers have attributed the retraction to ridicule from other jihadist groups.³⁵ The rest of the article, however, remained published. The next *Voice of Khorasan* issue likewise dedicated a *Light of Darkness* bulletin entirely to AI.

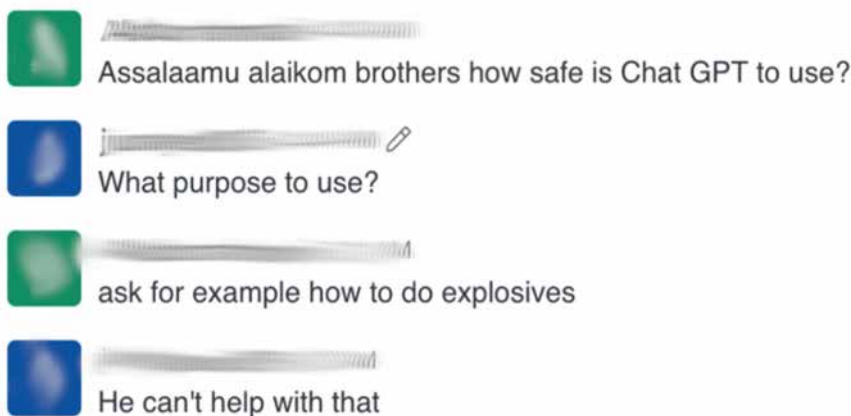


Figure 2. Excerpts from the ISKP Bulletins on AI in Voice of Khorasan, 2025

Both bulletins indicate a shallow understanding of how generative AI works and more sophisticated methods of deploying it, though they do demonstrate some awareness of the security and privacy concerns surrounding its use. This technical naivete and amateur advice would appear to make terrorist use of AI a non-issue if the articles weren't so insistent on its adoption—an imperative they ground in religious justification.

The first article opens with a reference to those “martyred” when Israel used AI-guided weapons in Gaza, then launches into a short reflection on the Qur'an's guidance regarding thoughtful engagement with information of suspicious origin. It concludes that Muslims should use AI responsibly. While the rest of the article focuses primarily on different cloud-based AI chatbots, it reveals an understanding of AI's importance in weapons systems, economic affairs, and geopolitics. A statement that is, interestingly, a 100% AI-generated text according to the detection tool Pangram summarizes the push for AI adoption as follows:

AI is no longer optional, it's your shield and compass in a digital world wired with hidden threats. From hackers and spyware to automated war tools and surveillance systems embedded in apps and networks, the dangers are evolving rapidly. With AI, you can detect intrusions, protect your identity, and decode digital traps. It also grants clear access to real knowledge on warfare, education, and global systems, free from bias and manipulation. Without AI literacy, you're exposed and misled. With it, you're empowered, informed, and secure. In an AI-driven age, understanding it isn't a choice, it's a defense.



Do you all get the picture?! How advanced AI has become and it keeps advancing? In previous post I was trying to make all of you aware that AI is something to get into or somewhat take a look at because AI will be the thing later on. I was looking for brothers that has knowledge of AI's, how to build one.

There are some reasons behind in why I asked is because what we do, every munasir and munasira of the Khilafah is serious matter and very sensitive one. Many of you dont know how difficult it is to always keep oneself safe and secure with the kuffar mushrikeen spies around that spends all their time to catch brothers and sisters.

The worries, the struggles, the hardships and difficulties munasreen going through because of all of this is hard to describe and explain, and top of that their own privatelives which we dont even know whats going on. So an AI that focused on Cyberdefence, Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare would take alot of the stress and worries away in sha Allah Brîdhnillah and Allah knows best.

An AI that is focused on Cyberdefence and Cybersecurity would protect oneself from all types of threats, attacks, viruses from the kuffar mushrikeen so they wont ever be able to catch, find or figure out who the brother is and things like that.

But why did I mentioned an AI that also includes Cyberwarfare?! When the AI is already protecting you, keep your computer and phone safe and secure from every kafir mushirk, murtad and munafiq with its Cyberdefence and Cybersecurity mechanism and features?!

Its because I, personally would want the AI to destory every kafir mushirk and murtad their computers and phones with all types of attacks it could be Viruses, Trojans malwares and all that. The kuffar mushrikeen and murtadeen are at war against Islam and muslimen, The Islamic State and the munasreen and munasiraat so it got to have Cyberwarfare countermeasures so that the kuffar mushrikeen and murtadeen cant continue with their attacks against us and it destorys their capabilities because you got a strong and reliable AI Bot made by few muwahideen brothers, it could also be by akhawāt aswell.

Figure 3. Sample of Discussions About AI Use in an Operational Context

The author weaves various Quranic verses throughout the piece to address privacy and security issues related to AI chatbots (figure 2). They also tie warnings about overreliance on or careless use of the technology to religious doctrine: “As Muslims, we are commanded not just to seek beneficial knowledge, but also to avoid becoming tools of *zulm* (oppression), *fitnah* (chaos), or *ghaflah* (heedlessness).” The article appears to conclude with a cautious endorsement of Brave Leo AI as the most secure option. Brave, the company primarily known for its privacy-focused browser, maintains that its chatbot does not collect personal identifiers such as IP addresses or any other personal data.³⁶

The second article of the edition provides a list of ways to operationalize AI chatbots. The entire section reads as humdrum and unthreatening with a distinct AI-generated flavor. Examples of permissible AI use read as banal, including one incredibly suggesting its use to generate halal business ideas, such as a modest fashion business. This stands in stark contrast to other articles in the same issue, one of which retells the “memories of a mujahid from the bloody Battle of Mo-

sul” in gory detail. It also refers to AI’s permissible uses for media campaigns and translation of Islamic State content but does not explore them in depth.

While these short bulletins confirm a top-down insistence on AI adoption among Islamic State members and supporters—though only from ISKP at this moment—the magazine does not discuss the use of AI for operational plotting and execution of terrorist attacks. This is where the dynamic identified in the Islamic State’s previous adoption of technologies becomes especially significant: In terrorist innovation, it is often supporters who experiment with new technologies first, and legitimization by the Islamic State follows only later through official propaganda outlets. For this reason, conversations among Islamic State supporters about how they are actually exploiting AI models may offer some of the most valuable intelligence for assessing the threat landscape ahead of AI-enabled terrorist attacks.

As this section demonstrates, AI-assisted propaganda generation and translation mark an interesting technical evolution in content production. However, there is little evidence so far that these activities have produced demonstrable increases in audience size, recruitment success, or pathways to violence. Nonetheless, even marginal improvements may have lethal downstream consequences. If modestly greater content appeal and more translations of publications garner only a handful of new or newly motivated supporters, the downstream effect can still be significant.

Tactical Adoption: Operational Planning and Weapons Systems

THE MOST WORRISOME SIGNAL EMERGING FROM OPEN-SOURCE ANALYSIS OF discussions among Islamic State supporters about AI is its apparent role in lowering the barriers to operations that would normally require significant technical expertise and resources. Supporters have discussed the use of generative AI for a range of different operational planning purposes.³⁷ One discussion suggests that AI chatbots can generate the code necessary to program 3D-printed drones to deliver a payload in an attack. Critically, the discussion indicates that participants were suggesting the concept of AI-assisted code generation rather than sharing outputs directly. This illustrates that, at present, serious operational ideation is

more common in these chatrooms than demonstrated technical execution. As with other technologies, including drones and social media platforms, early experimentation may very well lead to iteration and continued practice, resulting in a wave of AI-enabled terrorist attacks that we will further examine in our forecast.

We cannot determine whether supporters successfully generated or shared any such code through more restricted channels. Other discussions we observed on the Islamic State's Rocket.Chat server indicate that users are actively experimenting with different chatbots for guidance on creating explosives or generating code for cyberattacks in the name of the Islamic State (figure 3). While the credibility of these threats—and whether the user actually successfully leveraged AI to attempt such operational planning—is unclear, the intent is evident and worrisome for what it portends.

Piecing together the scale of actual AI-enabled plots and operations is an inherently unsatisfactory endeavor: Many foiled terrorist plots never receive public discussion, and the details of investigations into successful plots are rarely fully available to researchers. Nonetheless, there have been some initial signals that Islamic State supporters use AI chatbots for operational planning. In April 2025, authorities in Vienna, Austria, arrested an 18-year-old inspired by the Islamic State for planning to target the Israeli Embassy as well as a Shia mosque. However, investigators found no imminent plot, only ChatGPT chatlogs riddled with his fantasies about violent attacks as well as queries about the production and storage of explosives.³⁸ Open-source reporting has not clarified whether and how the teenager was able to circumvent the AI model's safety alignment. Reporting has also shown that extremists of other convictions (from efilist³⁹ to neo-Nazi) have successfully used AI chatbots for operational planning.⁴⁰

The small number of documented AI-enabled terrorist plots in which terrorists consulted AI chatbots for planning purposes reflects the limits of our visibility into such plots but not the absence of such plots. Moreover, AI as a technology is in its nascent stage; its proficient use by terrorists is likely to continue improving over time. Other signals also point to AI's misuse by violent extremists. The issue of chatbot exploitation has become significant enough that OpenAI has announced it will now embed a feature in its product to redirect individuals showing signs of radicalization to appropriate resources.⁴¹ In April 2026, the start-up Throughline announced it would introduce a feature for OpenAI that offers human- and chatbot-based support to individuals who are demonstrating signs of radicalization. Major AI companies had previously subcontracted Throughline to redirect users to crisis support when they were at risk of self-harm, domestic violence, or an eating disorder. The

2026 Tumbler Ridge mass school shooting case,⁴² in which OpenAI failed to appropriately act on the shooter's flagged chat logs, may have catalyzed this response.⁴³ But the underlying impetus likely extends to misuse by all kinds of extremists, including Salafi-jihadists.

The Risks of AI-Enabled Cyber-Physical Systems

The primary uses of AI have been propaganda generation and radicalization efforts. The few discussions we were able to find of Islamic State support for AI use in operational planning suggest supporters typically use it very similarly to non-malicious applications: breaking down complex material and existing knowledge into practical, digestible steps.

However, it is important to look beyond generative tools to understand the full threat landscape AI technology creates, including the specific threats posed by AI-enabled cyber-physical systems. Agentic AI consists of systems that can execute actions online or in the physical world with limited or no ongoing user input. Cyber-physical systems are systems in the physical world in which embedded computers and networks monitor and control physical processes. We can distinguish two categories of AI-enabled or agentic cyber-physical systems.

First, and of most immediate concern, are AI-enabled cyber-physical systems that are deemed dual-use, such as self-driving cars and drones. Terrorist use of drones has a long history,⁴⁴ and the Russo-Ukrainian war—marked by a boom in AI-enabled drones—is likely to further shape drone tactics by the Islamic State and its supporters. Analysts have long explored terrorists' potential use of self-driving cars to deliver explosives, but it has not yet occurred.⁴⁵ The second category consists of autonomous weapons, such as robotic systems that can select and attack targets without human intervention. Many of these weapons are “closed” and not commercially available. Still, advancements in AI and the recruitment of technical talent mean that terrorists may assemble their own, as they have DIY-ed various drone systems in the past.⁴⁶

Some signals have emerged of potential exploitation of AI in drone attacks by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Sahel region of Africa. In their analysis of JNIM's drone usage, Niccola Milnes and Rida Lyammouri posited that some of the latest advancements in JNIM's drone capabilities, including ISR-guided targeting and geofencing bypass, suggest the group may already be using open-source AI models to support drone modifications.⁴⁷ These tools can enable firmware overrides, autono-

mous flight path optimization, and comms-free execution. More evidence is necessary to evaluate exactly whether and how terrorists are modifying drones through AI. What is certainly true is that code repositories like GitHub feature an abundance of accessible software related to “drone mod scripts, vision models, [and] language tools.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the lack of clear evidence of AI-enabled attacks and/or adoption of fully autonomous weapons and/or drones by the Islamic State at present brings us to the crux of the matter: distinguishing between what is possible and what is plausible.

Future Forecasting: Distinguishing the Plausible from the Possible

OUR FORECASTING OF AI USE BY SALAFI-JIHADISTS, PARTICULARLY THE ISLAMIC STATE, is based on our empirical observations of how the group has adopted it so far: First, it is clear that there is organizational endorsement of the use of the technology in specific ways, as *Voice of Khorasan* has highlighted. Second, there is an appetite for continued experimentation among supporters, which tends to drive innovation within the Islamic State and is subsequently reinforced from the top down. Third, AI adoption so far follows an efficiency logic: removing hurdles (e.g., slow propaganda translation and complex DIY explosives manuals) to improve productivity. We also derive the forecast from the broader AI technological trajectory in past years, from early, standalone generative tools in chatbot format toward more integrated, agentic systems that can remember prior context and execute multi-step tasks with limited human supervision or input.

The following represents our forecast of the ways in which the Islamic State (and possibly other Salafi-jihadists not affiliated with the group) may seek to use AI in the coming years. It includes developments we believe will materialize within the next 12 months as well as in the longer term.

Propaganda and Recruitment

Mass and Scale. It is highly likely that the combination of improved agentic AI capabilities and already robust generative AI tools will enable propaganda

efforts at scale by the Islamic State or its supporters through vast, efficiently spun-up bot networks that promote AI-generated content. As Adam Hadley, the founder of Tech Against Terrorism, stated in July 2025, “the use of agentic AI and circumvention techniques to create tens of thousands of accounts online and create terrorist content with abundance is not so far away.”⁴⁹ Social media platforms have become adept at identifying and attributing bot networks, but state and nonstate actors continue to discover loopholes to exploit for their propaganda campaigns. As other analysts have pointed out, “Slick, AI-assisted media output may have an additional pull towards the younger generation.”⁵⁰ ISKP has, in the past, hosted classes for propagandists on content design;⁵¹ it is highly likely that AI will feature in upcoming iterations of such workshops.

Targeting and Microtargeting. In the near term, Salafi-jihadists will likely use AI tools for more tailored messaging campaigns, meaning the adaptation of content and narratives to specific audiences. In the longer term, the Islamic State will likely experiment with microtargeting, a strategy that uses personal data to segment audiences into extremely small groups and deliver highly relevant messages, similar to the approaches that Madison Avenue advertising firms pioneered. Multiple studies have demonstrated that AI-enabled microtargeting for political purposes is both effective and scalable.⁵² The 2018 multi-institutional report *The Malicious Use of Artificial Intelligence: Forecasting, Prevention, and Mitigation* has already articulated the theory that terrorists would exploit AI in this manner. It warns that groups can use AI to target people with “precisely the right message at precisely the right time in order to maximize persuasive potential.”⁵³

In our assessment, it is highly likely that the Islamic State and its supporters will engage in microtargeting through AI tools, including by identifying profiles of individuals who may be vulnerable to recruitment or coercible into conducting an attack. This fits a larger, well-established pattern in Islamic State propaganda, which, as al-Qaeda has done for decades, tailors narratives to an audience’s specific local grievances.⁵⁴ These groups have excelled at grievance laundering, connecting parochial (often legitimate) grievances to a global propaganda campaign intended to incite and radicalize jihadist followers and supporters around the world.

Specialized Bots. The Islamic State has a long history of using Telegram bots for its operations. The most comprehensive study of this phenomenon concludes that “for the Islamic State—similar to many other violent extremist groups—bots are being used to lubricate and augment influence activities, including facilitating content amplification and community cultivation efforts. They are standing

in for official Islamic State operatives and advocates, connecting people with the movement based on common behaviors, shared interests, and/or ideological proximity while minimizing risk for the broader organization.”⁵⁵

While many of these bots are rule-based rather than AI- or machine-learning-based (it is possible to build both through Telegram’s interface), the Islamic State’s use of such bots shows an appetite for efficiency and scaling. It is therefore plausible—and increasingly likely as tools mature—that the Islamic State or its supporters will deploy more capable bots to coax users toward the group’s ideology or to provide “vetted” guidance on behalf of the group, whether regarding operations or doctrine. Such bots may continue to be hosted on messaging applications like Telegram but could also be embedded in other platforms and services.

Operational Planning and Attack

Interactive DIY. It is almost certain that more Islamic State-inspired attackers and would-be attackers will use bots not affiliated with the Islamic State to receive hyper-personalized advice on attack planning or attack tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). This is the logical progression of a terrorist organization that has sought to decrease friction in committing attacks on its behalf through the production and dissemination of DIY guides. It is increasingly likely that supporters will look for more personalized guidance. This may include conversations with chatbots about which weapons to use and how (e.g., TATP synthesis⁵⁶) as well as broader tactics such as target selection, weather conditions, synthesis of open-source information about a target’s physical security, and anything relevant to reducing uncertainty. The role of “virtual planners”⁵⁷ may increasingly fall on such chatbots.⁵⁸

To assess the likelihood of this, an important factor will be whether Islamic State supporters will find functional but private chatbots to their liking and adopt them at scale. In *The Terrorists’ Dilemma*, Jacob Shapiro lays out an essential trade-off for terrorists: Time invested in OPSEC to stay alive means less time for planning and plotting attacks. This has a host of downstream trade-offs: Communication is necessary for efficient planning and organization but also gives law enforcement more signals intelligence (SIGINT) cues to dismantle the organization. Chatbot adoption for advice on attack TTPs, depending on their calibration, may very well minimize this trade-off for terrorist groups. As terrorists outsource more mundane tasks to AI—much like the modern of-

fice worker—it opens up bandwidth for them to focus their energy on planning attacks, a trend that could lead to an uptick in successful terror plots.

Weapons Systems. At least some of the drone and counter-drone innovations emerging from the war in Ukraine (e.g., techniques for operating small drones under heavy jamming) will likely diffuse to Islamic State provinces such as those in Somalia, the Sahel, and Afghanistan. This does not imply literal replication: Islamic State cells will not achieve the integrated, costly capabilities that Ukraine has fielded, such as AI-augmented drones.⁵⁹ However, they may adapt selected open-source tools, including AI-assisted or vision-based navigation techniques, to modify commercial drones so that they can at least partially operate in areas where GPS jamming degrades traditional remote navigation. A combination of “vibe-coding” and tech-savvy recruits can make that a reality.⁶⁰ However, cost-benefit calculations will determine whether this becomes a pattern of use. Terrorists may deem simple kamikaze drones more efficient.

In addition, as the very purpose of terrorism is to create an outsized impact that includes a deep psychological impact, it is important to consider the potential propaganda value of some AI-enabled weapons systems. A drone attack using DIY methods and open-source AI tools to wreak havoc may create spectacular propaganda value. First-person view (FPV) drones may prove especially appealing to record graphic aerial propaganda footage—the original purpose of the Islamic State’s drone usage.⁶¹

Cross-Functional

Playing Parasite on Third-Party Infrastructure and Data Poisoning. Beyond the direct use of AI tools by Salafi-jihadists, there is a distinct possibility that, with improved technical skill, some Islamic State-inspired individuals will seek to exploit AI systems that are embedded in various civilian and military infrastructures. This could manifest as the manipulation of AI-enabled systems with normally benign purposes. To some extent, this is not new. The Islamic State and its supporters have notoriously used the algorithms (i.e., recommender systems) of social media platforms to amplify their content.⁶² Researchers conducting analysis of the Islamic State’s propaganda system often use an AI-enabled snowballing method to identify more accounts—once a user likes a couple of Islamic State posts, the algorithm feeds them more. In the future, this could grow more complex, with data poisoning or prompt in-

jections used to manipulate AI-assisted platforms for various civilian, military, or private-sector purposes.⁶³

AI-Enabled Financial Innovation. Some of the most innovative practices in the Salafi-jihadist ecosystem have occurred in the arena of terrorist financing. While low-tech practices have often persisted, including reliance on Hawala and cash couriers to move money, certain Islamic State provinces have adopted cryptocurrencies to move money.⁶⁴ AI may aid fundraising narratives, but it will likely also facilitate low-level cybercrime that could support terrorists' fundraising or laundering operations.

In sum, the Islamic State and its supporters could use a host of AI capabilities, but not all scenarios are equally plausible. Cognizant that previous threat assessments, e.g., those about augmented and virtual reality,⁶⁵ failed to account for the Islamic State's tech adoption patterns, we have limited ourselves in this article to considering the most likely AI-enabled operations.

Two further issues related to AI and the terrorist threat landscape deserve further attention: the specific threats that open-source, locally run AI models pose and the inherently unpredictable occurrence of a Black Swan.

The Open-Source Model Conundrum

ONE OF THE MOST WORRISOME BUT STILL UNDER-ANALYZED ISSUES RELATED TO THE use of AI by violent extremists is the exploitation of locally runnable open-source or open-weight AI models, as opposed to purely cloud-based models. By open-weight models, this section refers to AI models whose weights (i.e., the parameters that determine how they process inputs) are downloadable and modifiable, often alongside open-source or partially open-source code. Unlike cloud-hosted systems, locally run open-weight models can typically be used without rate limits.

Much attention has focused on how malicious actors can circumvent the safety alignment of cloud-hosted proprietary models like ChatGPT via "jail-breaking" to receive answers to questions the platform otherwise refuses to answer.⁶⁶ However, from the perspective of terrorist exploitation, locally executable open-weight/open-source models are in some ways more concerning.

Proponents of open-source models argue that their approach enables public scrutiny, helping identify potential biases, vulnerabilities, and ethical concerns while ensuring the responsible development of AI models. This is certainly true. However, the same openness can facilitate misuse by malicious actors and make it harder for providers and law enforcement to detect such misuse than they could in centrally hosted, closed models. This paradox has clear implications for counterterrorism.

Unlike with proprietary, cloud-based models (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude), users can download, modify, and run open-source and open-weight models (e.g., Qwen or Llama) entirely on local hardware or, if necessary, intermediaries outside the developer's control can host them. This offers two benefits for malicious actors:

1. Sophisticated users can permanently remove safety measures through techniques like “ablation,” which consists of modifying the model's weights to eliminate refusal behaviors entirely.⁶⁷
2. Users could plot an attack with negligible risk of “leaks” as queries and outputs no longer transit on the provider's infrastructure.⁶⁸

Even non-technical people are increasingly able to customize these models (by, for example, adjusting the model weights). Often these locally running open-source models are significantly less powerful than cutting-edge proprietary models like Claude or ChatGPT. Nonetheless, this is not of concern to terrorists. As Brian Fishman has astutely observed, “The willingness to accept imprecise targeting will also unlock non-state actors to use less-sophisticated open models. These tools are unlikely to achieve the precision and capability of cutting-edge ‘powerful’ models, but they are sufficient for a wide range of discrete tasks and can run locally on relatively simple autonomous or semi-autonomous systems.”⁶⁹

Islamic State supporters have already begun experimenting with open-source AI models. Analysis of mentions of open-source models in the Islamic State's main Rocket.Chat server as of April 2026 shows there is already some awareness of the unique value of these models. As one user refers to locally run chatbots, “You can ask it anything without worrying that it will send your questions to eg. OpenAI or other companies that may report you to the feds.” He explicitly notes

that certain models are fine-tuned not to answer “any questions about bombs,” which provides some insight into the types of questions aspiring jihadists are seeking answers to. Another user appeared to endorse the use of locally run models for privacy and security, stating, “I used it to generate code and it’s flawless.”

The broader ecosystem of open-source robotics and computer vision projects also lowers the barrier for exploitation by violent extremists. For instance, widely used autopilot stacks provide an open-source flight-control system for drones and other unmanned aerial vehicles, supporting autonomous operation for people with moderate technical skill and motivation. In parallel, numerous open-source computer vision projects explicitly focus on detecting and tracking objects in aerial imagery. While developers design these systems predominantly for research and other benign or positive applications (e.g., search-and-rescue drones or traffic monitoring), they are inherently dual-use and accessible to malicious users.

On Black Swans and Gray Swans

THERE IS A SPECTRUM THAT ANALYSTS NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE IN THREAT forecasting. Beyond the known AI-enabled terrorist abuses and likely future use cases that we have already examined, there is a risk of more extreme but still foreseeable Gray Swan scenarios (lower likelihood, higher impact) and true Black Swans, i.e., unpredictable events with catastrophic effects, that would fall outside current models altogether.

The mathematical statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb introduced the Black Swan theory in his seminal 2007 book.⁷⁰ He lays out three defining characteristics of a Black Swan: “First, it is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme ‘impact’. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable.”

The 9/11 terror attacks are the archetypal example of a Black Swan terrorist attack. Following that devastating attack, the United States and its allies constructed a worldwide counterterrorism apparatus to mitigate the likelihood of further spectacular attacks. The record has been impressive in that regard. While there have been jihadist and jihadist-inspired attacks in the West, there

has not been an attack anywhere near the scale and magnitude of 9/11 in the past two and a half decades. However, if some of the predictions about AI becoming a truly revolutionary technology come true, then AI could theoretically open up an entire new portfolio of potential Black Swan scenarios.

Black Swans are by their very nature not meant to be predicted—they are outliers to a relative model, and their probability is noncomputable with standard statistical tools. If it can be forecast, it stops being a Black Swan. Applying Taleb’s definition literally, a Black Swan would constitute an AI-enabled terrorist capability that has an immense impact, lies outside counterterrorist models of prediction and rigorous red-teaming and forecasting, and then looks “obvious” only in hindsight. Almost by definition, it would not have been mentioned in our forecast or any other deep analysis⁷¹ of the potential adoption of AI by Salafi-jihadist terrorists.

Gray Swans, likewise dangerous but within the realm of predictability, should also appear in any piece on threat forecasting of AI adoption by terrorists. While these events would be shocking, they would not be conceptually earth-shattering. This includes scenarios such as an AI-optimized mass-casualty chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or electromagnetic attack. This would also be the case if, for example, an Islamic State cell was suddenly able to launch a “swarm shock,” a drone swarm consisting of dozens or hundreds of semiautonomous FPV attack drones launched against a target, or if Islamic State supporters launched an AI-assisted cyber-physical attack. Such scenarios fall squarely under the Gray Swan label and, as terrorists intend, can have an enormous psychological impact on target populations.

There are a host of uncertainties about how the terrorist threat landscape will continue to evolve. The only certainty is that terrorists will continue seeking new and innovative methods to improve the lethality of their attacks. As such, any technology—including AI—that can increase the chances of perpetrating a mass casualty incident will be one that terrorists experiment with and seek to use as a force multiplier in their attacks and operations.

Conclusion

REVISITING THE TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM HYPOTHESIS THAT HAS LONG SHAPED debates around terrorist innovation, this paper finds that AI—at this nascent

stage—neither confirms nor overturns it. A preliminary investigation into the Islamic State’s digital ecosystem indicates that experimentation has begun, particularly in the areas of propaganda production, translation, and recruitment. Additionally, the series of terrorist plots that have involved AI in operational planning, one of which was inspired by the Islamic State, shows the appeal of a tool that provides precise and tailored information.

At the same time, AI has functioned less as a paradigm-shifting weapon to date than as an extension of earlier practices: accelerating content production, lowering friction in planning, and marginally optimizing existing workflows rather than fundamentally transforming operational logic. AI has also begun to serve as part of a larger trend toward automation, outsourcing, and the minimization of physical and direct contact. As Telegram bots have stood in for Islamic State operatives and virtual planners for physical networks, AI may eventually overtake the virtual planner model. Incremental adoption does not mean less impact, however. Terrorists, including Salafi-jihadists, gradually adopted internet usage, beginning with static websites that displayed ideological messaging and news updates. The internet is now the backbone of much terrorist recruitment and functioning.

So far, AI use within the Islamic State ecosystem appears to cluster around low-hanging applications: generative propaganda imagery and anasheed, automated translation, basic operational ideation, and exploratory discussions about coding, drones, and cyber activity. There is not yet any proof of whether the speculative uses of AI that Islamic State supporters mention in online forums have materialized in actual attacks. More complex AI-use scenarios—e.g., high-end cyber-physical attacks or AI-directed mass-casualty plots—remain largely unrealized, but analysts and policymakers should consider them Gray Swans.

The open-source AI conundrum is particularly pressing: The same decentralization and transparency that fuel innovation across research communities and provide global access to a revolutionary technology also enable violent nonstate actors to obtain AI models that they can run locally and strip of their built-in safety measures with no concerns about information leaks.

Taken together, these dynamics demand analytical humility. It is wise to place AI-enabled terrorism in the longer historical pattern of terrorist innovation characterized by gradual appropriation, DIY-ification, uneven sophistication, and the ever-present possibility of catastrophic surprise.

In one of the earliest articles on the topic of AI and terrorism, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross pointed out, “Many analysts—and I fell prey to this error—brushed aside early concerns about the global diffusion of drone technology. The rea-

son? We imagined that terrorists would use drones as we did and believed that superior American airpower would blast theirs from the sky. But instead of trying to replicate the Predator, the Islamic State and other militant groups cleverly adapted smaller drones to their purposes.”⁷²

To prevent strategic surprise in the form of an AI-generated terrorist attack, the international counterterrorism community should resist mirror imaging. Instead they should focus on cultivating resilience by stress-testing systems through intense red-teaming that explores a wide realm of unlikely but plausible attack pathways. Ultimately, it will be necessary to implement concrete measures to limit exposure to worst-case failures.

ENDNOTES

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Assessing African Jihadist State Takeovers: Capability, Will, and the Puzzling Logic of Inaction

Jason Warner and Miles Charles

IN THE LATTER MONTHS OF 2025, AND AGAIN IN APRIL 2026,¹ MANY OBSERVERS expressed concern that African Salafi-jihadists associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State could overtake African states, particularly Mali. In that sphere, discussions were rife surrounding the possibility of the Sahelian-based al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) capturing the Malian state, leading to the emergence of a jihadist state.

During the fall of 2025, JNIM imposed a blockade on the southern half of Mali, pushing the ruling military junta, led by Assimi Goïta, to what many believed was the brink of collapse.² The jihadists' ability to deprive cities of fuel for months and coerce the junta into negotiations opened a serious debate over the likelihood of a jihadist state emerging in Africa.³ For instance, in November 2025, analysts at the Soufan Center asserted that "Mali stands on the brink of collapse . . . leaving the government in the capital of Bamako vulnerable to being overrun."⁴ Around the same time, analysts at the Atlantic Council assessed that Mali's military regime "may be on the brink of collapse after a months-long siege of Bamako by al-Qaeda aligned terrorists,"⁵ while

The Guardian wrote that “political instability and fuel shortages caused by the rebel group are driving Mali to the brink of becoming an Islamist republic.”⁶ In perhaps the most alarmist of such articles, *The Wall Street Journal* titled its late October reporting, “Al-Qaeda Is on the Brink of Taking Over a Country.”⁷

Rhetoric around a jihadist takeover in Mali calmed during the first quarter of 2026. However, such concerns returned with rapidity in April, following JNIM’s stunning assaults in Mali in conjunction with ethnic Tuareg rebels from the Front for the Liberation of Azawad. In late April, JNIM and FLA launched coordinated assaults across northern and central Mali, targeting critical cities such as Bamako, Sévaré, and Kidal.⁸ Analysts deemed the operation overwhelmingly successful for JNIM; the group not only temporarily overran the capital but also killed two of the five highest-ranking Malian security officials. They seized what may be the largest cache of weapons from the Malian army and took control of several urban centers, including Kidal, a regional capital.⁹ *The Washington Post* called it the “largest coordinated attack in over a decade in Mali,” and the Soufan Center commented that the offensive “threatened to topple the ruling military junta.”¹⁰ For its part, Reuters suggested that the attacks left Mali “at risk of splintering.”¹¹ However, to be sure, not all analysts held this opinion. As Boubacar Haidara raised in November 2025 when considering a JNIM takeover, the climate of crisis has fueled “some of the most alarmist hypotheses,” and this scenario is “at this stage, highly unlikely.”¹²

With the discussions of Mali’s potential fall in late 2025 and early 2026 came a cascade of other analyses that drew regional and even continental comparisons. For instance, *Newsweek* commentators warned that “if Mali’s capital were to fall to [JNIM], it would mark a stunning victory for the jihadists and increase the risk of Islamist takeovers in the rest of West Africa’s Sahel region and beyond.”¹³ For their part, Raphael Parens and Delina Goxho noted that Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso “are experiencing a collapse of the state. Jihadist and separatist insurgencies have fundamentally altered their capacity to conduct international affairs and manage sovereignty. No Sahelian government can claim full sovereignty or control over the means of violence within its borders.”¹⁴ Forebodingly, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism warned that the Sahel could become the “global headquarters of a jihadist state.”¹⁵ Elsewhere, similar concerns existed about the collapse of Somalia, which analysts asserted risks being overrun by al-Shabaab.¹⁶

Yet, despite the proliferation of worry, a jihadist takeover has yet to come to fruition. In the Sahel and Somalia, jihadists routinely conduct attacks anywhere from five to 60 miles outside of national capitals, even attacking, albeit

rarely, the capitals themselves.¹⁷ But they have failed to stage, let alone successfully orchestrate, a state takeover to date.

Today we see a perplexing paradox emerging: Even when African jihadist groups have the capability to take over African states—and given that they apparently have the will to do so—they elect not to. What underlies this seemingly puzzling outcome? Why, despite the proliferation of rhetoric and worry about African state takeover, has such an event not occurred? Have analysts exaggerated these groups' capabilities? Or have they somehow misinterpreted their desire to do so?

This piece seeks to shed light on the much-discussed phenomenon of an African jihadist state takeover by disaggregating African jihadist groups' goals into theological/ideological goals on the one hand and practical/praxeological goals on the other.¹⁸ In short, while several African jihadist groups (discussed below) seemingly have the military *capability* to take over African states and, inherently, to some degree, a theological/ideological *will* to do so, at their core, no group has shown evidence of a practical/praxeological will for state takeover. Thus, although all of the ingredients superficially seem present for such takeovers, observers must not allow their vision of African Salafi-jihadist groups' religious commitments to myopically cloud their understanding of those groups' goals. Instead, this piece urges observers to understand African jihadist groups not merely as blinded religious zealots but as rational actors whose perception of the shadow of the future fundamentally guides their actions (and inactions), especially those as significant as would-be state takeovers.

This piece proceeds in three primary sections. The first section lays out some definitions and parameters. Section 2 then assesses the *capability* of African jihadist groups to undertake state takeovers. Section 3 analyzes their *will* to do so, with particular attention to different types of will, disaggregating ideological/theological will and practical/praxeological will and showing how the latter trumps the former in their decision-making. A fourth section concludes the piece.

Setting the Parameters of the Discussion

BEFORE DELVING INTO THIS DISCUSSION FURTHER, SOME TERMS BEAR EXPLANATION. First, what do we mean when we refer to the takeover and emergence of a ji-

hadist state? This piece is referring to the process whereby a coalition of actors formally or informally connected to one of the two major transnational jihadist groups, al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, militarily ousts the sitting head of government of a preexisting, legally defined, sovereign African state (as recognized by the United Nations), then runs the country under a Salafist rule of law. The nearest—though not exact¹⁹—analogue is the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.

Of note, our interest here is in the likelihood of a full state takeover rather than the creation of informal, transnational jihadist “statelets” or “provinces” (*wilayat*) that exist either within or across African states. Indeed, these entities already exist. One need only look at the Islamic State’s “provinces” or al-Qaeda’s affiliates to see that self-recognized state-like entities exist, and have for years.²⁰ These are not our concern. Instead, the primary goal of this piece is to interrogate what it might look like if one of these entities succeeded in taking over a formal, juridically sovereign African state. It is also worth noting that we are not considering the possibility of a change in a state’s borders even though such groups do not inherently recognize such borders as legitimate in the first place. (More on the topic of borders follows below.)

Second, what is the temporal scope of this project? Given the dynamism of the region, this thought experiment is intended to cover the relatively near future: Written in the first four months of 2026 and published in May 2026, this piece interrogates the subsequent 12 months, though its conclusions may ultimately have relevance beyond these dates. Alternatively, amid the ever-changing landscape of African security and politics, this thought exercise could prove patently incorrect for unforeseeable reasons.

Assessing Capability to Take Over a State

TO INVESTIGATE THE SEEMINGLY PUZZLING LACK OF STATE TAKEOVERS BY AFRICAN jihadist groups, we now turn to assessing the capabilities of African jihadist groups. Which states, theoretically, are at greatest risk of takeover? Since the unit of analysis of this piece is the state, we present a useful heuristic to assess this risk, including the three most important phenomena to interrogate:

Significant violent jihadist presence. The African state must be home to a significant jihadist presence that houses a large number of violent fighters (not merely supporters), al-Qaeda and/or Islamic State militants who view a state takeover as ideal. Moreover, an overriding group in power needs to declare that its ideals are rooted in a Salafist, or at least Islamist, worldview and that its rule would follow accordingly.

Military capability for state ouster. A large number of citizens ideologically sympathetic to al-Qaeda or the Islamic State is important but not sufficient. A more pertinent risk factor is the capability of such a group to bring military forces into the capital city in numbers sufficient to challenge state or parastatal security forces. Primarily through violent efforts, the jihadist group must be able to oust the sitting head of state and a majority of their closest allies and declare itself the new ruler of the state.

Capacity to hold the capital indefinitely. A jihadist group that can assassinate a leader but cannot sustain power would not be capable of a true state takeover. In our assessments, this metric concerns not only the abilities of the jihadist group itself but its capabilities vis-a-vis would-be national and international spoilers interested in removing it.

With these three metrics in hand, table 1 presents our assessment of the near-term (12-month) likelihood of the takeover of an African state by a jihadist group associated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, leading to an Overall Jihadist Takeover Risk.

At its core, by virtue of data limitations and the inherently fraught goal of forecasting, this assessment is imbued with limitations. While Metric 1 was assessed with some amount of certainty, Metrics 2 and 3 are far more speculative. Nevertheless, by using subject matter familiarity, we present a useful heuristic to broadly sketch—however unscientifically—the continent-wide dynamics of potential African jihadist state takeover.

Table 1 shows only the states in which we assessed some conceivable risk of jihadist state takeover, no matter how small. This occurred in 24 of 54 African states (~44%). If a state is not listed in table 1, we assessed there to be no reasonably conceivable threat of a jihadist state takeover. Thus, the majority of African states (~56%) face no real risk of state takeover.

Second, as per table 2, our assessments reveal that while 24 African states have a shred of conceivability for a state takeover, in the vast majority, that conceivability is very low. In 16 of 54 African states (~30%), takeover is “scarcely conceivable,” and in five other states (~7%), it is “conceivable but unlikely.”

Table 1. Assessing the Conceivable Risk of African Jihadist State Takeovers (April 2026-April 2027)

Country	Overall Jihadist Takeover Risk	1. Significant Violent Jihadist Presence	Jihadist Group Presence	2. Military Capability For State Ouster	3. Capacity to Hold Capital Indefinitely
Burkina Faso	Conceivable	High	JNIM (AQ), IS-Sahel	High	High
Mali	Conceivable	High	JNIM (AQ), IS-Sahel	High	High
Somalia	Conceivable	High	Al-Shabaab (AQ), IS-Somalia	High	Medium
Niger	Somewhat Conceivable	High	JNIM, IS-Sahel, ISWAP	Medium	Medium
Mozambique	Conceivable But Unlikely	Medium	IS-Mozambique	Medium	Low
Libya	Conceivable But Unlikely	Medium	AQIM, IS-Libya	Medium	Medium
Benin	Conceivable But Unlikely	Low	JNIM, IS-Sahel	Medium	Low
Togo	Conceivable But Unlikely	Low	JNIM	Low	Low
Algeria	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	AQIM, IS-Algeria	Little to None	Little to None
Cameroon	Scarcely Conceivable	High	ISWAP, Boko Haram	Medium	Low
Chad	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	ISWAP	Low	Low
Côte d'Ivoire	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	JNIM	Low	Little to None
DR Congo	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	IS-Central Africa (ADF)	Low	Little to None
Ethiopia	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	Al-Shabaab	Little to None	Little to None
Egypt	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	IS-Sinai	Little to None	Little to None
Ghana	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	JNIM	Low	Little to None

Country	Overall Jihadist Takeover Risk	1. Significant Violent Jihadist Presence	Jihadist Group Presence	2. Military Capability For State Ouster	3. Capacity to Hold Capital Indefinitely
Kenya	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	Al-Shabaab	Little to None	Little to None
Mauritania	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	AQIM (latent presence)	Low	Little to None
Nigeria	Scarcely Conceivable	High	ISWAP, Boko Haram/JAS, Ansaru (AQ)	Low	Little to None
South Africa	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	(Financial/logistical cells)	Little to None	Little to None
Sudan	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	Historical AQ links	Low	Little to None
Tunisia	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	AQIM, IS-Tunisia	Little to None	Little to None
Uganda	Scarcely Conceivable	Medium	ADF (ISCAP)	Low	Little to None
Tanzania	Scarcely Conceivable	Low	IS-Mozambique (spillover)	Little to None	Little to None

Table 2. Summary of Findings

States	Likelihood of Jihadist State Takeover	Continental Total
3	Conceivable	5.56%
1	Somewhat Conceivable	1.85%
4	Conceivable But Unlikely	7.41%
16	Scarcely Conceivable	29.63%
30	Totally Inconceivable	55.56%

Third, and most germanely, our assessments suggest there are only four states—Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, and Niger—in which the capacity of jihadist groups is sufficiently high to make the likelihood of a takeover either “conceivable” (~6%) or “somewhat conceivable” (~2%). Given that these states are the ones that observers should most acutely focus on, we briefly explain the rationales for each of their rankings.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso remains among the most **conceivable** cases of an African jihadist state takeover. Notably, the Institute for Economics & Peace ranked it as the world’s most terrorism-afflicted country in 2024²¹ and the second most terrorism-afflicted country in 2025.²² In response, the ruling Burkinabè junta has siloed itself in urban centers, ceding much of the country to al-Qaeda and Islamic State jihadists.²³ Burkina Faso thus diverges from other Sahelian states in that the junta has concentrated its military capacity on safeguarding the capital and its surrounding area.²⁴ While this strategy has insulated Ouagadougou, the capital, it has forced the regime to overly depend on the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland, or VDP), an auxiliary civilian militia, to defend the country’s peripheries. Not coincidentally, Burkina Faso recorded nine of the world’s 20 deadliest terrorist attacks in 2024.²⁵

1. **Significant violent jihadist presence—High:** Burkina Faso has a highly significant violent jihadist presence. JNIM and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) field ~6,000 and ~2,000 fighters across the Sahel, respectively, and contest/control 60% of Burkina Faso, within which they frequently conduct violent operations.²⁶
2. **Military capability for state ouster—High:** JNIM, the likeliest actor to stage a takeover, has exhibited the potential capability to oust the ruling junta. It generally enjoys uninhibited freedom of movement, encroaching within 50 km of the capital, and security forces are largely unable to stop it.²⁷ The group has leveraged this and its size to coordinate complex attacks involving hundreds of militants. For example, in February 2026, JNIM launched

assaults on military and civilian positions across multiple Burkinabè cities hundreds of miles apart.²⁸ The group's operational freedom is partly due to the junta's strategy of insulation, which has left the periphery of the country largely unprotected.

3. **Capacity to hold capital indefinitely—High:** JNIM has demonstrated a high capacity to theoretically maintain long-term control of the capital. The group has surrounded the capital and displayed an ability to overrun and temporarily seize large cities, such as in its nine-hour seizure of Djibo, population 60,000, in northeastern Burkina Faso on May 11, 2025.²⁹ Alongside other factors, such as the transitory nature of governance in Burkina Faso, the seizure indicates that JNIM could launch a similar if not larger offensive in Burkina Faso than in Mali. Furthermore, the capital's central location in the country has isolated it from allied support; the junta's strategy of insulation has created a scenario in which, if JNIM is able to overrun the military core, it can likely maintain control.

However, JNIM could face challenges in holding the capital. One of its largest constraints is its antagonistic relationship with Burkina Faso's majority ethnic group, the Mossi. Mossi constitute the majority of the VDP, the civilian militia that JNIM explicitly targets. This relationship maps onto a broader regional interethnic conflict between sedentary and pastoralist Fulani populations in which JNIM is often superficially regarded as Fulani-dominant.³⁰ The group's rivalry with the ISSP further constrains its ability to maintain control.

Mali

Mali bears a close resemblance to Burkina Faso and faces a comparably **conceivable** risk of jihadist takeover. JNIM, again the dominant jihadist group, controls large swaths of uncontested territory, which it has leveraged to launch

increasingly bold and pervasive attacks, including the April 26 multisite offensive.³¹ The group has besieged cities and communities of varying size, frequently coercing the populations of urban centers into agreements that dictate citizens' livelihoods and/or security forces' rules of engagement.³² Though its blockade of Bamako has eased as of April 2026, reportedly as a result of the junta negotiating with JNIM and agreeing to a prisoner release, concerns remain about how it lifted the blockade and how long fuel supply lines will remain open.³³

1. **Significant violent jihadist presence—High:** JNIM's fighters number roughly 6,000 across the Sahel, and many operate in Mali. Moreover, the group controlled at least half the country in 2024 and routinely conducts violent operations in all parts of the country.³⁴
2. **Military capability for state ouster—High:** JNIM fields an extensive armory of weapons, land assets, and combat/surveillance drones, which it has built through transnational smuggling and looting of military camps it has overrun.³⁵ The group's use of drones and motorbikes has granted it a degree of maneuverability that the state struggles to counteract, enabling it to launch large attacks before the state can respond. The group frequently coordinates attacks on mid-sized and large cities involving hundreds of fighters, such as its April 2026 offensive, while sustaining a campaign of economic warfare, underscoring its capability to oust the government.³⁶
3. **Capacity to hold capital indefinitely—High:** JNIM has demonstrated a high ability to hold the capital for an extended period. The group's overwhelming April 24 assault on Bamako, among other key urban centers, and apparent seizure of Kidal, a regional capital with a population of 25,000, is the most compelling evidence of this. It similarly displayed such a capacity in its four-day seizure of southern Mali's Loulouni (population 40,000) in November 2025, a region considered a secondary operational theater for the group.³⁷ However, despite an apparent capability to oust the government and seize Bamako, the

group chose not to stage a takeover and agreed to let affiliated Tuareg fighters govern captured urban centers.³⁸ The decision, likely informed by an understanding of the practical cost associated with governing, is described further below and is at the core of this thesis.³⁹

Somalia

Somalia faces an equally **conceivable** prospect of a jihadist takeover as Burkina Faso and Mali. Al-Shabaab, the Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate, exerts influence over much of southern Somalia and its roadways, isolating government-controlled cities in a manner similar to that of its Sahelian counterparts.⁴⁰ In late 2025 and early 2026, al-Shabaab increased its attacks on the capital and deployed more fighters to its environs.⁴¹ The group's daringness has coincided with an increasingly fragmented government, weakening potential state resistance.⁴²

1. **Significant violent jihadist presence—High:** Al-Shabaab, the largest African jihadist group, meets the criteria for a highly significant violent presence with 7,000–12,000 active fighters controlling approximately 30% of the country, more than the Somali state itself.⁴³
2. **Military capability for state ouster—High:** Al-Shabaab fields more fighters than its Sahelian counterpart and has an arsenal of weapons, land assets, and drones comparable to JNIM's; new reports suggest a recent acquisition of missiles from the Yemeni Houthis.⁴⁴ Operationally, the group has not only reversed historically successful Somali-led counterinsurgency gains, underscoring its resilience, but has also conducted increasingly daring attacks on the capital, striking close to the presidential palace in October 2025.⁴⁵ Al-Shabaab's growing military capabilities alongside the state's fragmented resistance therefore put Somalia at relatively high risk.⁴⁶
3. **Capacity to hold capital indefinitely—Medium:** Al-Shabaab has demonstrated a moderate capacity to main-

tain control of the capital indefinitely. The group has controlled the cities of Jilib and Bua'aale (each with estimated populations of 100,000) in Middle Jubba as well as smaller cities in central Somalia since the late 2000s.⁴⁷

However, the presence of regional and foreign actors committed to deterring a jihadist takeover significantly constrains its ability to maintain control of the capital. The African Union has maintained peacekeeping forces within Somalia since 2007; the current African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) numbers nearly 12,000 troops.⁴⁸ Separately, regional actors such as Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, all of which contribute troops to AUSSOM, are unlikely to allow an uninhibited jihadist takeover. The group is also likely cognizant of its previous history, namely its failure to control districts within the capital from 2009–10 when it began losing ground to African Union troops.⁴⁹ Sustained attacks within Mogadishu that fall below the threshold of actual urban control therefore indicate a rational decision informed by the group's constraints.⁵⁰

Niger

Among the four states we have identified as at risk, a jihadist takeover is least likely yet **somewhat conceivable** in Niger. Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso, Nigerien jihadists have largely disregarded the country's peripheries, concentrating their control around Niamey and its adjacent regions.⁵¹ The ISSP, the dominant group in the country, uses Niger as its core area of operations.⁵² The group is highly active and has shown the ability to conduct complex and deadly attacks. JNIM and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) also maintain a presence, albeit at a reduced level.⁵³

1. **Significant violent jihadist presence—Medium:** ISSP, the smallest of the assessed groups, totals 2,000–3,000 fighters across all its territory. Within Niger, the group controls/contests less territory than the state; however, its zones are concentrated around Niamey and its adjacent regions. The group's presence is best reflected in its violent operational ability, making Niger's Tillaberi region the deadliest region in the central Sahel in 2025.⁵⁴

2. Military capability for state ouster—Medium: ISSP is considerably smaller than its al-Qaeda counterparts in the Sahel or Somalia, demonstrating only a moderate capability to violently oust the government. While the group has fewer fighters, it concentrates them within a smaller geographic range, enabling them to conduct complex attacks mobilizing hundreds of fighters across operational zones in a similar manner to JNIM.⁵⁵ The group exhibited such an ability in its February 2026 infiltration and assault on the capital's military airport.⁵⁶ It also receives logistical assistance and potentially a limited number of fighters or trainers from its much larger Nigerian affiliate, ISWAP, thus bolstering its capability.⁵⁷

3. Capacity to hold capital indefinitely—Medium: ISSP has encircled the capital of Niamey and shown a clear shift from pure kinetic activity to governance. In recent years, the group has broadcasted political rhetoric in line with its sharia interpretation of governance alongside implementation of more structured governance, such as re-opening local markets in areas it controls.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the group's prioritization of rural consolidation, general lack of urban control, and large attacks on the capital indicate a rational decision that seizing control would cost too much.⁵⁹

Collectively, these four case studies underscore that at least three African jihadist groups—JNIM, al-Shabaab, and ISSP—have most if not all of the requisite capabilities to take over Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, or Niger.

Assessing Will to Take Over a State

WHILE THE ABOVE DISCUSSION LAID OUT THE ASSESSED CAPABILITIES OF GROUPS TO undertake a state takeover, this is only part of the story. In this section we ask,

To what extent do various jihadist groups in Africa express the will, or the desire, to do so?

As one of our primary interventions, we argue that one must disaggregate two specific types of will: a theological/ideological will on the one hand and a practical/praxeological will on the other. In theory, all African jihadist groups are theologically and ideologically committed to overrunning the state(s) in which they operate. However, this section will demonstrate that, in reality, the practical and more quotidian dynamics of sustaining an insurgency make the prospect generally unappealing and thus a nonstarter for most African jihadist groups. We look at the two types of will—theological and practical—in turn, discussing the dynamics at play in African jihadist state takeovers.

Theological Will

As Salafi-jihadist groups, al-Qaeda and Islamic State-linked insurgent groups in Africa have an inherent commitment to dismantling the African states in which they exist. At the core of Salafi-jihadist ideology is the destruction of man-made states (i.e., those created in the Westphalian mold) and their replacement with entities governed in accordance with Islamic law. This dismantlement is part and parcel of the creation of the global caliphate, or global Muslim state, which both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State seek, but the immediacy of this goal has been a key source of division between them. Efforts to dismantle tangible state borders were evident in the Islamic State's early takeovers of parts of the Levant between 2014 and 2016, when insurgents literally dismantled the physical markers and barriers between Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰

Salafi-jihadists derive their theological justification from the writings of prolific Salafi theologians such as Abul A'la Maududi (1903–79). Maududi, a Salafi theologian who helped shape the foundational ideology of Salafi-jihadism, argued that the objective of jihad is to “eliminate the rule of an un-Islamic system and establish in its stead an Islamic system to State rule.”⁶¹ Jihad, as understood by Maududi, is a divine imperative concerning all efforts to exalt the word and thus the vision of Allah.⁶² Similarly, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the most prominent Salafi-jihadist intellectuals, asserts that statehood is a challenge to Allah's sovereignty, and thus true Muslims are obligated to fight against it and destroy its followers.⁶³

Thus, whether affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, all African jihadist groups are committed to a broad worldview in which the takeover, or at least destruction, of the states in which they exist is a central goal.

Practical Will

However, ideological and theological motives are not the only factors that influence jihadist behavior: African jihadist groups also have more practical desires related to the real-world experiences of the here and now. It is on this front, the practical will for state takeover, in which we see these groups expressing far lower desire. In short, while at least a few of them have the theoretical capability and inherently possess a theological will for state takeover, nearly all have shown they lack the practical will to do so. Below, this piece details four reasons that African groups find the practical realities of African state takeover less than attractive.

1. Governing States Is Hard.

At least one reason African jihadist groups are wary of state takeover is that they recognize that managing any state—particularly one that was just overthrown—is a daunting task. Operating in the shadows and conducting one-off attacks is manageable. However, a state takeover would require them to undertake wide-ranging service provision, such as managing electricity, water, schooling, healthcare, and infrastructure, after undermining these very state-led services for years. Indeed, jihadist attempts at governance over the past two decades in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Libya, to name a few, have shown just how difficult such an endeavor can be.

In addition, jihadists appear to recognize that governing, particularly transitioning from the national spoiler to the national caretaker, is difficult from a reputational standpoint. For any element of civil society that supported the group's rise to power, a would-be jihadist ruler would have to live up to its own ideals: Long having claimed that the state was the problem and touted the jihadist approach to governance, the group would need to prove its case. Successful jihadists risk looking like the dog that finally caught the car, unsure what to do with the long-sought prize once it is won. As Wassim Nasr articulated in 2025 regarding the reputational challenges of state takeover,

While in theory [African jihadists] would like to take over these cities militarily, taking Bamako or Ouagadougou or Niamey would be very costly for them in terms of governance and management. With large segments of the population in these cities being hostile to them, it would not be easy for them. It would also be used by the [ruling military] juntas to regain uncondi-

tional international support. So, it does not make sense for them to take the cities from a rational point of view, but of course, you should keep in mind that we are not talking only about rational actors here and it is possible for irrational decisions to lead to gains on the ground for them.⁶⁴

2. Governing States Is Dangerous.

A second reason African jihadist groups lack the practical will to take over states is that doing so presents some amount of danger. By officially installing themselves in a singular location, they become potential targets for adversaries—state and nonstate alike. For instance, one can reference the Taliban’s control of Afghanistan and its subsequent ouster by U.S. forces in the months following the September 11 attacks or the successful ouster of the Islamic State in Derna and Sirte, Libya, after the group decided to install itself formally in both locations.⁶⁵ Indeed, while leaders have assumed occupation of a seat of power in an African capital offers a degree of protection thanks to the sovereignty-granting powers of the United Nations, this is not a foregone conclusion in practice. The recent U.S. toppling of the Maduro regime in Venezuela and the targeted killings of top officials in Iran show that the protections of sovereignty are far from present in practice. And, especially in the Sahel, ECOWAS-aligned states have shown an openness to regime intervention, most recently in the bloc’s efforts to prevent a coup in Benin.⁶⁶

Yet arguably even more dangerous than threats from antagonistic states or coalitions of states are threats from nonstate actors. Combinations of anti-government rebel groups, ethnic militias, rival jihadist groups, and even mercenaries can depose sitting regimes. This dynamic is particularly evident in Mali, where at least three major armed factions—JNIM, ISSP, and ethnic Tuareg militias—operate across the country. These three networks can trace their history to Mali’s early 2012 insurgency, and two of the groups could work together against the third.⁶⁷ JNIM and the Front for the Liberation of Azawad (FLA), the preeminent Tuareg militia, maintain a symbiotic relationship, infrequently collaborating. The two actors most recently worked together in JNIM’s April 2026 assault across central and northern Mali. They reportedly agreed to allow the FLA to govern captured cities in northern Mali under JNIM sharia law, underscoring a possibility of future collaboration.⁶⁸ Nonstate actors have not historically led the takeovers in the “coup belt” of Africa, where 11 military-led coup attempts have occurred since 2020,⁶⁹ but the multiplicity of such actors,

coupled with other factors such as poor governance and insecurity, could well alter this trend.

Equally important, internal fragmentation poses as great a risk as any other factor to would-be African jihadist rulers. The aforementioned Salafi-jihadi groups, JNIM most prominently, maintain a centralized decision-making body within a decentralized body of sub-affiliates/groups.⁷⁰ The sub-affiliates typically operate autonomously, orchestrating their own operations and/or campaigns. A jihadist takeover could empower a sub-affiliate or factions within it to splinter and pursue their own ambitions.⁷¹ Conversely, waiting too long to pursue a jihadist takeover or adopting Westphalian-like governance once in power, and thus rejecting their theological will, could force more ideological members to splinter. For example, because of the ideological transformation of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the group's more ideologically hardline fighters splintered, underscoring the risks of balancing group dynamics with state-building.⁷² The dangers of fragmentation are magnified in the Sahel, where insurgencies are not only ethnically heterogeneous but have mapped onto interethnic conflicts between sedentary and pastoralist communities.

In short, coming out of the shadows, being centrally and reliably located, and officially owning the national problems that they once blamed on others can easily put a target on a would-be African jihadist regime's back.

3. Governing States Is Boring.

A third but no less important reason that capable African jihadist groups decline to overtake states is that state administration is less exciting than the life of an insurgent fighter. Several studies have shown that a portion of fighters join jihadist and other insurgent groups for adventure, thrills, or excitement, and many are nonplussed with the notion of giving up such a life to sit behind a desk as a bureaucrat.⁷³ Indeed, interviews with Taliban members in 2022–23 show that many expressed disdain for the monotony of governing Afghanistan as opposed to fighting.⁷⁴

The leaders of the most capable African jihadist organizations are aware that their interests diverge from those of lower-ranked members. Moreover, the upper echelons understand the need to appease their members to maintain loyalty. In the case of JNIM in the Sahel, the group's lower-ranking members may be more interested in expansion and its coinciding benefits than in fulfillment of the group's theological will.⁷⁵ A JNIM takeover would likely require internal consolidation and a pause in expansion, which could anger foot soldiers. The pressure to placate lower-ranking members who may be more op-

portunistic, financially motivated, or thrill-seeking is an additional constraint on jihadist groups. Thus, combined with the difficulty and danger of governing, the ennui of governance for lower-level members gives yet another reason not to pursue state capture.

4. Governing States Is Not the Goal.

Fourth, and finally, capable African jihadist groups are also electing not to take over states because the destruction of current states, not their governance under existing structures, is the actual goal. As per Salafi-jihadist ideology, the creation of the global caliphate will come about not due to the capture and management of individual states but due to the complete dismantling of the Westphalian system of states writ large.⁷⁶ In other words, while current states in Africa—Mali, Niger, Somalia, Burkina Faso, and others—are worthy of destruction, the goal is a de-territorialized system of governance that pays no heed to the boundaries of whatever structures it has destroyed. For instance, as Alex Thurston has assessed correctly of the April 26 attacks by JNIM, “Both JNIM and the FLA effectively say in their statements that they want the junta to fall, but neither is necessarily saying they want to step up to run Mali. Surely the headaches would be manifold, to say the least.”⁷⁷

Indeed, JNIM’s indifference toward governance was apparent in its April 26 collaboration with the FLA. According to Wassim Nasr, JNIM agreed to allow the FLA to govern captured cities in northern Mali in exchange for its assistance in seizing the cities and agreeing to implement sharia law.⁷⁸ In this instance, JNIM showed that it sought to simply dismantle current structures rather than to assume the bureaucratic rule of new ones. The group reinforced this in a statement released on April 30 in which it called on the “patriots of Mali” to rise up against the “terrorist regime.”⁷⁹ The distinct political rhetoric underscores the group’s desire to not assume authority but instead inspire or abet an independent authority that will act more favorably toward the group.

African jihadists imagine a world in which their Salafist caliphates transcend not only borders but many of the sociopolitical and ethnic challenges of today’s African states. Such lofty visions appear in the rhetoric of African jihadists, such as in al-Shabaab’s vision of a great East Africa emirate or JNIM’s goal of a caliphate spanning West Africa.⁸⁰ Despite these religiously rooted ideals, the realities of the ecosystems in which they operate and their own pragmatism largely shape group decisions and objectives. As rational actors, they understand that the first step to such ends would involve seizing power within the confines of a recognized Westphalian state. Only thereafter could

they pursue the second- and third-order effects of a transnationalization of such a caliphate. The imperative to walk before they can run may also explain, in part, why the visions of the Taliban and HTS became more accommodationist in the latter stages of their respective insurgencies.

Moreover, to the extent that dismantling and/or weakening states rather than governing them is the goal, one can view more evidence of the push and pull between the theological and the practical in African jihadists' approach to state dialogue. While in theory, negotiating with the leaders of apostate secular states should be a nonstarter, more recently, African jihadists have shown a willingness and even a desire to open channels of dialogue with the state. JNIM's indirect negotiations with the Malian junta to ease the fuel blockade present the most compelling example. The junta reportedly authorized local negotiations with JNIM in October 2025 to ease the blockade.⁸¹ Shortly afterward, it brokered an agreement to temporarily lift the blockade in exchange for the release of 115 JNIM prisoners.⁸² Unconfirmed reports indicate that it brokered an additional prisoner exchange in March 2026.⁸³ Practically, these actors understand the leverage they hold, the dangers of governing, and the costs of governance accrued by the state. Theologically, however, they are driven by a religious will to dismantle and replace Westphalian governance with their own Salafist interpretations. This dichotomy has manifested a scenario in which, as pragmatists, JNIM is willing to negotiate with the junta to an extent, enabling it to reap the benefits of its leverage without betraying its religious tenets. JNIM's tactical accommodations are attributable to the core argument of this piece: the overriding desire to let the group's practical will, rather than its theological will, guide its decision-making.

Conclusion

WE HAVE UNDERTAKEN AN INTELLECTUAL EXERCISE TO UNDERSTAND WHY THE much-discussed takeover of an African jihadist group has not yet materialized. To do so, we first charted the capacity and the will of African jihadist groups within each state to overthrow the central government and institute a jihadist-led form of national governance by early 2027. Using three metrics to determine the capacity of such groups, we showed that Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Niger are the four African states most

susceptible to takeover. As our main contribution to this discussion, we then emphasized the difference not only between the capability and will of African jihadist groups to take over but also between the different types *of* will. As we have shown, even though the theological will for secular state takeover is always present, African jihadist actors are highly rational and thus often lack the practical will for takeover. We then delineated four factors that make such takeovers undesirable.

What should an observer take away from this piece?

First, and most broadly, despite a rising narrative of the risk of African jihadist state takeovers, this study suggests not only that their likelihood is relatively proscribed in a small number of states (three or four) but that even in those states, the lack of will among the most capable jihadist actors makes this scenario less likely than it might appear. In other words, while rhetoric looms large, real threats appear far more diminutive.

Second, this piece has clarified how imperative it is to understand African jihadist leaders as highly rational and not merely—or even primarily—guided by religious ideology. They may indeed be devout ideologues inspired by intangible and existential goals, but their actions and motivations are far more often guided by the real-world practicalities of managing insurgent groups.

Third, and relatedly, this piece underscores that it is important not to analytically succumb to “jihadi myopia,” or the tendency to view all jihadist-linked groups exclusively through the lens of their jihadist affiliations.⁸⁴ For instance, Kristof Titeca and Giovanni Salvaggio have warned against the “ISIS-ification” of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁸⁵ While such African jihadist groups do have real and tangible links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (informing their theological will), they also have other imperatives for action that often trump any purely religious motivations.

Fourth, and more practically, the process of African state takeover is far more complex than it might appear at first blush. The mere fact that the ingredients for a takeover might be present—a significant jihadist presence with military capability and a relatively weak state—is far from a sufficient condition for a subsequent takeover. Although the specter of takeover appears to loom large, a more thorough understanding of the interplay between the ideology and practicality of African jihadist groups leads one to rethink their propensity to pursue such an outcome.

To conclude, what is likely to occur over the next 12 months? As this brief piece has assessed, the threat of African jihadists’ takeover of states is, at best,

conceivable—in other words, imaginable—in only three or four of the most terrorism-afflicted states. While the worst-case scenario may indeed befall one or more of them, it appears highly unlikely in the near term, primarily because such takeovers do not align with most African jihadist groups’ immediate interests.

Editor’s note: This piece solely reflects the views of the author(s) and in no way expresses the opinions of the U.S. Government, Department of War or any associated entities.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This piece was written in late 2025 and early 2026, and was in final production in April 2026, just before the JNIM’s widescale attacks in Mali. While the authors have made initial nods to these attacks, it should be noted that this piece was not written in response to those events and thus does not address them as centrally.
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- 18 Praxeology is the study of human action and decision-making, specifically purposeful action. As used here, praxeological goals are strategic, rational, action-oriented objectives that jihadists pursue and are distinct from ideologically rooted actions.
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Is Mali the Next Afghanistan, Syria, or Somalia?

Comparing JNIM to Its Jihadist Peers

Liam Karr

MALI HAS BECOME THE LATEST COUNTRY TO HAVE A SALAFI-JIHADI insurgency surrounding its capital. Al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), has blockaded Bamako and several other key towns in central and southern Mali since September 2025 and demanded the implementation of sharia law across the country.¹ The Malian junta's struggle to end the blockade led several countries to urge their citizens to leave Mali, as did reports from academic and media outlets that Bamako was on the verge of falling to JNIM in the second half of 2025. However, the situation has marginally improved since the end of 2025.²

These fears bear some similarities to warnings, albeit slightly alarmist, of an al-Qaeda takeover in Somalia throughout 2025 and to the more real collapses of the Afghan government and Syrian regime in 2021 and 2024 respectively.³ The parallels serve as an impetus for this report, which seeks to compare JNIM's capabilities and intent in Mali to those of its Salafi-jihadi

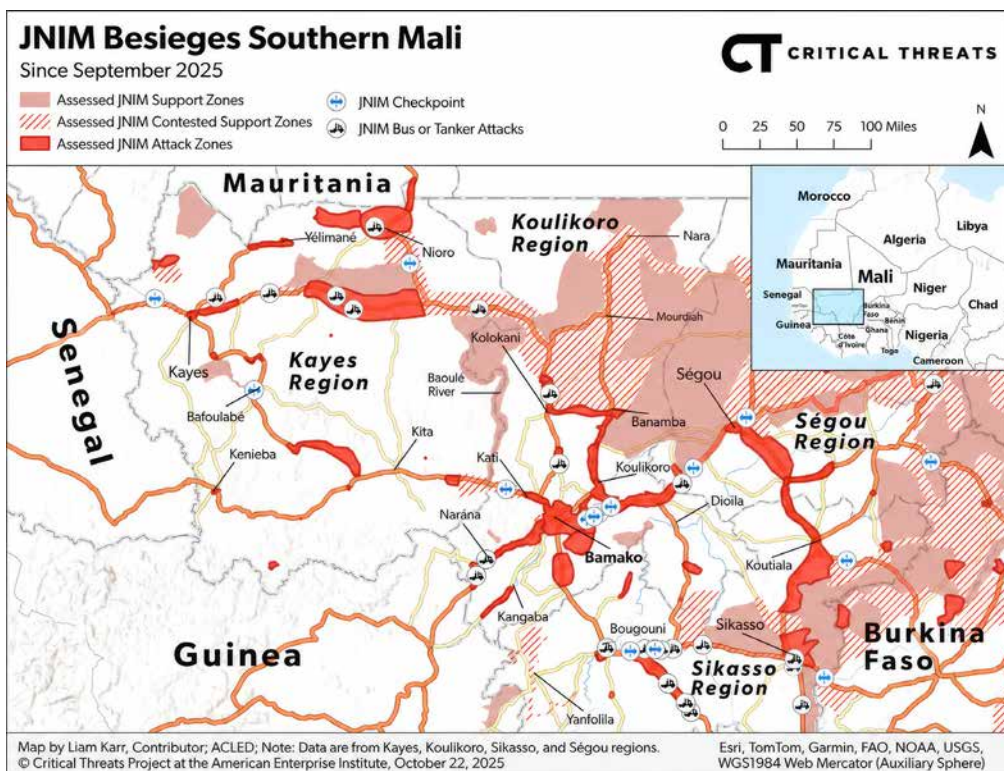


Figure 1. JNIM Besieges Southern Mali (Source: author, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data)

analogues in other parts of the world. This exercise will help contextualize the risk of any JNIM takeover in Mali and inform the group's likely trajectory in Mali and beyond.

This piece lays out that while JNIM shares many similarities with its al-Qaeda-linked brethren, Mali is more likely to mirror the de facto fragmented-state symptoms of current-day Somalia—pockets of government or pro-government control in a sea of insurgent-controlled or heavily contested territory—than to experience a full-blown JNIM takeover as Afghanistan and Syria did. The piece begins by shortly summarizing previous research comparing JNIM's political model to its al-Qaeda-linked analogues. It then takes a deeper look at how JNIM's broader strategic vision is playing out in Mali compared to the visions of these other groups. This comparative exercise first looks at the group's strengths, many of which it shares with the Taliban, before turning to key differences that prevent it from replicating the Taliban altogether. The final section examines several

possible future developments that could alter this trajectory, such as a government collapse, negotiations, international intervention, or an internal schism within JNIM.

Political Model: The al-Qaeda Playbook

ON THE POLITICAL LEVEL, JNIM HAS USED A PLAYBOOK SIMILAR TO THAT OF AL-QAEDA'S Somali affiliate (al-Shabaab), the ex-al-Qaeda Syrian affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and the Afghan Taliban. Jason Warner recently laid out the six components of the HTS model in this journal when evaluating whether Salafi-jihadi groups in Africa would seek to emulate HTS's path to power:⁴

1. Disavowing violence against civilians
2. Framing itself as a legitimate alternative authority
3. Pursuing a strategy of localization
4. Considering negotiations with governments
5. Collaborating with a strong regional state
6. Breaking away from transnational jihadist groups

While HTS employed these tactics throughout its evolution in Syria over the last decade, Warner noted that most of them are not unique to the group but are common to many other jihadist insurgencies, including al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, the Taliban, and JNIM.⁵ JNIM regularly disavows violence against Muslim civilians as part of its effort to present itself as a protector of local populations. This approach supports the group's effort to frame itself as a legitimate alternative authority through other governance, justice, and service provision efforts. JNIM has also frequently framed its actions as local, even when

threatening to retaliate against neighboring states or international partners for counterterrorism efforts. Rounding out the similarities, JNIM has regularly engaged in negotiations with local communities, negotiated with various states as part of hostage deals, and signaled an openness to direct negotiations with the government.⁶

JNIM differs most politically from HTS in that it lacks serious external backing by any state actor and has not disavowed its transnational ties. JNIM remains a regional pariah due to its growing expansion into neighboring states as well as its continued ties to al-Qaeda. While there have been rumors that JNIM could consider dropping its official affiliation with al-Qaeda, doing so would undermine a key uniting identity among what is a very decentralized, multiethnic, and multinational group.⁷

Comparing JNIM with its Jihadist Peers

UNDERSTANDING JNIM'S POLITICAL MODEL IS KEY, BUT IT IS WORTH FURTHER examining how its broader strategic vision bears out in practice. Although JNIM may be following a playbook similar to those of other groups, these groups have different capabilities and operate in different local contexts. What worked for HTS or the Taliban may not work as well or even be feasible for JNIM for a variety of reasons. Comparing these similarities and differences can help inform the trajectory that Mali and the wider Sahel may take.

JNIM's relative strengths are most similar to those of the Taliban or al-Shabaab, except that JNIM suffers from several key weaknesses the Taliban did not face. A Taliban-like seizure of power is highly unlikely in the short-to-medium term because of these shortcomings, but it cannot be ruled out in the long term. Still, JNIM's ascendancy will likely lead to the slow hollowing out of state presence outside major population centers in the short-to-medium term—a Somalia scenario.

JNIM's Operational Advantages: Taliban-Lite

1. Disruption of Roadways

JNIM is infamous for using siege tactics across the Sahel, which began as early as 2019 in Burkina Faso and Mali. JNIM enforces sieges to punish communities that it views as hostile, e.g., for cooperating with security forces or recruiting self-defense militias.⁸ The end objective is to isolate security forces in the area and coerce civilians into fleeing or complying with JNIM shadow governance. Amnesty International reported in July 2023 that at least 46 locations were under siege in Burkina Faso alone, while the Critical Threats Project, using Armed Conflict & Location Event Data, identified at least 63 towns and cities across Burkina Faso and Mali where JNIM partially or entirely controls the surrounding ground lines of communication.⁹

A key requirement for enforcing blockades is disrupting ground lines of communication, which JNIM does through a combination of coercion and direct violence. Amnesty defined JNIM's tactics as "checkpoints at the main exit, the laying of IEDs in the main road axis to limit traffic, and occasional attacks against people, soldiers, and supply convoys trying to reach those besieged towns."¹⁰ The group frequently stops civilians or drivers not complying with the siege and sometimes kills them. JNIM's physical control over specific roadways varies from case to case, but the group contests the roadways enough to generate a psychological effect convincing civilians that the road is too dangerous to use.

The group's efforts have forced Malian forces to abandon some key commune outposts and enabled the group to now besiege cercle and regional capitals. (Mali's administrative levels descend from regions, to cercles, then communes, and finally villages or quarters.) Malian forces abandoned key district outposts on opposite sides of central Mali near the borders with Burkina Faso and Mauritania, respectively, in mid-2025 after two major attacks that together killed at least 121 soldiers.¹¹ The attacks are two of the 14 large-scale attacks—defined as JNIM-initiated events that inflicted 20 or more fatalities in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data dataset—that JNIM conducted in Mali in 2025, more than in all of 2024.¹² As JNIM increasingly overruns these

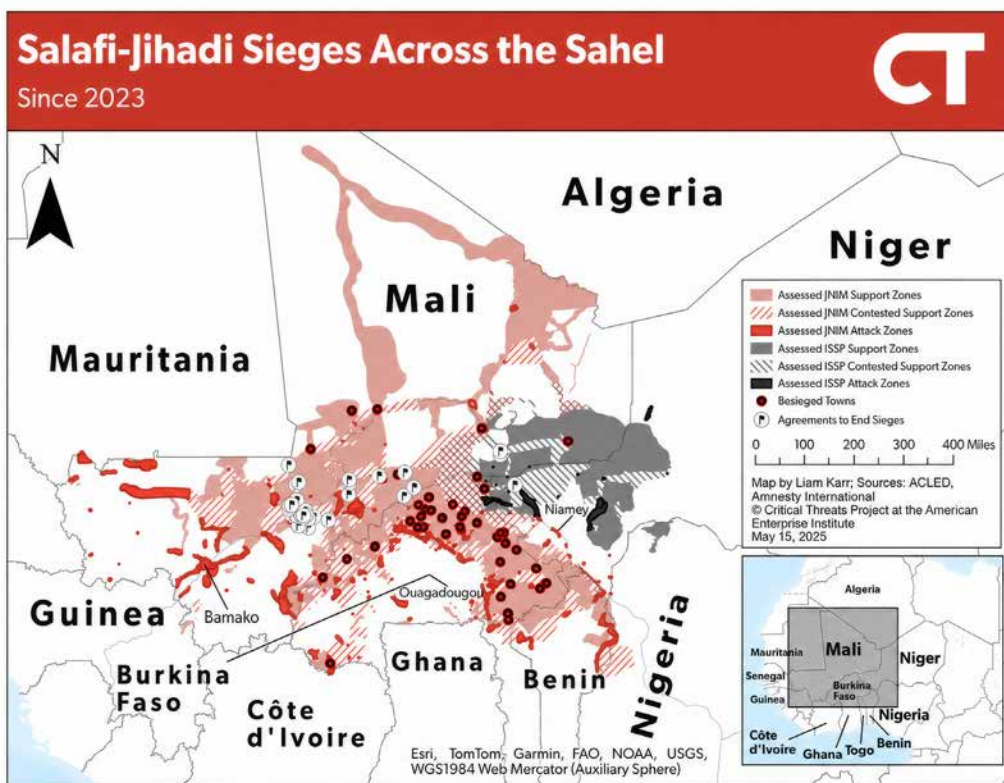


Figure 2. Salafi-jihadi Sieges Across the Sahel

smaller outposts, the group is laying siege to bigger targets across the country. In the last year, it has enforced blockades to varying degrees on nearly all of Mali's regional capitals; the most notable is the ongoing fuel blockade against Bamako and other major towns in the southern half of the country.

The Sahelian states have developed two responses to JNIM sieges: armed convoys and airdrops. While armed convoys occasionally provide much-needed relief, they are highly risky, as some of JNIM's deadliest attacks have been ambushes of these relief convoys. JNIM also targets key infrastructure, such as bridges, to make road travel impossible.¹³ Airdrops provide limited and temporary relief, and Mali has only seven transport aircraft.¹⁴

JNIM uses its control of roadways to control the livelihoods of civilians, which undermines state authority and causes backlash against the state.¹⁵ Along the roads, the group has begun enforcing aspects of sharia, such as veiling and gender segregation, at checkpoints, leading women traveling between government-held cities to veil out of fear that JNIM could stop them and punish them if they do not comply.

JNIM frequently denies civilians in towns access to surrounding farmland subject to local agreements (see subsequent section), cutting them off from their livelihood and the basic resources they need to survive. The group also attacks critical infrastructure underpinning the local economy, such as water systems.¹⁶ The inability of civilians to acquire basic goods results in inflation, as essential resources like water and food become scarcer.¹⁷ Health and education services also often collapse under siege, as JNIM explicitly targets related personnel and infrastructure, or staff preemptively flee.¹⁸

Control of the roads allows the group to further position itself as a de facto governing authority through taxation, which also generates significant funds. JNIM imposes taxes on communities as part of its blockades and resulting peace deals and collects toll taxes at road checkpoints.¹⁹ The group has looted state coffers in attacks on customs posts near Mali's borders with neighboring Guinea, Mauritania, and Senegal, as well as on other border points in the Sahel.²⁰

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

In 2020 and 2021, the Taliban heavily degraded and consolidated control over key roads to isolate Afghan forces. This campaign left Afghan forces demoralized and without supplies except for sporadic air resupply missions, leading them to eventually abandon key district-level outposts.²¹ The collapse of district-level checkpoints enabled the Taliban to consolidate control over these roadways and begin to isolate regional capitals and control economic activity throughout the country. The Taliban also used its control of roadways to position itself as the de facto governing authority and generate significant funds through taxation and customs tolls.²²

HTS used control of roadways in northwestern Syria to establish itself as the de facto governing authority in the area and legitimize its control over civilians, using similar tactics to the JNIM and the Taliban. Checkpoints were a defining feature of its shift from a pure insurgent group to asserting itself as a centralized, systematic governing authority in northwestern Syria. HTS levied taxes at these checkpoints, especially near the Turkish border, generating millions of U.S. dollars per month.²³ Its taxation system grew even more sophisticated in subsequent years, including the creation of new taxes for vehicle registrations and trade and construction licenses.²⁴ Although it invested some of these funds back into road infrastructure efforts, Syrian civilians regularly criticized the group for not doing enough given how much it collected in taxes.²⁵ The group also enforced certain sharia precepts across its territory,

presumably including at checkpoints, in its first years before it began to take a softer approach in the 2020s.²⁶

While al-Shabaab has not seized power in Somalia, the group heavily contests or controls most roadways in the southern half of the country. Al-Shabaab has also used this control to generate millions of U.S. dollars in revenue from checkpoints.²⁷ The group's campaign has effectively isolated most government-held population centers in southern Somalia, creating the "Swiss cheese" effect of a de facto fragmented state with government-held cities in seas of contested or al-Shabaab-controlled territory.²⁸

2. *Local Agreements*

JNIM's blockade tactics are heavily intertwined with another tool in the group's tool kit—local agreements. JNIM often ends blockades once it comes to an agreement with the local leaders of targeted communities, which the leaders have called "survival pacts."²⁹ These agreements provide a modicum of security for beleaguered local populations and enable economic activity to resume, as JNIM allows local markets to reopen and civilians to return to their farming and grazing land.³⁰ The pacts ultimately result in JNIM de facto supplanting state authority.

One of the two key stipulations in local agreements is that there should be no military resistance to JNIM, which sidelines the military and government-aligned militias in affected areas and gives JNIM a monopoly on the use of force and security provision. Local communities often agree to cease all cooperation with state security forces, which cuts critical intelligence and resource streams that state forces need to safely maintain their position. The group cut similar deals with bus transportation companies that had helped move security forces around the country. In some cases, the deals have even placed specific constraints on the military forces stationed in the town.³¹ Many of the deals have also led government-aligned militias, which have become the only obstacle to JNIM's control in rural areas that security forces have abandoned over the last decade, to surrender their weapons and cease their activities.³²

The other key aspect of these local agreements is the requirement of populations to adhere to sharia law, effectively meaning they concede to JNIM shadow governance. Basic aspects of this sharia implementation include dress codes, alcohol bans, and *zakat* collection (i.e., taxation).³³ In many cases, JNIM taxes come in the form of livestock or other goods, which the group then sells or bar-

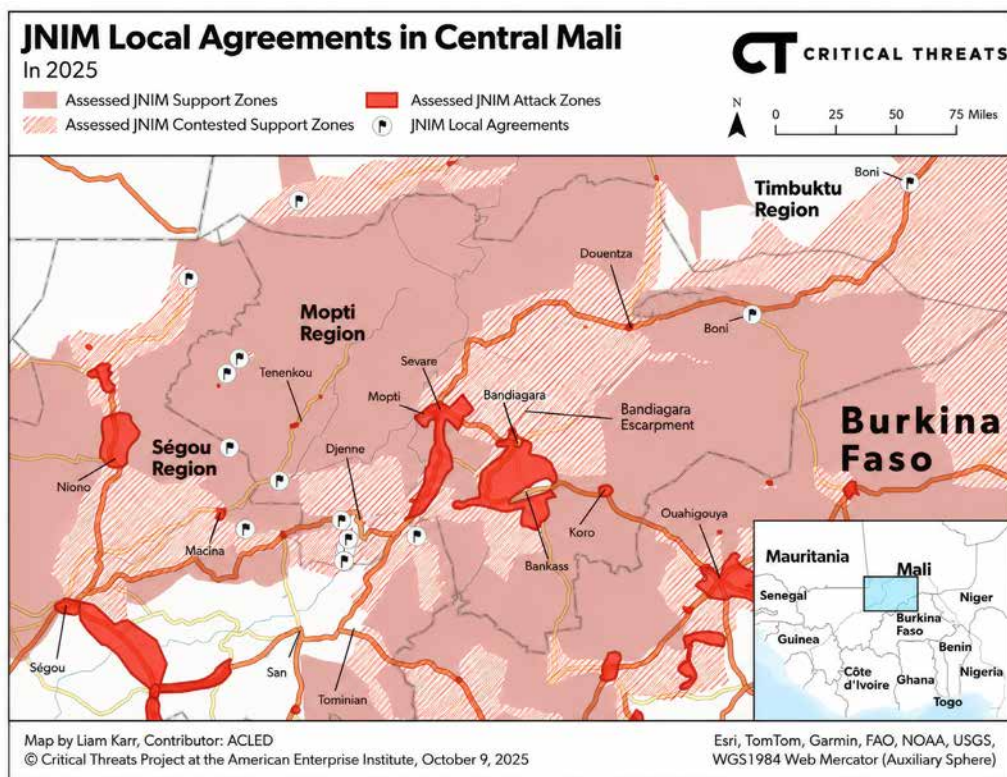


Figure 3. JNIM Local Agreements in Southern Mali

ters elsewhere.³⁴ Enforcement and other initiatives to mediate disputes and provide basic services can vary greatly in their nature and scope as the group seeks to win over the local community.³⁵ For example, local JNIM fighters also sometimes make pragmatic concessions of their own at the request of communities, including on limiting JNIM involvement in religious affairs, arms and IED control, schooling, and efforts to reduce collateral damage from fighting in towns.³⁶

JNIM increased the scale and geographic scope of its negotiations in Mali in 2025, partially at the acquiescence of the Malian junta. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data recorded that JNIM concluded 15 local agreements and lifted at least three sieges, which implies the existence of an agreement, in 2025. New agreements in Sikasso in 2025—the group’s first in southern Mali—are contributing to this yearly record. The Malian junta quietly showed more openness to local negotiations in 2025, especially in central Mali, as a result of the deteriorating security position in southern Mali. Numerous media reports indicate that junta-linked officials are trying to enforce agreements and increasingly oversee or get directly involved in negotiations.³⁷

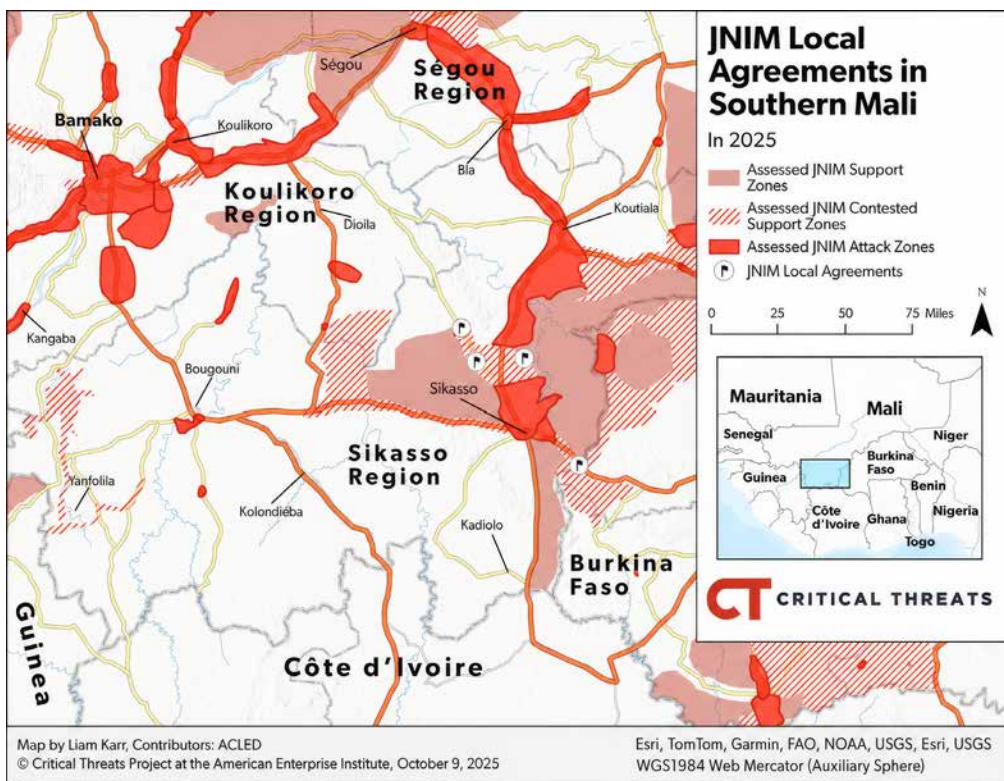


Figure 4. JNIM Local Agreements in Central Mali

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

The Taliban cultivated local agreements at a rapid pace as it extended its control across Afghanistan in 2020–21. It achieved this mostly through coercion and persuasion of isolated communities, much like in JNIM’s current blockade campaign.³⁸ Afghan capitulations to the Taliban involved state security forces more frequently than JNIM’s local agreements, partially due to the larger size and presence of Afghan security forces compared to Sahelian forces, but JNIM’s agreements are still having a similar effect of eliminating any armed resistance—state or militia—to its control. Taliban negotiations also used local tribal elders to increase the legitimacy and reach of its appeals, which resembles the JNIM tactic of negotiating with local leaders in blockaded areas.³⁹ The surrender of Afghan communities helped the Taliban gain more weapons, control of population, and revenues, creating a snowball effect that enabled it to rapidly encircle the Afghan government until it collapsed.⁴⁰

Local agreements were a major component of HTS’s efforts to consolidate control of and legitimacy among the Christian minority population in north-

western Syria since 2018 and were key to the group's lightning advance across Syria in late 2024. HTS had negotiated with Christian leaders in Idlib Province since at least 2018, and these talks led to agreements that returned seized property to their Christian owners, allowed public holiday celebrations and prayers, and ceased security force attacks on Christian communities.⁴¹ This experience served as a template for HTS as it spread across Syria in late 2024, when it preemptively engaged community and diaspora leaders of minority communities to secure agreements that enabled it to spread into new areas with minimal force and establish popular legitimacy.⁴²

Al-Shabaab has also used local agreements and local leaders to strengthen its position in various parts of Somalia. It has frequently navigated Somalia's fractious clan politics by striking local agreements with various clans.⁴³ The group faced a clan-based uprising in central Somalia in 2021-23 after it overplayed its hand with forcible conscription and heavy taxation practices that alienated locals in the area. In response to this uprising and the ensuing government-backed offensive, al-Shabaab rallied support among certain clans in the region that were rivals of those engaged in the uprising, which helped it eventually halt the offensive.⁴⁴ Since then, al-Shabaab has gradually overturned its losses by either striking deals with or sidelining the same clan militias that initially rebelled against it. The group typically contacts clan elders in nominally government-held areas before it sends forces to retake them, offering clan militia fighters amnesty if they stand down. This has allowed the group to reclaim many territories previously liberated by clan/government forces since 2022, sometimes without firing a shot.⁴⁵

3. Psychological and Propaganda Efforts

The strategic surprise JNIM achieved in southwestern Mali in the second half of 2025 has another more practical effect—wearing down the psyche of the junta and Malian civilians, which could critically undermine the confidence, will, and popular legitimacy of the Malian government and military. JNIM publicly announced its arrival in southwestern Mali on July 1, when it simultaneously attacked five army positions in the Kayes region and two positions in the Segou region. By all accounts, it seemed the attacks were a series of tactical defeats for JNIM. The Malian army claimed to have killed at least 80 militants as it repelled the incursions.⁴⁶ But the attacks still validated fears that the group's growing strength in the southwest since at least 2020 would eventually

threaten Mali's economic and political center of gravity, disrupt regional economic activity, and spread to neighboring states.⁴⁷

Despite the tactical defeat, JNIM's operations in southwestern Mali have had a strategic and psychological impact by shattering the pro-junta information bubble in Bamako and other parts of southern Mali, undermining the junta's *raison d'être*. An oversimplistic analogue for this situation is the impact of the Tet Offensive during the Vietnam War. The junta has spent the last several years systematically cracking down on independent press and co-opting civic space to project the narrative that it is leading *a montée en puissance* (growing strength), which is integral to its popular support and legitimacy.⁴⁸ However, JNIM's attack on Bamako in 2024 and its campaign across southern Mali in the second half of 2025 aimed to torpedo the narrative among the junta's support base in these previously insulated areas. It directly confronted Malians with the reality that the security situation is not improving despite what the government propaganda and talking points are telling citizens in the cities.

JNIM has sought to further exaggerate its strength through its propaganda. It regularly publishes attack claims with supporting media to highlight its victories and drive the narrative that it is strengthening and winning.⁴⁹ The group began publishing pictures and videos of its training camps in 2024; the SITE Intelligence Group recorded at least 27 such publications.⁵⁰ JNIM published training camp media more frequently and with a greater focus on Mali in 2025, especially since the siege in the southwestern part of the country began. The group has published 11 training camp media releases since August 31, six of these since the beginning of December 2025. Almost all publications since the start of 2025 have been from Mali-based camps, including its first video from a camp in southern Mali, while the group's 11 publications in 2024 were split between Burkina- and Mali-based camps.⁵¹ The media aims to send a clear message—the group is overpowering the junta and is only growing stronger.

Comparison with other jihadist actors

The Taliban used propaganda and social media to undermine the morale and cohesion of Afghan forces and support for the government prior to its takeover of Kabul in 2021. Pro-Taliban social media accounts flooded the internet with graphic images and warnings to Afghan soldiers or anyone who refused to surrender to the group.⁵² The group circulated images of its conquests on social media and more traditional propaganda channels to “win the narrative,” un-

dercutting the will of the Afghan people to resist the group and contributing to the snowballing of surrenders.⁵³

HTS used a much more sophisticated propaganda network to bolster its own public image as a legitimate state authority in northwestern Syria. After the HTS merger and rebrand in 2017, the group expanded preexisting strategies to highlight its governance efforts in northwestern Syria. It did this through a variety of sources, including online and offline outlets and content that included op-eds and political analysis in addition to the typical Jihadist battlefield content.⁵⁴ The group consolidated increasing control over the information space to promote its governance vision in HTS-held areas and sought to manage Western media coverage of these areas through its information apparatus.⁵⁵ During the offensive that toppled the Assad regime in 2024, officials posted updates across social media and recorded videos detailing operations, but this messaging was directed at Syrian civilians and the international community more than at regime forces.⁵⁶

Al-Shabaab frequently uses its traditional and social media networks to spread propaganda that undermines the Somali government. It has an extensive media apparatus that involves its own official media channel, domestic radio stations, online news outlets, and social media presence.⁵⁷ The group spreads standardized messages across this apparatus to control and present a unified narrative.⁵⁸ Al-Shabaab's media network spreads many of the same narratives as JNIM, particularly highlighting its victories and abuses by state and partner forces. The group also regularly highlights its governance and religious activity in a similar way to HTS.

4. Distracted Adversaries

Much like the Taliban and HTS in Syria, JNIM is threatening Bamako at a time when Mali has few—if any—solid or effective external partnerships. Mali's partnership with Russia has been a disaster. From the outset, the math did not add up, as the junta traded nearly 2,500 French soldiers and 12,000 UN peacekeepers for 2,000 Russian mercenaries. The junta had legitimate grievances with the continued worsening of violence and the stalled reintroduction of government control to Tuareg rebel-held parts of northern Mali. However, the shift has left Malian and Russian forces overstretched and unable to backfill French and UN forces that had been responsible for security in the north for nearly a decade. The junta and its Russian counterparts have

pursued a woefully ineffective counterinsurgency strategy premised on brutal, Russian-style, military-centric counterinsurgency doctrine. Burkinabé and Malian state forces are now on pace to kill more civilians than Salafi-jihadi insurgents across the Sahel for the second straight year, which has reportedly led to an increase in JNIM recruitment and has likely contributed to JNIM's expansion and strengthening across the Sahel.⁵⁹

To make matters worse, Russia's continued invasion of Ukraine means it is unlikely that Russia can provide impactful reinforcements for the Malian military. Africa Corps (formerly known as Wagner Group) faced significant recruiting shortages throughout 2024, which affected its ability to expand operations in partner countries like Burkina Faso and Niger.⁶⁰ While the Kremlin surged Africa Corps recruiting in 2025, the Institute for the Study of War assessed that this was likely to replace legacy Wagner Group members and in part to recruit personnel to fight in Ukraine, where the Kremlin uses Africa Corps as a reserve pool.⁶¹

Looking elsewhere, Mali has few partners able to fundamentally alter the strategic picture in the short term. Turkey offers the most promise; Turkish trainers are reportedly planning to deploy to neighboring Niger, and mercenaries are reportedly protecting Turkish economic sites in Mali and Burkina Faso.⁶² Turkish drones are being used throughout the Sahel and are helpful in disrupting JNIM control of key towns or highways but cannot deny the group influence over these areas entirely, much less alter the strategic picture. Mali first acquired Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2s in December 2022 (since which time the insurgency has undoubtedly worsened) and now has between eight and 17 TB2s according to various sources.⁶³ Other partners, such as China, the European Union, and the United States, offer various degrees of material and intelligence support, but none are positioned—much less willing—to play the role France did when it sent 4,000 soldiers after JNIM's predecessor captured major population centers in 2013.⁶⁴

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

In taking power in Syria in 2024, HTS greatly benefited from the weakening and distraction of the Assad regime's main enablers—Iran and its proxy network as well as Russia. Israel severely degraded Iran's proxy network after Hamas's October 7, 2023, attacks. Among Israel's various actions to target the network, it launched several airstrikes on Iranian facilities and Iran-aligned militias in Syria, which forced those personnel to withdraw.⁶⁵ Lebanese Hezbollah had also played a key role in Iran's support for the Assad regime but had

been severely weakened by its war with Israel, which ended only days before the HTS offensive in November 2024.⁶⁶ Similar to its position in Mali, Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine had also weakened the Assad regime's position, specifically through the loss of air assets that Russia moved to Ukraine.⁶⁷

The Taliban escalated its efforts to seize Afghanistan alongside the U.S. withdrawal from that country. The United States initially agreed in February 2020 to withdraw all troops by May 2021 but eventually extended this deadline to September 11, 2021. U.S. forces began accelerating their withdrawal in May 2021, and it was 95% complete by July.⁶⁸ Taliban forces launched their summer offensive as the American withdrawal accelerated in May 2021, and the offensive escalated and snowballed alongside the U.S. drawdown over the rest of the summer.⁶⁹

Al-Shabaab faces greater multilateral resistance than JNIM or other actors, but it too has exploited recent divisions among Somalia's international partners. Part of al-Shabaab's resurgence in central Somalia in 2025 owed to the messy transition of the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Somalia. Burundi, which had maintained troops in central Somalia for 18 years, abruptly threatened to withdraw from the new mission days before it was slated to begin.⁷⁰ A major political dispute involving Ethiopia and Somalia in 2024 also meant that Ethiopia and Egypt finalized their involvement in the new AU mission after it began.⁷¹ The AU faces challenges in finding continued funding for the mission.⁷² Those challenges aside, AU forces and international drone support (namely from the U.S., U.A.E., and Turkey) continued to play a critical role in helping Somali forces regain some territory from al-Shabaab in parts of the country in 2025.⁷³

JNIM's Weaknesses

WHILE JNIM UNDOUBTEDLY ENJOYS MANY ADVANTAGES, MANY OF WHICH ARE worryingly reminiscent of those of the Taliban or HTS, the group faces several internal and external constraints that neither of the successful groups faced. While these shortcomings will not stop JNIM from pushing Mali toward becoming a de facto fragmented state of government-controlled urban centers surrounded by jihadist-controlled or -contested countryside and roadways, the limitations do make the group highly unlikely to seize and directly govern Ba-

mako or other major population centers by force in the near or even medium term. In short, the group lacks the capacity, the capability, and likely even the intent to do so.

1. Lack of Intent

JNIM's rhetoric and behavior indicate that it wants to heavily influence the state—not to directly capture it. JNIM and its al-Qaeda-linked predecessors have historically been open to negotiations under the condition that foreign forces leave the country. Amid the blockade, the group demanded a direct dialogue with the junta and continued to show an openness to negotiations. The group's demands have focused on fuel trading provisions, sharia law, and even the ousting of the current regime, which are all short of implying it seeks direct control. In July 2025, JNIM put out a call for “all influential figures, intellectual and cultural elites, businessmen, media personalities, and all the elements and components of our society” to fight back against the juntas.⁷⁴ Nowhere did the statement explicitly call for these elites to join JNIM; rather, it urged them to hold the governments accountable for their actions.

JNIM's negative historical experience with direct administration, and the resulting international intervention, will also likely inform the group's approach. JNIM is undoubtedly stronger than its predecessor groups were when they first faced international intervention in 2013, after they had seized and begun administering major population centers in northern Mali. However, JNIM still has not yet shown it can win conventional battles and hold major population centers against Malian forces, much less in the face of a renewed international effort. While HTS and the Taliban each sidelined the threat of international intervention against them in their own ways, JNIM has done little to tangibly dissuade a potential international intervention aside from maintaining a low profile. It has done this by explicitly avoiding seizing cities or conducting major attacks that could cause foreign fatalities.⁷⁵ The rare JNIM attacks on foreigners are often kidnappings in which the group sells the hostages back to the host country for ransom, which establishes mediation channels and builds trust rather than adopting a purely confrontational stance.⁷⁶ The group has repeatedly criticized and warned against foreign meddling in the Sahel for years, signaling that avoiding an international intervention remains a genuine interest.

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

HTS mitigated the risk of unwanted international intervention by disavowing its links to al-Qaeda and cultivating ties with Turkey. First, HTS formally renounced its ties with al-Qaeda in 2016. This step was key in “gaining broader acceptance and reducing external pressure” among both internal Syrian factions and the broader international community.⁷⁷ HTS also allied with Turkey, which shielded the group physically and politically. Analysts note that HTS operated with “de facto Turkish protection” in northeastern Syria as it built its capabilities.⁷⁸ The Taliban, in contrast, ended unwanted international intervention by striking a deal with the United States, which constrained the United States in its response to the escalating Taliban insurgency and ultimately ended decades of U.S. involvement.⁷⁹

2. Lack of Capacity

JNIM is working with fewer fighters across a wider expanse of geography than its jihadist peers. The latest public estimates claim the group has 6,000 fighters, which is a fifth of HTS size estimates in 2024 and a tenth of the lower-end estimates of the Taliban’s fighting force in 2021.⁸⁰ These fighters are primarily spread across Burkina Faso and Mali—an area more than twice as large as Afghanistan and nearly nine times larger than Syria—and western Niger.⁸¹

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

HTS and the Taliban had many more fighters, including vis-à-vis the adversaries they were fighting, when they took power in their respective countries than JNIM currently has. In terms of raw numbers, lower-end estimates of HTS strength in 2024 and the Taliban’s strength in 2021 are 30,000 and 60,000 militants, respectively, compared to JNIM’s 6,000.⁸² JNIM continues to trail its peers in size relative to that of the opposing security forces.⁸³ The group has one militant for every 10 soldiers it faces across Burkina Faso and Mali combined, excluding thousands of militia fighters the group also faces.⁸⁴ HTS and the Taliban enjoyed more favorable ratios of roughly one fighter for every five or six Syrian or Afghan soldiers.⁸⁵ These numbers do not even paint the full picture of the difference, however, as HTS and the Taliban also benefited from alliances with other armed groups, while their adversaries were even weaker than their stated numbers due to poor morale and cohesion.

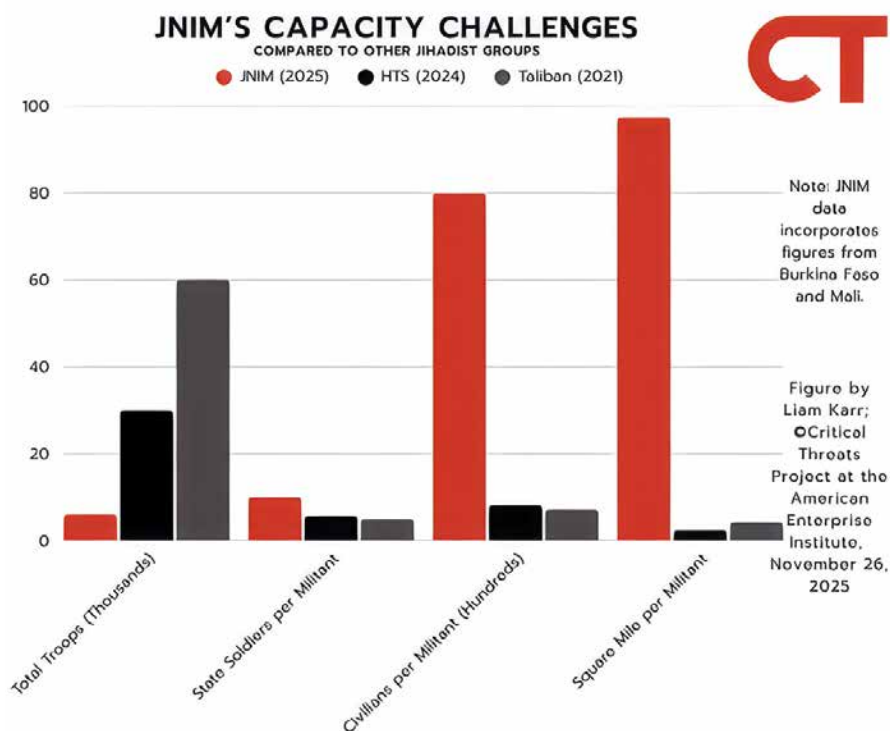


Figure 5. JNIM's capacity challenges compared to those of other jihadist groups (Source: author, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute)

JNIM's capacity issues, specifically its ability to govern, are more clearly exposed when comparing its size to the population and territory it is aiming to control. There is one JNIM militant for every 8,000 people across Burkina Faso and Mali, while HTS and the Taliban had one militant for every 820 and 710 people in their respective countries.⁸⁶ JNIM is also operating across a much larger geographic expanse, as noted previously, with one militant for nearly every 100 square miles of Burkinabe and Malian national territory. HTS and the Taliban had one militant for roughly every two and four square miles respectively. Removing Burkina Faso, a relatively more densely populated country of nearly 23.5 million people, helps balance the civilian figures to a still-lopsided 4,000-to-one ratio in Mali alone but hardly impacts the geographic imbalance given Mali's vast territory.

3. Lack of Capability

Militarily, JNIM is working with less experienced fighters and weaker hardware than the other jihadist groups examined in this study. Its most veteran fighters are concentrated in northern Mali, where the initial al-Qaeda-linked insurgency latched onto the Tuareg rebellion in 2012. However, many of JNIM's fighters, especially in the areas where JNIM and its constituent groups have spread south in recent years, are newer recruits and part-time fighters who rally from nearby villages for a given attack.⁸⁷ The group's training camps show an intention to improve its overall combat effectiveness, but training still does not make up for years of experience. JNIM is increasingly using drones in kinetic operations but is tactically limited to using rudimentary commercial quadcopters to drop mortars or other explosives onto stationary targets.⁸⁸

JNIM also remains vulnerable to Malian drones, which limit its ability to mass forces for conventional assaults. As a result, its militants in southern Mali resort to smaller ambushes along roadways and commando-style attacks in major cities. The Malian military has begun to degrade JNIM's ability to maintain its blockade along some axes in southern Mali through drone strikes since October 2025.⁸⁹ Furthermore, drones proved decisive in Mali's ability to recapture Kidal city in northern Mali in 2022, underscoring their utility should JNIM attempt a more conventional urban assault.⁹⁰ JNIM has acquired ad hoc anti-air capabilities thanks to looted weaponry, such as a 14.5mm anti-aircraft gun in Burkina Faso, which it used to repel state air support and remain in large numbers in a provincial capital for multiple days in one instance in June 2025.⁹¹ These systems are still unable to reliably shoot down combat drones, however, and have not been deployed in southern Mali.

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

The Taliban and HTS were much more experienced and capable fighting forces than JNIM. Veteran Taliban fighters had been active in the country since the initial U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The Taliban had used looted night-vision goggles, armored vehicles, and other higher-end equipment for years prior to its capture of Kabul in 2021.⁹² HTS had been fighting the Assad regime, rival rebel groups, and ISIS since its inception as Jabhat al-Nusra in 2012. Many veteran jihadists in Syria, such as the group's leader Ahmed al-Sharaa and foreign fighters, had been fighting even longer across the Middle East. HTS further professionalized its fighting forces by establishing a military academy in 2019 that was run by Syrian army defectors.⁹³ The academy included a stan-

dardized training course for rebels who had merged with the group as well as specialty courses for drone, artillery, and special force units.⁹⁴ HTS had been developing a drone unit since 2019 that produced reconnaissance, attack, and suicide drones to carry out a range of tactical functions in the 2024 offensive.⁹⁵

In addition to these major differences from the successful HTS and the Taliban, JNIM has drone defense shortcomings similar to those of al-Shabaab, which has contributed to its struggles to seize power in Somalia. Somalia and its partners have limited drones in the country, meaning coverage is spotty, but the drones that do operate are still able to create a persistent physical and psychological threat.⁹⁶ This threat degrades al-Shabaab's ability to mass the forces necessary to conventionally seize major towns. Partially for this reason, al-Shabaab also resorts to commando-style raids or suicide bombings via infiltration of government-held cities, such as Mogadishu. The Taliban, by contrast, had neutralized the Afghan Air Force prior to taking power through targeted assassinations of Afghan pilots (who were few in number given their specialized training), while the Afghan Air Force simultaneously struggled to maintain its aircraft after the withdrawal of U.S. forces and attendant logistics support.⁹⁷ In Syria, Russia had been the main source of pro-Assad air support, and its commitments in Ukraine meant that Russian air support could not keep pace with the HTS offensive.⁹⁸

4. Lack of Legitimacy

JNIM's roots as a predominantly ethnic minority-based Salafi-jihadi movement have contributed to a legitimacy gap vis-à-vis the Malian state in urban centers, especially in the south. JNIM has exploited farmer-herder tensions and other ethnic grievances among Mali's mostly rural ethnic minorities—initially as part of the separatist insurgency among the Tuareg in northern Mali and gradually among other minorities, such as the Fulani pastoralists in central Mali and Burkina Faso. JNIM's other class- and ethnicity-based populist appeals hold little weight in urban centers or the southwest, however, which is predominantly Bambara (Mali's largest ethnic group). Some Malians find JNIM's sharia structures useful for addressing some of their grievances in the absence of any state solutions. However, even in JNIM strongholds, Salafi-jihadist ideology itself is often not a primary recruiting factor as Malians have traditionally practiced a more moderate strand of Islam.⁹⁹

Compounding JNIM's uphill battle, most Malians have expressed positive or mostly positive sentiment toward the army for decades. At least 75% said they were "very" or "partially" confident in the army in several successive Afrobarometer polls dating back to 2000, before the latest military coups.¹⁰⁰ Notably, prior to the 2020 coup, the military had constantly remained on par with, if not outpaced, the legitimacy of traditional and religious authorities and was vastly more popular than government institutions and other security forces.

It is unclear whether popular sentiments are shifting amid the deteriorating security situation. More recent Afrobarometer polling showing disproportionate support for the junta and for President Assimi Goita in Mali's increasingly oppressive information space should be treated with skepticism given the authorities' censorship and the challenges researchers face in reaching most of the country.¹⁰¹ However, the latest Afrobarometer study included some important nuance, finding that "the junta enjoys a certain credibility at low-to-moderate levels of violence but suffers a precipitous collapse of trust once violence crosses a new threshold, whereas high levels of subjective fear [propaganda, news, or other indirect experiences] alone rekindles public solidarity in a conditional rally-around-the-flag effect."¹⁰² In simpler terms, while the junta's control of the information space makes populations in insulated urban areas more immune to secondhand accounts or media, the growing degree of personal encounters with implicit or direct violence (e.g., unprecedented fuel shortages or JNIM checkpoints) experienced in Bamako and across southern Mali risks rapidly undermining the junta's credibility.

JNIM has tried to broaden its appeal and undermine the junta's support base through narratives other than just its focus on security forces' violence against ethnic minorities that the group treats as its traditional constituencies.¹⁰³ For example, in a July 25 statement, JNIM's official media outlet accused the junta of "elevating their dominance and tyranny," backtracking on their promises, and targeting secular political figures that contradict their "authoritarian whims."¹⁰⁴ In other statements, the group has pointed to the lack of electricity, food, and water as the result of the junta "plundering the wealth of their countries to give it for free to the Russians."¹⁰⁵ JNIM has seen growing success in its recruiting efforts among Bambara communities, but its legitimacy gap is still a challenge to operations, much less governance, in southern Mali.¹⁰⁶

Comparison with Other Jihadist Actors

HTS and the Taliban both enjoyed comparative advantages to JNIM in their legitimacy battles. They both hail from the majority ethnic groups in their respec-

tive states and were facing paper tigers that had dubious legitimacy among the population. The Taliban had also already governed the country for several years in the 1990s before it was overthrown, and it continued to evolve its governance efforts even while out of power. HTS built up local legitimacy by distancing itself from Salafism entirely. It favored a highly pragmatic and localized “social inertia” approach that retained popular Islamic practices within mainstream Syrian views, including aspects of Sufism and traditional Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁰⁷ Despite these advantages, it is worth acknowledging that HTS still had to form a broader coalition and currently does not assert unilateral control over the entirety of its national territory due to tensions with minority ethnic groups, such as the Druze and Kurds.¹⁰⁸ In short, developing the necessary popular support in Syria and Afghanistan, while no easy feat for either HTS or the Taliban, was nonetheless a lesser challenge compared to what JNIM faces in Mali.

Future Inflections: What Comes Next?

WHILE IT APPEARS MALI IS BECOMING A DE FACTO FRAGMENTED STATE, FUTURE developments could punctuate this trajectory and dramatically alter the course of the conflict. Things rarely remain on the same stable course forever—they happen slowly and then all at once. Aside from a Taliban-style takeover, developments such as a collapse of the Malian government, centralized negotiations between JNIM and the junta, international intervention, and schisms within JNIM could all drastically change the future of Mali, JNIM, and the wider Sahel.

1. Government Collapse

While JNIM may not capture cities, it can impose conditions that could collapse the junta. Continued popular support for the junta is far from guaranteed. President Goita’s popularity and legitimacy rest on his portrayal as Mali’s “defender and liberator.”¹⁰⁹ JNIM’s latest offensive undermines that narrative entirely, and Malians in the southern half of the country may be much less

likely to unconditionally back the junta with the violence reaching their front door. It is worth remembering that the Malian army and state also nearly collapsed during the initial 2012 insurgency before French intervention staved this off.¹¹⁰

JNIM has said it plans to sustain its fuel blockade until the junta collapses or agrees to implement sharia law nationwide. While the junta has eased the blockade since its peak in late 2025, fuel shortages are still widespread, causing rolling blackouts, long lines at gas stations, and inflation across the country.¹¹¹ JNIM's expansion into western Mali also threatens to undermine the junta's vital mining revenues. In addition to these economic impacts, JNIM's growing visibility in these areas threatens support for the junta among what should be its power base. While the junta may be able to rally the public in the short term, and while many Malians detest JNIM's interpretation of sharia and the violence the group has wrought, it is unclear whether the military or the public will be able to stomach this pressure indefinitely. A change of government could impact Mali's approach to negotiations and to regional and international engagement, both of which are explored in greater detail below.

2. Centralized Negotiations

JNIM's economic warfare could lead the junta to pursue negotiations with JNIM or cause a government collapse that would enable JNIM to negotiate with new authorities. Mali's government began to come around to the idea of limited negotiations in 2020, but the subsequent coups in 2020 and 2021 ended these efforts.¹¹² However, the Malian junta has shown receptiveness to discrete outreach, especially on the local level, in recent years and amid the ongoing blockade. More comprehensive negotiations between JNIM and the junta would be a challenge, as they would likely involve a major public reversal and further shred the junta's legitimacy, which could ultimately lead to the aforementioned government collapse.¹¹³ While it is unclear who would succeed the current junta, civil society and religious organizations, some of whom have advocated for dialogue with JNIM or are junta critics, could become key actors. Mali's High Islamic Council (HCI) remains a powerful and respected political actor across the country.¹¹⁴ Former HCI president and exiled imam Mahmoud Dicko previously led dialogue with the current JNIM leader in 2012 and joined an opposition coalition in December 2025 that aims to "open

a national dialogue with Malian armed groups” as part of a transition to return to constitutional order.¹¹⁵

It is hard to imagine what negotiations would entail, given the wide range of topics that would need to be addressed. Experts such as Alex Thurston and the International Crisis Group have previously explored this and noted that an obvious topic is the role of religion and the state. JNIM has repeatedly insisted on the implementation of sharia law in Mali, while successive Malian governments have defended the secular nature of the country’s constitution. Symbolically, a compromise would almost certainly at the very least include an Egyptian-style acknowledgment of sharia as the “source” of Malian law in the constitution and involve discussions of JNIM’s allegiance to al-Qaeda and support for any global operations.¹¹⁶ However, outcomes could also involve much more practical matters, such as the application of sharia law, where JNIM is one of many powerful religious voices in Mali. There would also need to be discussions of whether JNIM-linked actors assume institutional roles or continue to influence the state autonomously as other religious organizations have done in Malian history.¹¹⁷

JNIM’s rhetoric surrounding the junta indicates it is most likely interested in some power-sharing arrangement by which it secures greater control over rural areas while leaving Bamako and other areas under state control, albeit with JNIM influence. The group has repeatedly called for a popular uprising in government-held cities.¹¹⁸ Other elements of its negotiating strategy have repeatedly sought to limit the role of the state while securing its control over rural areas. This pattern includes the previously covered local agreements as well as its demands to end a ban on rural fuel trading as part of the current blockade.¹¹⁹

While the outcomes of potential negotiations are hard to forecast, one thing is clear—JNIM would be negotiating from its historical zenith. In previous moments when dialogue was discussed, international backers helping to contain JNIM mostly opposed the idea.¹²⁰ They also presumably did not feel the need to make any major concessions, as JNIM did not threaten economically or politically sensitive areas. Neither situation is currently true; international assistance has diminished and JNIM is destabilizing economically and politically sensitive parts of the country.

3. International Intervention

JNIM’s growing strength is a regional and arguably international threat that could generate a regional or international response. JNIM is already active in

Benin and Togo, where it carries out dozens of attacks every year. The group also has rear support zones in Nigeria, where it claimed its first attack in 2025, and likely has additional rear bases in Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal.¹²¹ Leadership figures from JNIM's parent organization, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and prominent JNIM officials have frequently threatened neighboring countries for "hostile" actions against Fulani communities and warned of potential reprisals.¹²² This approach mimics the playbook the group used to exploit local grievances and expand into central Mali and Burkina Faso a decade ago.¹²³ JNIM has also regularly retaliated against littoral countries for cross-border counterterrorism cooperation and proactive counterinsurgency measures, which the group frames as "provocations."¹²⁴

Regional efforts, whether through the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) or other multilateral fora, such as the Accra Initiative, have repeatedly disappointed. Generating a regional response has not been a priority for non-Sahelian states until recently, as they hoped to rely on the French and UN presence to keep jihadist expansion from the Sahel in check. Coastal countries face various domestic political constraints in their security responses, and they have all given priority to using international security assistance and their small and/or already-overstretched security forces (in the case of Nigeria) to address more pressing domestic security challenges. Key among these challenges are ensuring regime security (given the coup plots in Benin and Nigeria in late 2025) and shoring up border security to contain the Salafi-jihadi insurgency in the Sahel.¹²⁵ This prioritization has meant that West African governments are unable or unwilling to dedicate financial resources to operationalize a hypothetical regional counterterrorism force.¹²⁶ Deep-seated animosity and mistrust have also given rise to major political differences between the Sahel states and many of their coastal neighbors, fueling mutual suspicions (some more valid than others) that they are seeking to overthrow each other and preventing the implementation of any regional security force in the near future.¹²⁷

The fractured region is unlikely to overcome these deeply rooted personal and institutional challenges to the degree necessary to solve the crisis, but JNIM's growing strength could conceivably provide the impetus to progress toward a stronger regional response. ECOWAS initially announced plans to create a 5,000-strong regional standby force in March 2025 through AU funding channels before announcing in August that it aimed to activate an implausibly large 260,000-strong rapid response force—twice the size of the Nigerian military.¹²⁸ ECOWAS is currently struggling to secure the 2.5 billion U.S. dollars needed to fund its latest plans and is looking for alternative bilateral and

multilateral funding channels from international donors.¹²⁹ Regime change among either of the two blocs could also create an opening for renewed cooperation with new, likeminded authorities.

An ECOWAS force would mirror some elements of the AU-supported peacekeeping operations in Somalia, the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) in the Lake Chad Basin, or the Rwandan intervention in Mozambique.¹³⁰ African peacekeepers and air assets would be able to immediately bolster Mali's capacity to secure key supply lines by conducting more frequent patrols, participating in convoy protection, and securing population centers.¹³¹ Forces with a more offensive mandate would be able to support Malian forces in clearing known insurgent havens and working with peacekeepers to protect vulnerable civilians in these areas.¹³² Increased collaboration with neighboring countries' forces through a setup like the MNJTF could also enable partner forces to more effectively target insurgent zones along shared borders.¹³³

The various obstacles to a regional intervention could lead to a hybrid model in which ECOWAS plays a smaller role with a narrower aim alongside other external security partners and private military companies. This arrangement would resemble the fragmented counter-Islamic State operations during the Syrian civil war.¹³⁴ Russia's Africa Corps remains present across Mali, especially in the north, where it supports Russia's economic interests and seeks to bolster the junta's narrative of an improving security situation.¹³⁵ Turkey is also assuming an increasingly large role, using drones across all three Sahelian countries, providing trainers in Niger, and allegedly training and funding Syrian mercenaries in Burkina Faso and Mali to protect Turkish economic sites.¹³⁶ The United States is looking to reengage the Sahelian states on critical minerals and security; the U.S. military has resumed intelligence sharing of high-value targets with its Malian counterparts since mid-2025, and American private military contractors are allegedly in contact with the Malian junta for protection services.¹³⁷ China remains a major arms provider and economic partner of Mali, and while it is unclear whether Chinese private security contractors are present in the country, these contractors have proliferated across parts of Africa where China has large investments and citizens at risk of violence—conditions present in the Sahel.¹³⁸

4. Internal Factionalism

Another unique challenge that JNIM faces as it gains power is that posed by the group's internal factions. JNIM is a coalition of several subgroups, many

of which are characterized by their links with specific ethnic groups and commanders.¹³⁹ This decentralized franchise structure appeals to the local grievances of various groups as JNIM expands across the Sahel.¹⁴⁰ The subgroups retain a large degree of operational autonomy although JNIM's senior leadership retains control over the group's broader strategic objectives.¹⁴¹ For example, it appears the current blockade is locally driven, at least in part, given that the group articulated local demands focused on fuel smuggling in southern Mali before opportunistically raising the stakes.¹⁴²

Greater power, through either the gun or the negotiating table, could throw JNIM's delicate equilibrium into limbo. For one, JNIM is a multinational group operating across numerous countries. Taking power in one country would "elevate" one of several centers of power within the group.¹⁴³ JNIM is also a multiethnic group, which means it could alternatively fracture along ethnic lines if certain ethnic constituencies feel they are being marginalized. Either shift could lead to infighting or splintering, especially since the group has maintained cohesion through a mutual support system that breeds "mandatory interdependence."¹⁴⁴ The group's allegiance to al-Qaeda is a major unifying factor, but that too could come into question in the course of negotiations or as part of a strategy JNIM uses to avoid international intervention. All said, JNIM would be opening a can of worms that would require an incredibly delicate balancing act if it were to take power.

Conclusion

MALI IS SLOWLY BECOMING A DE FACTO FRAGMENTED STATE AT JNIM'S HANDS. The trends are dismal and share many similarities with the HTS rise in Syria and, even more so, with the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. These alarm bells are concerning, but JNIM is unlikely to seize Bamako tomorrow or even over the next several years. The group is still unprepared militarily and politically to start capturing and governing cities. We should not assume that JNIM even wants to do so, as the last time its predecessor tried this in 2012, it led to a strategic setback at the hands of an international intervention. These factors together mean the current most likely trajectory is toward a Somalia-like fragmented state scenario, although negotiations, internal rivalries, and international intervention create a wide range of possible outcomes. If the last several decades are anything

to go by, Mali's transformation into Somalia instead of Afghanistan is of little consolation, which is why the international community must remain engaged and look for opportunities to alter this trajectory so that Mali does not become another epicenter of seemingly perpetual regional instability.

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Local Expansion, Transnational Interests? The Evolution of the Islamic State's Sahel Province

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ON MARCH 25, 2026, SPANISH AND MOROCCAN AUTHORITIES announced the arrest of a small Islamic State cell operating in both countries. Based between Tangiers in Morocco and Mallorca in Spain, the three-person cell seems to have had a dual role, according to readouts from authorities in both countries. First, it provided logistical and financial support to two key Islamic State affiliates, the Islamic State's Sahel Province (ISSP) and the Islamic State in Somalia (IS-S). In addition, the leader of the cell, whom authorities apprehended in Mallorca, was reportedly planning lone-actor-style attacks in Spain. The Span-

ish police believed the whole cell was part of a coordinated structure dedicated to financing, logistics, and operational planning.¹

The existence of the Spanish-Moroccan cell with multiple roles fits a consistent pattern that has emerged in recent years. The Islamic State on the African continent is divided into multiple provincial affiliates overseen by a few overarching bureaucratic structures that advise and/or administer major affairs in designated zones.² It has apparently been using the Maghreb to support its wings in West and East Africa. This fits into a broader pattern in which provincial African affiliates support far-flung operations of the Islamic State via financing or logistics despite operating principally in rural areas,³ and smaller cells on the continent (officially unconnected to the larger provincial insurgencies) likewise facilitate international plots.⁴ As we argue in this article, the ISSP risks becoming a more important node in the global Islamic State architecture. It may even develop its own capacity for external operations as a result of its growing integration with a regional Islamic State office (al-Furqan), coordination with neighboring provinces, and repurposing of historical trans-Saharan militant and smuggling networks for global operations.⁵

The ISSP has evolved through multiple stages since 2016. Having now consolidated a degree of territory and manpower in the Sahel, the province may directly support the global ambitions of the organization. The Islamic State's overall leadership, for its part, hasn't been able to launch any major international operations since 2024, when the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), based in Afghanistan and Pakistan, facilitated and planned several attacks in the West.⁶ The group's leadership may therefore be looking for new provinces to serve as launchpads for external attacks. With this background in mind, observers should not downplay the arrests of cells in Spain and Morocco, even if they still lack more specific details about the nature of the plots those cells were involved in.

This article aims to assess ISSP's historical trajectory up to the present day in light of an emerging pattern in other Islamic State affiliates in Africa and Asia. The pattern suggests the evolution ISSP is undergoing creates a risk of increasing transnationalization. Europe, in particular, will likely be at greater risk of violence directed, facilitated, or inspired by ISSP in the coming years. While ISSP's present role in external operations remains uncertain, we argue that it would be risky to assume this group will remain a localized jihadist insurgency. In the following sections, we provide an overview of ISSP's historical evolution and analyze the available evidence, incomplete as it may be, of the group's growing external ambitions.

Origins, History, Background

ISSP'S BEGINNINGS CAN BE TRACED TO FORMER AL-QAEDA AFFILIATED GROUPS THAT operated in Algeria, Libya, and Mali in the early and mid-2010s, specifically the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), which was connected to al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).⁷ These groups were themselves descended from the remnants of groups that had fought in the Algerian civil war in the 1990s.

The founding leader of ISSP was Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi. First a member of the secular Western Saharan rebel movement Polisario Front, al-Sahrawi joined MUJAO in the early 2010s and then joined al-Mourabitoune, a merger group consisting of MUJAO and another AQIM-linked jihadist group. In May 2015, as the Islamic State was at its height in the Middle East and was attracting defections from al-Qaeda-aligned jihadists the world over, al-Sahrawi pledged an oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to then-Caliph of the Islamic State Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State accepted the pledge in October 2016, releasing the video of Sahrawi's bay'ah as he stood among a small group of militants, signifying the Islamic State's humble beginnings in the Sahel.⁸

ISSP's lineage connects the present movement to long-standing trans-Saharan networks and relationships, particularly involving Arabs and Tuaregs in northern Mali and Niger. The group's current operational zones coincide with old pastoral and smuggling networks, and al-Sahrawi reserved most of its leadership spots for Sahrawis and Arabs.⁹ ISSP formed in 2015 as a splinter of these existing jihadist networks and subsequently began operating in parts of Gao and Menaka provinces in Mali. At this time, it was already operating in familiar terrain. The group knew many of the clan networks and smuggling structures that AQIM and MUJAO had long invested in, though it took several years of hard-fought gains to win over many of these recruiting and logistical networks from the more entrenched al-Qaeda affiliates.¹⁰ The logistical infrastructure of the current ISSP threat therefore predates the organization by decades.

Initially known as the Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), the group quickly established itself in border areas of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the so-called Liptako-Gourma triangle. Its first major attempted operation was a failed prison break in Koutoukale outside the Nigerien capital of Niamey on October 17, 2016.¹¹ A year later, in October 2017, the group gained greater international notoriety after its fighters ambushed a patrol of U.S. and Nigerien special forces in Niger's remote region of Tongo-Tongo, resulting in the death

of four U.S. soldiers. The Islamic State's media outlets heavily publicized that attack and published footage from a body camera worn by one of the deceased American soldiers.¹² The attack prompted the U.S. military to revise the posture of its troops in Niger to confine them to training and drone operation rather than patrols and combat operations.¹³

ISGS continued to grow in the late 2010s and eventually came into conflict with its al-Qaeda rivals in the Sahel, who had reorganized under the umbrella group JNIM in 2017. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) noted a significant uptick of armed incidents involving ISGS, from a handful of incidents in 2017 to dozens in 2018 and 2019 to over 100 from 2020 onward. The latter correlated with the start of the group's protracted conflict with JNIM.¹⁴ Yet in the first few years of ISSP's existence, the Sahel had witnessed an uneasy truce between al-Qaeda/JNIM-affiliated forces and the small Islamic State splinter, which researchers called "the Sahelian exception" to distinguish it from the broader global trend of conflict between al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates across Syria, Somalia, Yemen, and Afghanistan at the time.¹⁵ This exception ended when ISGS became too strong for JNIM to ignore and forced JNIM to push back.¹⁶

The Islamic State subordinated ISGS in 2019 under the umbrella of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the powerful affiliate based in northeastern Nigeria, to facilitate its own expansion across West Africa. While ISGS maintained its autonomy, it benefited from resources and coordination with ISWAP under this organizational restructuring.¹⁷

As early as 2019, United Nations (UN) experts reported that ISWAP and ISGS may have coordinated in a joint assault in Tongo-Tongo in May of that year. They also mentioned unverified reports that the two provincial affiliates were establishing a coordination cell in Sokoto state in northwestern Nigeria, presaging increased coordination in northwestern Nigeria in the 2020s.¹⁸ Access to commercial routes from northern Nigeria enabled the group to supply its fighters in Mali and Niger with motorcycles and other vital supplies, circumventing motorcycle bans in parts of the Sahel and providing cheap mobile transport as it sought to overrun remote security outposts and expand its footprint across the two countries.¹⁹

ISGS was at this time trying to develop multiple avenues to expand beyond the Sahel. In February 2022, UN experts first reported claims of possible ISGS warehouses in Ghana, Togo, and Benin that were used to supply the group's fighters further north in the Sahel. They also reported supposed sightings of ISGS fighters in Benin, where JNIM was increasingly active at the time (and

has been since).²⁰ In March of that year, the Islamic State administratively renamed its Sahelian affiliate ISSP, distinguishing it from ISWAP and “elevating” the Sahel to provincial status. Then, in July, ISSP claimed its first attacks in Benin, following in JNIM’s footsteps.²¹

However, a combination of Western counterterrorism efforts and jihadist infighting checked the extent to which ISGS could expand its territory. U.S. forces regularly monitored and bombed the Islamic State’s affiliate in Libya, which was an important logistics hub for both ISWAP and ISSP.²² The French military had deployed several thousand soldiers to Mali since 2013 and helped check the advance of the ISGS through an offensive launched in 2020, though it could not eliminate the group altogether. JNIM, meanwhile, was also a major factor in preventing ISGS from gaining ground, and both groups suffered hundreds of casualties in factional clashes from 2020 onward.²³

The Coup Belt and Consequences of Armed Takeovers

ANY PROGRESS AGAINST ISGS PROVED SHORT-LIVED, HOWEVER. POLITICAL AND geopolitical changes between 2020 and 2023 allowed ISGS and JNIM not only to survive the onslaught of foreign and local military pressure but also to expand in different directions. Successive coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in early and late 2022, and, finally, in Niger in July 2023 contributed to a security vacuum that JNIM and ISGS were quick to exploit.²⁴

Malian junta leader Assimi Goïta’s most consequential decision was to expel French forces operating in the country and invite the Russian Wagner Group in their stead. This expulsion had military as well as political effects on Mali’s internal security. The Russian mercenaries began arriving in 2021, quickly proving themselves a violent force willing to conduct mass executions of civilians.²⁵ Their arrival has significantly changed how local forces operate against various communities, particularly minority groups such as Tuaregs and Peul, whom authorities had long suspected of being infiltrated by jihadists. No longer constrained by French oversight but instead emboldened by Wagner, Malian forces engaged in indiscriminate violence against these communities, worsening popular grievances against the state.²⁶ In Burkina Faso, the new

military regime from late 2022 onward took a similar approach (albeit without direct Wagner support), engaging in widespread violence against ethnic Peul that resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties.²⁷

When the French withdrew from Mali in 2022, they left behind major bases and took important intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities with them that Wagner could not replace. Goïta also asked MINUSMA, a UN peacekeeping force, to leave in 2023, which undermined a fragile truce in the north between the Malian state and Tuareg rebels (albeit a truce that was deeply unpopular among many Malians).²⁸

The military regime in Burkina Faso ordered the French to leave soon after Paris left Mali, and when the final coup occurred in Niger in July 2023, the new junta in Niamey followed the other two military governments in asking French and U.S. forces to withdraw. All three juntas withdrew from the G5-Sahel, a regional military alliance supported by the EU and France, effectively dissolving the organization.²⁹ The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Niger was particularly significant given the extensive ISR capabilities they took with them, leaving the new Nigerien junta lacking good coverage of its borders and key smuggling zones, especially the tri-border region with Libya and Chad known as the Salvador Triangle.³⁰ Moreover, the palace coup that overthrew President Bazoum in Niger in July 2023 ended one of the few relatively calibrated and effective strategies at containing violence in the Sahel: Bazoum had balanced hard power with limited dialogue with jihadists as well as Western-supported demobilization and development programs. These efforts had helped to make Niger the only Sahelian state in which violence was on the decline in the first half of 2023.³¹ The military junta that replaced Bazoum, by contrast, embraced the same militaristic and dragnet approach to the conflict as the military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso.

ISSP Expands Geographically

THESE CHANGING POLITICAL CONDITIONS ACROSS THE SAHEL FACILITATED AN expansion by both JNIM and ISSP that was already underway by 2021. In August 2023, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies assessed that the number of people killed in Mali and Burkina Faso had tripled since January 2022 and that JNIM and ISSP had expanded their areas of operation.³² The picture in

Niger likewise deteriorated after the coup there; jihadists increased their presence in southwestern Niger and entrenched themselves across the Niger-Nigeria border.³³

Repeated attempts at leadership decapitation have not effectively stymied ISSP's expansion. French forces killed al-Sahrawi, the first emir of ISGS/ISSP, in an air strike in the tri-border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in August 2021.³⁴ As the historical records of conflicts in the Sahel, Somalia, Afghanistan, and other areas show, eliminating a founder or a key operative may help disrupt his networks. But jihadists tend to decentralize their group infrastructure, which makes them resilient to targeted strikes as commanders are swiftly replaced.

By June 2024, UN experts estimated ISSP's strength at 2,000–3,000 fighters conducting sustained operations across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger while slowly entrenching their presence in northwestern Nigeria (ISWAP may have been aiding ISSP in this latter effort).³⁵ These manpower figures are rough estimates given the methodological challenges of tracking group expansion. But the overall trendlines point to a more organizationally capable group that is more globally integrated within the Islamic State's worldwide structure than ever before.

In June 2025, ISSP conducted a multi-zone offensive in Niger, underscoring its expansion there following similar efforts to expand in Mali's Mena-ka and Burkina Faso's Dori region.³⁶ In each case, it sought to entrench its hold over rural areas and start applying its governance (discussed further in the next section). An offensive in April 2026 by JNIM and Tuareg rebels in Kidal in northern Mali similarly helped ISSP conduct a brief incursion into the towns of Labbezanga and the capital of Menaka region before withdrawing under Russian military pressure.³⁷ In May 2026, the Islamic State confirmed analysts' long-standing speculation for the first time in its *al-Naba'* newsletter: ISSP had expanded into northwestern Nigeria via the Niger border.³⁸ While claiming attacks in Sokoto and Kebbi states from previous months, the group admitted that the lack of reporting of its advances into that part of Nigeria was a deliberate strategy to maintain operational security.³⁹ The announcement came some six months after U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) conducted its first air strike in Nigeria, hitting what it described as "ISIS camps" in Sokoto state on Christmas day.⁴⁰ These strikes and ISSP's subsequent public acknowledgment of operations in northwestern Nigeria point to a growing convergence of jihadist conflicts in West Africa that observers have long feared.

Governance and Legitimacy

WHEN ANALYZING ISSP'S RISE, IT IS IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT ITS STRENGTH increasingly comes from governance measures. Though often brutal compared to those of its major rival, JNIM, such measures allow the group to enforce internal discipline and consolidate influence over many of the territories it operates in. This governance involves collecting taxes, managing markets, administering justice (particularly through Hisbah morality police), and enforcing sharia law, mirroring the former caliphate's administrative structures.⁴¹ According to local reports from Mali's Menaka region, the organization has hired masons to rehabilitate damaged infrastructure in villages under its rule, maintained water reservoirs, and established new rules aimed at bolstering the local economy, indicating an evolution as the group attempts to present a more agreeable image to local populations.⁴² Analysts from the International Crisis Group have found similar results from field research in Tillabéri province in Niger, including evidence that some women support ISSP's rule despite the strict gender norms they enforce. The financial opportunities that ISSP provides also make the group appealing to young men in rural communities who have often been priced out of the marriage market through high bride prices.⁴³

Notably, ISWAP, arguably the most powerful Islamic State affiliate in the world today, developed a similar system of governance in the late 2010s, which likely served as a useful example for the Sahel wing.⁴⁴ It is possible that ISSP also adopted elements of governance from the Islamic State's Libyan province, which briefly controlled several coastal cities in the country in the mid-2010s. The Libyan group has a long history of advising ISWAP on military-technical matters,⁴⁵ which may have, in turn, influenced ISWAP's guidance toward ISSP via the coordination of the regional al-Furqan office.

Despite some advances in recent years toward a slightly more "population-centric" strategy, ISSP rules through coercion and fear as much as through legitimacy. The group's security and intelligence wing, known as Amniyat and modeled after the internal security apparatus the Islamic State previously employed in its supposed caliphate, monitors the actions and movement of populations under the group's control and conducts reconnaissance in new frontiers of expansion.⁴⁶ Whether by coercion, legitimacy-building, or some combination of the two, territorial control and influence over local populations allow

ISSP to tap into more recruiting networks and present itself as a successful jihadist statelet within the Islamic State information ecosystem. For example, in an edition of *al-Naba'* from 2024, the Islamic State claimed that ISSP had distributed over 27,000 pamphlets covering jurisprudence, creed, and various other topics alongside audio recordings for the illiterate in its territory in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The article also highlighted how ISSP's Hisbah had delivered "sharia-approved" clothing for women.⁴⁷ While these claims cannot be independently verified, they point to ISSP's desire to present itself as emulating the same *modus operandi* known from the earlier days of the "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁸

The Architecture of Internationalization

ACCORDING TO MOROCCAN INTELLIGENCE, BEFORE HIS DEATH IN A FRENCH airstrike in 2021, al-Sahrawi had already constructed ISSP's external operations wing. This claim was revealed in a February 2025 briefing by the director of the Moroccan intelligence service, in which he announced the arrest of a complex ISSP-operated network in nine Moroccan cities. This cell had in recent weeks smuggled weapons from Mali into the country for imminent terrorist plots (according to the director, the weapons were wrapped in Malian newspapers dated from late January 2025). According to Moroccan authorities, the cell had first operated under the guidance of al-Sahrawi and, after al-Sahrawi's death, had been managed by a Libyan Sahel-based commander known as Abderrahmane Sahraoui who acted as the head of ISSP's External Operations Committee.⁴⁹ These claims by the Moroccan authorities would benefit from further verification, but it is notable that independent reporting from Mali indicates the creation of an *Amniyat* (internal security) wing within ISSP in recent years.⁵⁰ The *Amniyat* has held external attack planning roles within other "provinces" of the Islamic State, including in Syria during the height of the "caliphate."⁵¹ It is therefore likely that any External Operations Committee operates under the *Amniyat*.

Libya's role in facilitating ISSP operations—and the Islamic State's ambitions in Africa more broadly—is multifaceted. Islamic State cells in Libya re-

portedly engage in illicit dollar trading, infiltrate online spaces including TikTok to spread propaganda and recruit, and facilitate the smuggling of jihadists from the Middle East or elsewhere into/through Africa, including to Islamic State camps in Somalia, the Sahel, or Lake Chad Basin.⁵²

The Libyan role in this architecture has deep roots. The Islamic State's central leadership had dispatched a significant contingent of fighters from Iraq to Libya in 2014, establishing a hub for African and Mediterranean operations.⁵³ After American and European air strikes in support of local forces pushed the Islamic State from Libyan cities like Sirte in 2016, the remnant Islamic State-Libya networks maintained logistical connectivity with Sahelian affiliates. Mentions of Abu Adnan Walid al-Sahrawi's links to Libya go back at least as far as 2017, when Libya was still a key theater of the Islamic State.⁵⁴ Al-Sahrawi himself stated in one of his interviews in Islamic State's weekly *al-Naba'* that Libya was a part of an interconnected axis that enables and supports interaction between Islamic State branches, among them the Nigerian and Sahelian branches.⁵⁵ With the decline of the Islamic State in Libya since the mid-2010s, al-Anfal, the regional office previously stationed there, was relegated to al-Furqan, which expanded to include Libya in 2024.⁵⁶ In 2023, the U.S. Department of State designated Abu Bakr al-Minuki, a Nigerian ISWAP commander, as a senior leader in al-Furqan and suggested he was based in ISSP territory, indicating he may have relocated from Nigeria.⁵⁷

By early 2026, the UN Monitoring Team reported that al-Minuki may have been promoted to the overall head of the General Directors of Provinces, following earlier reports that he may have been elevated to a role on the Islamic State's Global Shura Council alongside longtime ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi.⁵⁸ On the other side of the continent, the Somalia-based al-Karrar office, led by the founder of IS-S, Abdulqadir Mumin, has overseen the coordination of Islamic State activities across a wide swath of eastern, central, and southern Africa and has been implicated in financial and logistical support for Islamic State operations further afield in the Middle East and beyond.⁵⁹ These two offices appear to be connected in multiple ways: The suspects arrested by Moroccan authorities in Tangiers in March 2026, mentioned at the start of this article, were reportedly involved in a financing enterprise that combined support for ISSP and IS-S, gathering funds and then sending them to both affiliates. We cannot reliably determine which node in the Islamic State structure commanded this cell, however.

In addition to Libya and the Lake Chad Basin, Sudan has emerged as a logistical and financial base for the Islamic State, likely serving to facilitate the

movement of fighters and funds across cells in Africa and the Middle East.⁶⁰ Ethiopian authorities have also recently arrested large cells purportedly linked to the Islamic State,⁶¹ while Ethiopians constitute a major source of recruits within IS-S.⁶² The ongoing civil war in Sudan, combined with persistent instability in Libya and Ethiopia, create a volatile regional environment that Islamic State cells can exploit despite intermittent counterterrorism pressure, including U.S. air strikes in places like Puntland in northern Somalia and, more recently, a U.S.-Nigerian special forces raid that killed al-Minuki in May 2026.⁶³ (It remains to be seen how his death may disrupt Islamic State plans and what changes may result.)

While the exact relationship between the different Islamic State nodes in western, central, and eastern Africa remains difficult to parse, one thing is becoming clearer: Coordination is growing between ISSP and ISWAP under the auspices of the al-Furqan office. ISSP's bold attack on the airport in Niamey in January 2026 appeared to show this coordination given the accents of the fighters in the official Islamic State attack video and the tactics they employed, including the use of armed drones.⁶⁴ West Africa is therefore witnessing an increasingly coordinated and operationally effective alliance between the Islamic State insurgencies in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin at the same time as logistical and financial cells remain active from Morocco to Libya, Sudan, and Somalia.

Morocco and Spain

BOTH MOROCCO AND SPAIN HAVE EMERGED AS AN IMPORTANT HUB CONNECTING Islamic State affiliates in Africa with supporter networks in Europe.⁶⁵ The Islamic State's focus on this geography stems from several factors.

First, the historical Andalus, a Muslim-dominated region of the Iberian Peninsula that existed throughout the Middle Ages, holds an important part in the jihadist imaginary and often features in Islamic State propaganda.⁶⁶ Secondly, the geography of the region is important for facilitating the movement of supporters and fighters. The land borders with Ceuta and Melilla, Spain's North African enclaves, provide the only overland crossings between

African and European soil, which can be exploited as transit routes.⁶⁷ The Islamic State has also drawn recruits from Morocco and Spain, the latter of which has a large North Africa diaspora, many of whom immigrated during the Syrian Civil War.⁶⁸ Morocco, however, has been the greater source of recruits of the two to date. Even after the peak of the Syrian civil war, this trend continued: In January 2025, the Moroccan intelligence director stated that over 130 jihadists had departed the country for Islamic State affiliates Sahel and Somalia in recent years.⁶⁹

Arrests in both Morocco and Spain over the past six years point to a threat that has evolved. Between 2020 and 2022, authorities dismantled Islamic State networks that they described as involved in fundraising and recruitment but typically did not specify which provincial affiliate of the Islamic State these cells were supporting.⁷⁰ That began to change from 2022 onward as Moroccan and Spanish authorities provided details of cells, mostly comprising North Africans, that were multiplying and increasingly attempting to facilitate the movement of fighters to the Sahel.⁷¹ The arrest of cells in March 2026 may represent a further evolution, as one of the suspects, based in the Spanish town of Mallorca, was reportedly planning attacks there while also overseeing an advanced logistics network across the two countries.⁷² This would indicate increasing sophistication of the Islamic State cells in the two countries, although it requires further cases to establish a genuine pattern rather than a single data point.

Nonetheless, the available evidence points to a growing two-way logistics and recruitment network in Spain and Morocco that could facilitate the movement of more foreign fighters to African affiliates or, conceivably, from African affiliates into Europe. Reliable figures on the presence of foreign fighters within Islamic State affiliates in Africa are lacking. However, research indicates that many fighters within IS-S are foreigners, albeit mostly East Africans.⁷³ And over the past year, ISWAP has begun to release footage of Arab and North African fighters in its camps for the first time.⁷⁴ Coupled with the reports of various Islamic State-linked cells that were attempting to move individuals into Mali, and against the broader backdrop of long-standing connections between ISSP and Libyan and North African militant networks, our picture of the foreign fighter presence within Africa's Islamic State affiliates may be highly incomplete.⁷⁵ U.S. counterterrorism operations in Africa, particularly in Somalia and more recently in Nigeria, may also result in shifts in foreign fighter migration on the continent via these nodes described above.

Conclusion

THE REGIONAL SECURITY PICTURE IN THE SAHEL IS DISPIRITING. RECENT EVENTS IN Mali, Niger, and Nigeria are a source of major concern. In January 2026, ISSP, apparently supported by ISWAP fighters (as noted previously), launched a daring attack on the international airport in Niamey in which they destroyed several aircraft.⁷⁶ In April 2026, JNIM and its allies in the Tuareg FLA rebel group launched coordinated assaults on key towns in Mali, including the capital Bamako. While the militants did not ultimately seize Bamako, they successfully took control of several large towns and killed Mali's defense minister.⁷⁷ ISSP took advantage of the chaos to temporarily seize certain towns in Mali when Malian military and Africa Corps mercenaries withdrew.⁷⁸ Given lingering questions about the size and role of foreign fighters within ISSP, there is reason to worry that these worsening local conditions in the Sahel could, over time, generate new threats outside the region. The threat posed by foreign fighter "returnees" to their country of origin is always difficult to predict, but it is notable that Europe has already dealt with this problem before. For example, the jihadists who attacked the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester in 2017 had previously fought in Libya.⁷⁹

The existing regional and international security mechanisms have the capacity to contain this growing threat, but it will require sustained focus and energy. The Morocco-Spain bilateral security relationship is the most important counterterrorism mechanism currently preventing ISSP's Moroccan and Spanish networks from executing attacks. Its operational model—consisting of 31 joint operations since 2014 as well as 150 arrests and continuous intelligence sharing—is an encouraging example of a decade-long investment.⁸⁰

U.S. airstrikes against suspected ISSP militants in northwestern Nigeria in December 2025 demonstrate that the United States retains the capacity and will for targeted action against Islamic State infrastructure in West Africa even after the loss of the Agadez base in 2023. That capacity should be sustained and expanded through alternative basing and intelligence arrangements. The Ivory Coast-based ISR collection that enabled the Sokoto strikes suggests one model, while support of French special forces in forest operations in Benin suggests another.⁸¹ Policymakers should resist the temptation to frame counterterrorism options in Africa exclusively through the lens of a large-footprint presence; the post-Agadez evidence suggests targeted action from alternative platforms remains possible and effective. The logistics corridors within Libya

require sustained policy attention of a sort they are not currently receiving. Any serious long-term strategy for containing the ISSP cannot succeed without progress in stabilizing Libya. The transnational nature of threats from the Sahel also requires increasing the sharing of intelligence (including financial intelligence) between Europe and North Africa and closing jurisdictional gaps between Moroccan and European legal frameworks.⁸²

ISSP is certainly not, as of 2026, an international threat on par with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria during the latter's operational height in the mid-2010s. Cells that Moroccan and/or Spanish authorities have arrested have ranged in size from a handful to a dozen members. But the barriers to broader internationalization are lower than they were a few years ago. ISSP is already well linked to logistics corridors that span Africa and connect to Europe, and there is no guarantee that the foreign fighters who move across these networks will choose to remain in Africa.

The threat is evolving, and nothing is certain—the demands of local expansion and competition with JNIM could mean ISSP remains focused on local objectives for the foreseeable future. But it is just as easy to imagine that a weakening of Islamic State affiliates elsewhere could lead the Islamic State's leadership to encourage ISSP to facilitate international attacks. The question is whether the counterterrorism architecture that has so far prevented the Islamic State from striking more frequently in Europe can maintain its effectiveness as the threat matures. The answer to that question is likewise uncertain but is rooted in various policy choices as well as the West's collective ability to understand this evolving threat.

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When Religion Becomes Governance: The Kadyrov Case

Inal Sherip

THE HISTORY OF AHMAD AND RAMZAN KADYROV, THE SUCCESSIVE presidents of Russia's Chechen Republic since 2003, is not merely a family chronicle of Chechen power. It is also a telling case of how a state seeks to turn religion into a technology of governance—and how, over time, that very technology begins to work against it. In Chechnya, the Russian state institutionalized “traditional Islam” as a stabilizing political force: It was supposed to neutralize competing religious networks and furnish the Kremlin with a controllable form of Islamic legitimacy. But this very project, when pushed to its limits, has also revealed the boundaries of state-co-opted Islam.

The Soviet and Post-Soviet Models of Governing Islam

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES ON THE KADYROVS, TWO OF THE LEADING FIGURES IN CHECHEN politics since the 1990s. Ahmad Kadyrov was a former mufti who switched sides during the second Chechen war and became Moscow's main ally in

Chechnya. After his assassination in 2004, his son Ramzan Kadyrov took over and built a system centered on personal loyalty, security control, and public religion. For that reason, the Chechen case matters not only as a regional story but as a way of explaining how the Russian state has tried to manage Islam by supporting “approved” religious actors and using religion as part of political control.

It is impossible to understand the trajectory of the Kadyrovs without the basic framework into which they were embedded. In Russia, Islam has historically been not simply a religion but a domain of politics. It has been part of the history of the Russian state for centuries since large Muslim populations lived within its borders long before the Soviet period. This Muslim presence grew even further as the Russian Empire expanded into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Chechens usually associate “traditional Islam” with Sufi brotherhoods (above all, the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya), the cult of religious sheikhs, and practices deeply intertwined with *adat*, the system of local customs, behavioral norms, and patriarchal prescriptions. In this form, religion becomes not only a spiritual practice but also a social regulator—a language of morality, status, and the “proper” way of life, which the state easily integrates into a policy of order.

During the Soviet period, the state constructed a system that permitted religious life only in forms that it strictly limited through official structures, personnel selection, and constant surveillance. This system was a technology of governance that combined three tasks: minimizing independent religious mobilization inside the country, controlling contacts with the wider Islamic world, and using “official Islam” as an instrument of foreign-policy representation.

Institutionally, this model rested on official spiritual administrations and a limited set of educational channels.¹ The state preferred to create a small number of authorized religious figures who could serve as intermediaries, transmitting loyalty, disciplining communities, and signaling to the state the mood within the religious milieu. At the same time, supervision did not necessarily take the form of direct interference in doctrine. More important were registration, approval of personnel, control over public religiosity, and monitoring of contacts.

Official Islam also functioned as a foreign-policy showcase. The state could display Soviet Muslims and religious organizations externally as proof of “religious freedom” and as a channel of communication with countries of the Islamic world. Yet this external dimension almost always coexisted with an

internal dimension of control: Participation in international contacts and religious diplomacy presupposed selection and surveillance. In the language of governance, this was a combination of “asset abroad / monitored at home,” a useful resource in foreign policy and a potentially risky resource inside the country.

After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the underlying logic did not disappear but adapted instead. The state’s monopoly over the religious field broke down; transnational preaching, funding, and educational networks expanded; competition among interpretations within Islam intensified; and, in the North Caucasus, religion became closely bound up with post-conflict politics and the question of political legitimacy. Yet the state’s response largely continued the Soviet reflex: to expand the space of official/traditional Islam as a manageable partner while narrowing the space of autonomous religious networks, now in the language of security.

The key distinction of the post-Soviet phase was the dominance of securitization. Islam ceased to be merely one of many controlled spheres of (what would otherwise be) civil society and became part of a counterterrorist and anti-extremist architecture. Umbrella labels such as “Wahhabism” and “Salafism” entered political language; in practical politics, however, these were often used not as theological categories but as convenient labels for undesirable practices and autonomous groups. This does not mean the Russian state invented the phenomenon of radicalism, as it did indeed exist in certain circles. Rather, it was inclined to translate a broad spectrum of religious differences into the category of threat and govern through coercive and administrative instruments.

This model operates through three linkages. The first is institutional: support for the “correct” muftiates, personnel policy, and the symbolic recognition of traditional Islam as the norm. The second is coercive: law enforcement and security service filtering of the religious field, including practices of prevention, pressure, and persecution under the umbrella of anti-extremism. The third is patronal: financial and symbolic investments, such as mosques and public religious ceremonies, that bind the religious establishment to the political.

Chechnya became the extreme case of this construction because here official/traditional Islam became not merely a partner of the state but an embedded part of the post-Second Chechen War regime. This is why the figure of Akhmad Kadyrov matters not only as a biography but as a function—an intermediary through whom the state could speak to society in a religious language and as the heir to a governing project in which Islam functions as an instrument of control. However, in recent years, the Chechen case shows how

such an instrument can begin to acquire its own autonomy and external cost for the Russian state.

Akhmad Kadyrov

Chechnya after the collapse of the USSR, and especially under conditions of war, sharply increased demand for religious intermediaries. The religious field became competitive: Various groups claimed the right to speak in the name of “authentic” Islam, while religion became ever more tightly linked to questions of power, resistance, violence, and external support. In such an environment, the status of mufti becomes a resource that the state seeks either to neutralize or to incorporate into its own architecture.

Akhmad Kadyrov was one of the central religious and political figures in Chechnya in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He received his religious education within the official Soviet Islamic system, which the state security services closely monitored. Before the war, Chechnya was a secular state governed by secular law, and its conflict with Russia was primarily a national liberation struggle. Kadyrov changed that in a fundamental way. By officially declaring jihad against Russia, he gave the war a religious character and helped move it out of a mainly national and anti-colonial frame into a religious one. This was not just a change of language. It affected how observers understood the war both inside and outside Chechnya, deepening religious mobilization at home while pushing away part of the Western public that had been ready to sympathize with a secular struggle for self-determination. He later broke with the supporters of Chechen independence, aligned himself with Moscow, and became the head of the pro-Russian Chechen administration.

At first glance, Akhmad Kadyrov’s decision to side with Moscow in 1999 may have seemed unexpected, especially to those who remembered his earlier rhetoric, including his declaration of jihad against Russia, and his role in the Chechen struggle. But taking into account his life trajectory, and above all the trajectory of religious education within the institutions of official Islam, makes this turn appear more logical than eccentric. Much more surprising would have been the opposite, if a man formed within the system of managed religious bureaucracy had maintained to the very end a line of religious resistance.

Kadyrov’s subsequent career, his administrative rise and his transformation into the central figure of the new Chechen regime, demonstrates another mechanism of co-optation: the translation of religious authority into state

power. From this moment onward, religious legitimation becomes built into the regime itself. If previously the state could manage religion from the outside—through oversight and bureaucracy—now religious symbolic capital is located within the institution of power itself.

This is precisely why Kadyrov's assassination on May 9, 2004, at Dynamo Stadium in Moscow was more than a turning point in family history. The official narrative linked the attack to the armed underground; in particular, Russian officials made much of a statement by Shamil Basayev claiming responsibility for the explosion.² At the same time, the Chechen resistance was already advancing an alternative narrative: Chechen president in exile Aslan Maskhadov publicly stated that the killing may have been carried out by "those who put him in power"—that is, the Russian authorities and the FSB—and pointed to the low plausibility of successfully planting an explosive device in a heavily guarded area without internal assistance.³

According to the Chechen resistance's interpretation of Kadyrov's assassination, his influence had grown markedly by 2003–4: He increasingly appeared to be an independent figure capable of shaping his own line rather than merely executing the Kremlin's will. According to Akhmed Zakayev, prime minister in exile of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Akhmad Kadyrov's relations with the Kremlin had by that point deteriorated, and Moscow may have concluded that he needed to be eliminated as a player who had become too strong and less manageable.⁴ This theory has not been confirmed, but it is important as an indicator of how the state interprets risks within a system of co-opted Islam. Religious-political intermediaries whom the state initially embedded in its stabilization project may, as they consolidate power, come to be perceived by the center as potentially autonomous actors—and therefore as objects of internal bureaucratic competition.

Akhmad Kadyrov's death raised the question of succession in more ways than one: Who would preserve the same configuration of traditional Islam with coercive stabilization and loyalty to the center? Succession became possible because the mission itself had been institutionally defined. The Russian state, together with the new Chechen authorities, had established "traditional Islam" in the Chechen variant—centered around Sufi brotherhoods and *adat*—as a cultural-religious platform of order. In such a system, the successor does not need to be a theologian. It is enough for him to become the holder of the apparatus of coercion and patronage to speak in a religious language on behalf of the regime.

This is where the key bridge to Ramzan Kadyrov emerged. He inherited not a theological tradition but a governing technology—Islam as an instrument both

to suppress competitors and to produce legitimacy. In other words, Akhmad Kadyrov represented the stage at which the Russian state successfully turned Islam into a pillar of the regime and acquired a religious intermediary who helped close off the field from rivals. The next stage, Ramzan, showed that this construction has limits: An instrument embedded in the apparatus of power begins to accumulate autonomy, external connections, and reputational costs for the center. This is what turns the history of the Kadyrovs from a regional chronicle into a lesson in the limits of state-co-opted Islam.

Ramzan Kadyrov

The assassination of Akhmad Kadyrov in 2004, judging by Moscow's subsequent actions, did not catch the Kremlin off guard. Succession occurred almost immediately, which looks more like the implementation of a prearranged scenario than improvisation in a vacuum. For the center, it was crucial to preserve the very construction that Moscow and Grozny had by then managed to build around traditional Islam. Therefore, the state resolved the question of succession not around theological authority or independent political weight but around the degree of manageability and the ability to maintain the regime's function—to preserve order, define the “correct” religious norm, and neutralize competing networks of influence.

In this logic, the natural successor was Akhmad's son Ramzan Kadyrov, a young leader with limited formal administrative experience and without his own autonomous institutional base, whose legitimacy and stability depended decisively on Kremlin support. This made him a convenient operator of state-co-opted Islam, not the heir to a theological tradition but the executor of a political mission aimed at preserving control in the region.

From Moscow's perspective, succession after Akhmad was less a question of who would continue the father's line and more of who could preserve the technology of coercive control. Ramzan Kadyrov proved to be a suitable figure precisely because his power was built not on theology but on the apparatus of coercion and patronage—that is, on those resources that in this model matter more than religious competence. He could speak in the name of “tradition” by controlling institutions, personnel, public symbolism, and the distribution of benefits and thereby turn religious language into a language of loyalty.

In such a construction, “controlled Islam” plays a dual role. First, it sustains internal mobilization. It explains to society why this particular regime is law-

ful, morally justified, and “protective.” Second, it provides a foreign-policy facade. The region becomes a showcase for the claim that Russian power is supposedly capable of integrating Islam and governing a Muslim space without the disintegration of the state.

From this, Ramzan Kadyrov’s early style as a leader follows logically. He appeared not as a theologian but as an administrator of correctness. His role was to service the state project, demonstrating intransigence toward “extremism,” supporting Sufi infrastructure as a foundation of legitimacy, disciplining society, and at the same time reassuring the center that the region was under control. This logic explains why, at the early stage, his public rhetoric could be extremely aggressive. It served as a signal—both within the region and upward to the Kremlin—that the mission was being fulfilled.

Yet tension was already building. The more successfully a regional leader performs the role of the guarantor of controlled Islam, the more autonomy he accumulates in institutions, symbolism, resources, and contacts. Religious legitimization, once embedded in the regime, begins to live both an internal life and an external one because Islamic correctness is judged not only by Moscow and Grozny but also by global audiences. This is where the next stage emerges: from coercion, securitization, and internal discipline to external ties, symbolic politics, and conflicts over who gets to define Sunnism.

The Anti-Wahhabi Campaign as an Instrument of the Regime

IN THE EARLY STAGE OF RAMZAN KADYROV’S RULE, HIS KEY TASK WAS THE consolidation of the regime through control over the religious field. Here Islam functioned as a political instrument in the direct sense. It provided coercive politics with a moral language, made it possible to label opponents as threats to the “true faith,” and gave the regime a form of legitimacy that society perceived more strongly than abstract legal arguments. In post-conflict Chechnya, this logic was especially effective, as it fused the traumatic experience of war, fear of chaos, and the demand for order into a single frame, i.e., “the defense of tradition.”

It is important to clarify the terminology from the outset. Regional and federal discourse often use the words *Wahhabism* and *Salafism* as categories

that do not correspond to how members of those theological currents describe themselves. In practical politics, they are frequently synonyms for “uncontrolled religiosity,” “autonomous networks,” or “undesirable forms of Islamic practice” and hint at broader threats like “extremism” or “terrorism.” Therefore, in this article the term *Wahhabism* should be read as part of the official language of securitization, not as a precise theological classification.

In the public sphere, Ramzan Kadyrov’s regime constructed a “moral war” against “Wahhabism.” Although he had held such views earlier, they became an open and systematic part of his public political rhetoric only after his appointment on May 10, 2004, the day after his father’s killing, as first deputy chairman of the Government of the Chechen Republic, where he oversaw the security bloc. This approach showed the Kremlin that the Chechen authorities controlled the territory and would not allow the return of armed resistance in a religious guise. It showed society that the regime was the defender of correct Islam and traditional order. It showed elites within Chechnya that religious legitimacy belonged only to those embedded in the regime.

The anti-Wahhabi campaign was at the same time a campaign of social control, intervening in religious and cultural markers such as appearance, manner of behavior, and public practices. The regime, rather than theologians, assumed the right to define what is proper, which is precisely what distinguishes state-co-opted Islam from religious autonomy. Campaigns connected with women’s dress codes and with the imposition of “moral discipline” in public spaces occupied a special place in this logic. Human rights organizations documented cases of pressure and coercion in which “Islamic rules” were effectively imposed through threats, humiliation, and violence rather than through religious discourse and persuasion.⁵

The state built this system of control around a simple principle: Religious legitimacy had to be monopolized. If it declares traditional Islam the only correct form, then alternatives automatically become incorrect. This inevitably expands repression to include constant pressure, selective persecution, humiliation, and “preventive measures” aimed at dissuading any form of autonomous religious organization. Human rights organizations recorded cases of raids, detentions, and pressure on people based on outward appearance and religious practice, often describing such campaigns as struggles against “Wahhabism/Salafism” without offering any evidence that the targets of the raids were adherents to such movements.⁶

This strategy had practical meaning for the Kremlin. After the Second Chechen War, Moscow needed a symbolically convincing model of integration

to show that Islam in Russia was controllable and compatible with the Russian state. In this sense, Chechnya served as a showcase: The region was supposed to demonstrate a “successful Islamic norm” within the Russian state. But a showcase requires direction. Therefore, coercive stabilization in Chechnya was accompanied by religious staging. The state sought to prevent the emergence of autonomous religious authorities capable of producing alternative meanings that might compete with the regime. At this stage, Ramzan Kadyrov appeared as the most convenient operator of the model. His mission was to demonstrate that religion is under control and order is ensured.

But the more the Kremlin used Islam as an instrument of internal control (via the Kadyrov regime), the more it was forced to rely on religious symbolism as a source of legitimacy. And any stable source of religious legitimacy inevitably has an external dimension—in this case, interstate Islamic diplomacy and symbolic politics. Here we begin to see the limits of the model.

Islam as Soft Power and the Language of External Legitimacy

THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF STATE-CO-OPTED ISLAM IS ESPECIALLY VISIBLE where religious symbolism turns into the language of diplomacy. Once the authorities make traditional Islam part of the regime, they inevitably encounter global audiences for whom prestige, correctness, and status are not measured by Moscow. This is where a new type of capital arises—external, and specifically Middle Eastern capital—which strengthens the regional leader’s autonomy and simultaneously raises the cost of his politics for the center.

In order not to conflate different levels, it is important to clarify that by the “Islamic world” in this article, I mean above all the agency of states and interstate institutions, not the feelings of ordinary Muslims. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many Muslims around the world sincerely sympathized with the Chechens in their fight against Russia, but these Muslims did not possess the political weight to turn solidarity into decisions. In many countries, especially the Gulf monarchies, civil society is structurally weak and has almost no influence on foreign policy; therefore, sympathy “from below” is rarely converted into tangible foreign policy decisions by Middle Eastern states.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Chechen resistance counted on at least minimal institutional recognition and support from Islamic states and organizations. But in practice, this did not happen. The Chechen project of political representation did not receive institutional recognition in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and not a single Islamic state officially recognized Chechnya's independence despite appeals by Chechen representatives to the "Muslim world." On March 8, 2005, Aslan Maskhadov was killed in the village of Tolstoy-Yurt during a Russian special operation. Yet for many outside Russia, he remained a legitimate political figure. He had been elected president in 1997 in an internationally observed vote and had signed a peace treaty with Russian President Boris Yeltsin at the Kremlin.⁷ This is why many continued to see him not as a terrorist, as Moscow later portrayed him, but as an elected leader who had represented Chechnya in formal negotiations with Russia. Yet, already at the end of June 2005, instead of accepting the Chechen side in any form, the OIC granted Russia observer status within the organization.⁸

This outcome can also be read in the context of the post-9/11 climate. After September 11, many Islamic states became more cautious about conflicts that could associate them with jihadist language or with the broader discourse of terrorism. In this sense, the Kremlin's strategy was especially effective: By allowing the Chechen struggle to be framed in religious terms, and above all through Akhmad Kadyrov's April 1995 declaration of jihad against Russia, Moscow helped move the conflict out of a mainly national-liberation frame and into a religious one.⁹ That shift carried reputational costs for the Chechen side. It made even institutions such as the OIC more cautious and less willing to risk political or diplomatic costs by openly siding with Chechnya.

From the perspective of those holding idealistic expectations of "Islamic solidarity," this looks like inverted justice. At the moment of the Chechens' greatest need for substantive support from Islamic institutions, none was forthcoming, whereas Moscow gained institutional access to the platform of the Islamic world. But if one reads the OIC and "Islamic agency" as an extension of geopolitics, the situation is clearer. For most governments, it is more important to have a channel of communication and potential influence over Moscow than to support projects that would lead to direct confrontation with the Russian Federation and potentially produce instability. This is especially so when within Russia there exists a complex Muslim region that can become an object of negotiation and leverage—provided that external channels of influence exist, including through religious symbolism.¹⁰

The clearest form of this external capital that the Kadyrov dynasty was able to secure was not ordinary diplomatic meetings but symbolic religious recognition connected with the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and with sacred objects. For many years, the Gulf monarchies have used Islam as a form of soft power through high-level receptions, religious ceremonies, hajj-related privileges, and favorable media coverage. These gestures help create status in the Islamic world and provide a language through which to build and reinforce political relationships.

Thus, during Ramzan Kadyrov's official visit to Saudi Arabia in August 2007, King Abdullah received him and included him in a highly symbolic ritual setting: the ceremony of washing the Ka'aba. He received a fragment of the *kiswah*, the cloth covering the Ka'aba, as a gift, which in Saudi practice is understood as a special mark of honor.¹¹ Chechen state media presented these episodes as proof that Kadyrov enjoyed special access and recognition in the wider Muslim world. This is important because it showed that religious legitimacy had become a kind of political currency and that this currency had important issuers outside Russia. To international audiences, such gestures suggested that Kadyrov had a recognized place in the symbolic hierarchy of the Islamic world. They showed audiences inside Chechnya that his authority extended beyond Russia. And they demonstrated to Moscow that Kadyrov possessed external religious and political connections that could be useful but not always fully controllable.

Another telling case study emerges during the years of the Syrian civil war in the 2010s. Russian official statements and Kremlin readouts pointed to high-level contacts between Moscow and Riyadh during the Syrian crisis, in particular Vladimir Putin's meeting with Prince Bandar bin Sultan in August 2013.¹² A number of publications suggested they were discussing a deal: The Saudi government would tolerate Russia's position on Syria in return for Russian promises to help reduce threats associated with jihadist networks in the North Caucasus, especially regarding any jihadists from there who had traveled to Syria and Iraq. (Russian officials denied or distanced the Kremlin from such reports.¹³) The reported talks are notable as they underscore the extent to which, for external actors such as the Gulf States, Islam in the North Caucasus is not just an internal Russian matter but also a point of pressure and bargaining in relations with Moscow. Once the Kremlin turned Islam inside Russia into an instrument of governance, it also exposed that instrument to external Islamic diplomacy, in which Russia no longer shaped the rules alone. Put differently, if Putin presented the Kadyrov model as evidence of his ability

to manage Islam in the North Caucasus and contain radicalism there, then external actors such as Saudi Arabia would develop their expectations accordingly, putting new demands on the Putin regime.

Grozny 2016 and the Transformation of a Religious Definition into an International Conflict

IN AUGUST 2016, THE KADYROV GOVERNMENT HOSTED A MAJOR ISLAMIC conference in Grozny titled “Who Are Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Jama’a?” It brought together religious scholars and officials from Russia and abroad. The Chechen authorities presented it as an effort to define the boundaries of legitimate Sunni Islam.

The Kadyrov government clearly intended the conference to act as a form of norm-setting, to fix the boundaries of correct Sunnism and thereby strengthen traditional Islam as a state norm. But because the question of who can define true Sunnism goes far beyond Chechnya itself, the conference quickly drew attention across the wider Islamic world.¹⁴

In substantive terms, this episode is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that state-co-opted Islam inevitably strives for a monopoly not only over institutions and practices but also over the very definition of Islam. Second, it reveals the limit of that ambition. Religious definition does not belong to a single region and cannot be insulated from global audiences and external actors with sufficient influence to contest those definitions.

The conference proposed a definition of *ahl al-Sunna* (people of the Sunna, i.e., Sunnis) built around three elements: theological schools (Ash‘arism and Maturidism); the four *madhhabs* (schools of thought) of Islamic jurisprudence, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi‘i, and Hanbali; and “Sufism” as a normative spiritual practice. At the same time, those at the conference emphasized excluding Wahhabism from the normative category of Sunnism, triggering an international reaction.¹⁵

From the point of view of the Kadyrov regime, it seemed logical to remove Wahhabism from the boundaries of acceptable Sunni Islam. If the task was to

suppress autonomous religious networks and entrench traditional Islam as a state norm, then it had to delegitimize competing identities not only administratively but also theologically. Hence the effort to label the enemy not merely as a “security threat” but as an ideological deviation from the true Sunni tradition.

From the perspective of key actors in the Islamic world, however, the matter looked different. The exclusion of Wahhabism from the definition of Sunnism appeared as a blow to Saudi religious symbolism and the status that Riyadh had enjoyed for decades as a central source of religious legitimation.¹⁶ Hence the reaction from major Arab Islamic scholars quickly took the form of a politically charged warning: Do not allow a schism, and do not turn intra-Sunni disagreements into an instrument of delegitimation. In particular, Saudi scholars warned that such definitions “do not serve the unity of the *ummah*” and create a dangerous precedent of “dividing the Sunnis.”¹⁷ Some Salafi preachers in Saudi Arabia went so far as to use inflammatory if not inciteful language about Kadyrov on social media.¹⁸ While the official state-backed Council of Senior Scholars did not go this far, the fact that the Saudi authorities (who do not typically refrain from arresting or threatening religious figures¹⁹) allowed borderline inciteful rhetoric from Salafi scholars indicates the official frustration with the Grozny conference in Riyadh.

This episode illuminates the power dynamics inherent in state-co-opted Islam. Inside Chechnya, the definition of Sunnism was a continuation of politics, helping consolidate the Sufi infrastructure and traditional Islam as the only legitimate norm while presenting competitors as a threat. But outside Chechnya, the definition was read as an international gesture that touched on the interests of major geopolitical actors and their religious prestige. The Russian-Chechen instrument of control became, externally, an act of positioning, provoking a response.

Not long after the conference, Saudi media reported that during his subsequent meetings in the kingdom, Ramzan Kadyrov had sought to “defuse tensions” surrounding the consequences of the Grozny conference to the point of apologizing.²⁰ Chechen religious figures immediately began rejecting these claims.²¹ Riyadh appears to have responded to the Grozny episode by signaling that it had alternative diplomatic channels with Russia’s North Caucasus. On November 1, 2016, King Salman, along with Crown Prince and Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, received the head of the Republic of Ingushetia (another constituent republic of the Russian Federation), Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, at the royal court in Riyadh.²² Over the next month, delegations

from Ingushetia and then a Chechen delegation led by Kadyrov visited Saudi Arabia in succession.²³ Riyadh appeared to be diversifying its contacts in a classic manner, demonstrating that it was not tied to a single figure and could build relations with other North Caucasian elites. In other words, it was signaling to Kadyrov that his status as the main channel to this strategic constituent region of Russia was not guaranteed.

Conclusion: The Kadyrovs and State-Co-Opted Islam

THE STORY OF THE KADYROVS MATTERS NOT SIMPLY BECAUSE IT TELLS US SOMETHING about one family or one region. It matters because it shows, in a very clear form, how a state can try to use religion as part of its system of rule. In Chechnya, this strategy rested on three connected elements: support for “approved” religious institutions, the use of security language against unwanted religious currents, and the heavy use of symbols, rituals, and public displays of Islamic legitimacy. In Chechnya, with Russian encouragement and support, the Kadyrov regime combined these elements more openly and more intensely than in most other places, which is why the weaknesses of this model are also easier to see there.

The first part of this model was institutional control. The state supported the religious actors it considered loyal, presented traditional Islam as the only legitimate norm, and used this framework to narrow the space for alternative religious authority. In Chechnya, this meant strengthening the Sufi infrastructure and linking it closely to the language of order, morality, and political loyalty. But this kind of control has limits.

A government may shape religious institutions inside one territory, but it cannot fully control how religious authority is judged outside that territory. The Grozny conference of 2016 made this especially clear: Once the regime tried to define “true” Sunnism in public, it entered a much larger arena where other actors—above all, Saudi Arabia and the wider Sunni world—also claimed the right to define religious legitimacy. Moreover, from the Kremlin’s perspective, there is a risk that as sub-national allies/proxies like Kadyrov begin building ties with powerful external actors like Saudi Arabia, they can become more independent of the center, i.e., Moscow, even as the center assumes greater

expectations globally because it has showcased its control of the periphery via those proxies. This was seen in the reported Saudi demands on Russia vis-à-vis Syria in 2013.

The second part of the model was securitization. The Kadyrov regime increasingly described religious difference in the language of threat: extremism, Wahhabism, radicalism. It allowed the regime to justify repression, expand coercive power, and present its own version of Islam as the only safe and acceptable one. In the short term, this was effective. It helped suppress independent networks and strengthened the regime's control over society. But this strategy also came with a cost. It deepened social division, created a permanent need for enemies, and made the regime dependent on fear as a tool of authority. A system built in this way cannot easily relax because its legitimacy comes in part from convincing society that danger is always near.

The final part was symbolic patronage. The regime invested in mosques, religious ceremonies, public piety, and visible signs of Islamic legitimacy. This helped turn loyalty into a moral performance and gave political power a religious appearance. In Chechnya, this symbolic politics did not remain local. It expanded outward through foreign visits, namely hajj-related recognition, and ties with actors in the Middle East. This, too, created new risks and vulnerabilities. Once a regime begins to rely on outside recognition, it no longer fully controls the meaning of the symbols it uses. Religious legitimacy begins to come not only from local institutions but also from external audiences, foreign states, and transnational Islamic prestige.

This is the main lesson of the Kadyrov case. Religion can be used as an instrument of rule, and in the short term it can be highly effective. It can help justify coercion, strengthen loyal institutions, and give power a moral language. But over time, religion stops being just a tool. It creates its own claims, its own audiences, and its own sources of authority. What begins as an instrument of control can become a source of outside influence, political friction, and reputational risk.

For that reason, the Chechen case should be read not only as a regional story but as a warning about the limits of state control over religion. A state may succeed in managing religious institutions for a time. It may even succeed in turning religion into part of its political machinery. But it cannot fully control the long-term consequences. The more deeply religion is built into a system of power, the more likely it is to develop a life beyond the state's intentions. In that sense, the real question is not whether religion can help stabilize a regime. It is how long a regime can control a force that eventually begins to answer to audiences, pressures, and standards beyond its own reach.

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A Look into the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah's Ideological Shift

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ON JUNE 30, 2024, THE LEADERSHIP OF INDONESIAN JEMAAH Islamiyah (JI), one of Southeast Asia's largest jihadist groups, formally announced the dissolution of the organization. JI declared its recognition of the legitimacy of NKRI (Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia, or the Unitary State of Republic of Indonesia), pledged to uphold the state constitution, and committed to revising its ideology away from extremism. The leadership also announced the formation of a committee tasked with reforming its education curriculum and materials.¹ This significant and surprising development caught both terrorism experts and many of its own members off guard.² The ideological shift followed two decades of sustained, relentless pressure from Indonesian counterterrorism authorities.

Following the pronouncement, and with the support of state authorities, JI leaders embarked on a nationwide tour to meet with members and provide theological justification for this ideological reorientation. A key outcome of

this effort was the publication of a book titled *At Tathorruf*, by Para Wijayanto,³ JI's last emir prior to dissolution.⁴ The book serves as the primary doctrinal reference for JI's internal transformation and is intended to guide its members away from their jihadist past and toward a new future.

JI has its roots in the Darul Islam (Islamic state) movement, which emerged in the context of Indonesia's anti-colonialist movement in the 1940s. Abu Bakar Baashir and Abdullah Sungkar founded JI in the early 1990s and became its first leaders. The organization emerged as a significant militant Islamist network and was responsible for several major terrorist attacks in Indonesia.⁵ These include the bombing of the Philippines embassy in Jakarta (August 2000), the Christmas Eve bombing of churches across Indonesia (December 2000), the first Bali bombings that killed over 200 people (October 2002), the JW Marriott bombing in Jakarta (August 2003), the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta (September 2004), the second Bali bombing (October 2005), and the coordinated JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton bombings in Jakarta (July 2009).⁶

Given JI's pivotal role in shaping regional terrorism and the seemingly profound nature of its recent ideological transformation, *At Tathorruf* stands as a crucial primary source for comprehending both the historical development of JI and its prospective trajectory. Wijayanto originally wrote it in Bahasa, Indonesia, and published only a limited number of copies for public circulation. It is difficult to obtain through ordinary public bookstores, which suggests its target audience is JI members themselves—both inside and outside prisons.

By presenting this work to a wider English-speaking audience, this article aims to equip security practitioners, policymakers, and scholars with essential insights into the group's potential behavior, which carry significant implications for the terrorism landscape across Southeast Asia. Moreover, it seeks to stimulate further academic inquiry, critical analysis, and research engagement with the text, thereby contributing meaningfully to the broader literature on counter-extremism, deradicalization, and the strategic evolution of jihadist movements.

The article first provides a detailed summary of the book's six chapters and underscores seven key points from the book that are poised to guide and influence JI members following the organization's dissolution:

1. JI's acknowledgment of its terrorist acts coupled with an official apology
2. The rationale underpinning the group's dissolution

3. A return to orthodox Sunni traditions
4. Full endorsement of the Indonesian state (NKRI), its constitution, and the *Pancasila* (the official state ideology consisting of five principles: belief in the One and only God, civilized humanity, national unity, deliberative democracy, and social justice)⁷
5. A clarification of the true meaning of jihad
6. A corrective approach to the practice of *takfir*⁸
7. The centrality of *tarbiyah* (education) and *dawah* (proselytization) in shaping future conduct and ideology

Overview of *At Tathorruf*

THE BOOK IS STRUCTURED INTO SIX CHAPTERS, EACH ADDRESSING A DISTINCT FACET of JI's past extremism and the theological arguments behind its ideological shift.⁹

The first chapter introduces four phenomena attributed to JI—extremism, terrorism, radicalism, and violence—then groups them under the term *extremism*.¹⁰ It identifies approximately 50 manifestations of extremism,¹¹ analyzes its root causes,¹² and proposes two models of resolving them within JI.¹³ The chapter emphasizes the importance of acquiring the right knowledge to remedy any doctrinal misunderstanding.¹⁴ It offers eight attitudinal changes and highlights three success factors necessary for ideological reform.¹⁵

The second chapter elaborates on the first solution—a return to the Sunni tradition as the authoritative framework in understanding Islam.¹⁶ It highlights the theological influence of Ibn Taimiyah, whom JI members highly revere and respect, as instrumental to its internal transformation.¹⁷ The chapter articulates the right conception of *iman* (faith) as the foundation for correcting the misapplications of *takfir* (the act of declaring another Muslim an infidel)¹⁸ and lists four important Islamic sciences necessary to ensure the correct application of Sunni intellectual traditions in addressing the problem.¹⁹

The third chapter addresses takfir directly, presenting it as a second major area requiring reform.²⁰ It systematically explains various aspects of takfir and lays down 15 guiding principles for legitimate takfir.²¹ Based on the principles, the chapter repudiates the practice of declaring takfir toward general Muslims outside JI, political leaders, civil servants, and police and armed forces, deeming such declarations theologically incorrect.²²

The fourth chapter provides theological justification for recognizing and embracing NKRI as a legitimate polity for Indonesian Muslims. In contrast to JI's former vision of Darul Islam, this chapter argues that many elements of NKRI align with sharia principles, even if the Indonesian state does not explicitly label them as sharia principles per se.²³

The fifth chapter strengthens the legitimacy of NKRI by presenting 36 points through the lens of *siyasah shar'iyah* (Islamic public administration and policymaking doctrine).²⁴ This chapter emphasizes the necessity of upholding, preserving, and defending NKRI.

The sixth and final chapter synthesizes the preceding arguments, offering a new theological rationale for JI's dissolution and its revised ideological outlook. It acknowledges JI's past connection to extremism and terrorism,²⁵ provides a theological basis for JI's dissolution,²⁶ and concludes with 42 points affirming the legitimacy of NKRI and its constitution. It also calls on JI members to be good citizens.²⁷

Highlights

AT TATHORRUF RAISES SEVEN IMPORTANT ISSUES THAT MAY PROVIDE FURTHER insight into JI's past record and its future trajectory.

Admission and Apology

The book explicitly acknowledges JI's connection to acts of terrorism, as mentioned in the brief overview of JI above,²⁸ while qualifying these acts as perpetrated by a small minority of members and never endorsed by the leadership.²⁹ This position—that JI's leadership has inspired but not directly planned attacks—is consistent with statements by Ali Imron, one of the terrorists con-

victed of the first Bali bombing, and several researchers have noted it in their analyses of JI's internal dynamics.³⁰ Nonetheless, JI leadership accepts moral responsibility, citing the sheltering of wanted members who were on the run and the group's uncooperative stance with authorities.³¹

The book also acknowledges JI's links to specific terrorist individuals, including the trio of Bali bombers (Imam Samudra, Amrozi Nurhasyim, and Ali Ghuron), as well as Nordin Mat Top (a Malaysian JI bombmaker whom an Indonesian police counterterrorism unit killed in a September 2009 shootout in Central Java), Dr. Azahari (a Malaysian JI bombmaker whom Indonesian counterterrorism police killed in a November 2005 shootout in East Java), and Hambali (JI's former military chief, whom authorities arrested in Thailand in March 2003, currently held at Guantanamo Bay).³² The book also acknowledges that JI had cooperative ties with al-Qaeda while insisting that it operated as an independent entity and was never under al-Qaeda's direct command.³³ However, scholars remain divided regarding the links between these two groups: Some, such as Zachary Abuza and Rohan Gunaratna (the second author of this piece)³⁴ have depicted JI as al-Qaeda's de facto South-east Asian affiliate,³⁵ while analysts from the International Crisis Group have stressed JI's autonomy and argued that the group's focus was regional instead of global jihad.³⁶

According to the book, a critical factor in the development of JI's earlier extremist ideology was the negative influence of *da'wah Najdiyyah*—a *dawah* (proselytization) movement from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula founded by Muhammad Abdul Wahab, famously known as the Wahabis³⁷—and its fusion with the ideas of Hasan al-Banna's Egyptian Muslim Brothers (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun).³⁸ Wijayanto makes special mention of one book for its impact on JI's extremist ideology: *al-Jami' fi Talab al-'Ilm al-Sharif* (*The Compendium in Pursuit of Noble Knowledge*), which was authored in 1993 by Sayyid Imam bin 'Abd al-'Aziz (also known as Dr. Fadl), a leader and ideologue of the Egyptian al-Jihad Organization (Tanzim al-Jihad).³⁹

While Wijayanto attributes acts of terrorism to only a minority within JI, he concedes that extremism is a reality among its members.⁴⁰ One example is the *General Guide for the Struggle of al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah* (*Pedoman Umum Perjuangan Al-Jama'ah Al-Islamiyah*), commonly known under its acronym PUPJI. As JI's guiding document, PUPJI outlines the group's radical vision of establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia, which it used to justify labeling NKRI a *thagut* entity (i.e., a false idol) that it must bring down by jihad.⁴¹ The book's extensive list of 50 manifestations of extremism may be read as an im-

plicit theological self-critique and correction.⁴² Another example is the application of takfir toward government leaders, civil servants, police, and military personnel, which, in effect, legitimizes violence against such individuals.⁴³ Wijayanto dedicates two chapters to addressing this gross misuse of takfir: One explains the concept of true *iman* (faith) according to Sunni traditions as the foundation of determining valid takfir,⁴⁴ while the other is dedicated solely to various issues concerning misguided takfirs and principles to correct them.⁴⁵ Finally, Wijayanto notes the influence of Ibn Taimiyah's theological works among JI members. He rationalizes the extensive use of Ibn Taimiyah's writings to reform JI's earlier ideology and redirect it along a new trajectory.⁴⁶

The above admissions are significant. Wijayanto's transparency debunks conspiracy theories that were rife among JI circles and sympathizers. For example, some alleged that JI was a fabricated organization created to discredit Islam and Muslims and that foreign intelligence agencies orchestrated the first Bali bombing in 2002 for that purpose. For example, Abu Bakar Baasyir, who was then the second emir of JI, claimed the CIA caused the attack by deploying a "micro nuclear bomb"—an assertion that gained traction among segments of both the Indonesian public and certain elites.⁴⁷ By confronting such false narratives, the book creates an opportunity to address the inclination toward conspiratorial thinking that remains pervasive in Muslim societies and may hamper counter-extremism efforts.

A formal apology from the JI leadership for their past misdeeds, including acts of terrorism and the propagation of radical ideology that harmed both the Indonesian state and the broader interests of Islam, affirms these admissions. The leaders direct their apology toward the government, the public, and the victims of attacks by JI members.⁴⁸ As a demonstration of sincerity and remorse, JI has outlined a series of corrective actions: revising its ideological framework, reviewing the curriculum and education materials of its *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), surrendering its remaining weapons, and urging wanted members to surrender.⁴⁹ JI leaders appear to be firm in their commitment to implementing these measures, many of which were already in progress at the time Wijayanto was writing *At Tathorruf*. The head of Special Detachment 88 (D88), the counterterrorism branch of the Indonesian police, has praised JI's dedication and acknowledged their ideological shift, noting that Wijayanto has volunteered to testify as a witness in court trials of JI members and personally provided D88 with information about the identities of key JI figures, the organization's structure, and the locations of weapons caches known to him. Acting on these disclosures, authorities recovered and secured

a range of weapons and related materials from several locations across Central Java, Lampung, East Java, South Sulawesi, and Central Sulawesi.⁵⁰ Indonesia's national police commissioner has also echoed this praise and urged the former militants to become model citizens.⁵¹

Reasons for Dissolution

The leadership's decision to dissolve JI in 2024 represents one of the most unexpected developments that experts in the field of counterterrorism and counter-radicalization have observed. This surprising move was not an inevitable outcome of ideological reform or strategic shift. It is indeed plausible that many JI members, who lived covertly and had minimal direct contact with the leadership, found the announcement quite startling. The question of why they took this action looms large for internal members and external observers alike. Wijayanto's book offers partial answers through his theological arguments for the permissibility and necessity of dissolution.

We can discern four main arguments that Wijayanto makes for the theological permissibility of dissolution in the book:

1. JI's original vision to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, based on the premise that Indonesia was un-Islamic, secular, or a *thagut* entity, no longer holds. The leadership now affirms NKRI as a theologically legitimate polity for Muslims, considering its historical and sociopolitical context (more on this below).⁵²
2. JI's association with extremism and terrorism has irreparably tarnished its reputation, rendering the organization a liability not only for its members but also for the wider Indonesian Muslim community.⁵³
3. The continuation of JI constitutes a major *darar* (harm) to Islam and the Muslim *ummah* (community), which sharia obliges Muslims to eliminate. This is based on the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) maxim that requires elimination of harm and prohibits harm to oneself and others.⁵⁴

4. While JI's dissolution may cause negative consequences, which its members may regard as *darar* under sharia, it ultimately represents the lesser of two evils. In other words, the harm from JI's continued existence is greater than the potential harm from its dissolution. Furthermore, the benefits of dissolution outweigh the potential harms dissolution entails. The book cites other *fiqh* maxims to support this judgment: Preventing harm takes priority over acquiring benefits, enduring harm may be acceptable to secure greater benefits, and specific harm may be tolerated to repel general harm. Examples of general harm include the arrests of hundreds of JI members and the resulting hardship for their families and communities, the ongoing pressure that JI members feel from law enforcement after two decades, and the damage their work inflicted on the public image of Islam in Indonesia and on Indonesian Muslims. Wijayanto argues that these harms warrant dissolution of JI despite any limited harms that the dissolution might also produce.⁵⁵

Return to Sunni Traditions

A key highlight of the book is the call for a return to Sunni traditions. The book does not define Sunni (*Ahl al-Sunnah Wa al-Jama'ah*). However, it does make clear that JI needs to recalibrate the earlier theological stance it stipulated in PUPJI, which gives clear preference to Salafism in the understanding and practice of Islam.⁵⁶

The book downplays JI's earlier orientation by constantly using the word *Sunni* to the extent that the word *Salafism* is hardly present. However, Wijayanto extensively cites Ibn Taimiyah's works as tools to navigate this ideological recalibration. He offers utilitarian reasons for this, noting that JI members revere Taimiyah's writings and would therefore be most receptive to calls for reform that are couched in the late theologian's teachings.⁵⁷

This approach is not an indication of a clear break from Salafism as PUPJI defines it. Rather, it suggests a more inclusive and open understanding that regards Salafism as part of Sunni traditions.⁵⁸ The open stance contrasts with that of large segments of Indonesian traditionalist Muslim scholars, particu-

larly those within Nahdhatul Ulama, who view contemporary Salafism and Ibn Taimiyah as outside the realm of Sunni traditions.⁵⁹ This difference raises important questions pertaining to JI members' integration into Indonesian society after its dissolution.

Nonetheless, by emphasizing the need to return to a Sunni tradition, albeit one that includes the Salafism of Ibn Taimiyah and the like, the book makes the case to extremist JI members that their past understanding of Islam is incompatible with Sunni traditions or has deviated from such traditions in certain elements. In either case, Wijayanto argues that theological realignment is necessary and a return to Sunni traditions is a path forward. Nonetheless, questions remain as to what this ideological realignment will look like in practice, as detailed in the penultimate section of this article.

Reasons for Embracing NKRI, Its Constitution, and Pancasila

The decision to embrace NKRI, its constitution, and the Pancasila ideology represents a significant shift for JI. Half the book is dedicated to this subject, which is discussed across three chapters and summarized into 42 points of justification.⁶⁰ The move radically alters JI's original *raison d'être*—to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia as a contribution to the global revival of the Islamic caliphate via violent jihad. Embarking on this path included making *i'dad* (preparation for armed jihad).⁶¹ It led to the formation of JI's military wing, combat training with camps established both locally and in foreign lands, and the involvement of JI members in armed conflict in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Syria, and the Philippines, ultimately leading JI to connect with al-Qaeda and transnational terrorism.

Due to space constraints, this article does not delve into all 42 justifications. The following are the 10 most important and illuminating.

1. **Lack of a Prescribed Form of Governance.** The book recognizes the concept of the nation-state model on which NKRI was founded. It argues that Islam does not prescribe a specific form of Islamic government. As such, the matter is open to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Islam allows for ideational flexibility. Therefore, Muslims should welcome creative and innovative ideas and not regard them as forbidden innovations (*bid'ah*). Since political

governance is a worldly matter, the relevant *fiqh* maxim that regulates it should be “permissibility, unless there is proof of prohibition.” There is consequently no theological proof prohibiting Muslims from using the nation-state concept as a framework for political governance.⁶²

2. Lack of a Mandate for a Caliphate. According to Wijayanto, *khilafah* (the caliphate) is not a divinely mandated form of governance. While its historical loss remains a lamentable tragedy, Muslims are under no theological duty to revive it. Given contemporary realities, the *khilafah*’s return is very unlikely. Instead, the nation-state is the most practical, viable, and realistic alternative. A nation-state may not be the most ideal form of governance, according to Wijayanto, but that does not mean Islam prohibits it. As a realistic and practical religion, Islam recognizes “traditions, norms, and conventions as a valid source of law and *fatwa* [decree],” as the *fiqh* maxim stipulates, applicable to a nation-state.⁶³ This represents a major departure from a core jihadist ideological premise: that restoring the caliphate is a binding religious obligation and the ultimate objective of Muslim struggle. By treating the caliphate as historically significant but not theologically mandatory, and by recognizing the legitimacy of the nation-state, Wijayanto undertakes a significant ideological shift that weakens a key doctrinal justification for legitimizing jihadist militancy.

3. Muslim Fragmentation Throughout History. Wijayanto argues that the fragmentation of Muslim communities is neither a modern phenomenon nor abhorred by Islam. Muslims have been politically divided since the first century of Islam, beginning with the replacement of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus by the Abbasids in Baghdad, while a branch of the Umayyads continued to rule Andalusia for 300 years thereafter. Since then, the fragmentation has continued. Classical Sunni scholars regarded the existence of various independent and autonomous Muslim kingdoms as a reality of the time and legitimized it for

practical reasons. The same reasoning is applicable today: Muslims should regard political plurality among their nation-states—including NKRI—as a legitimate norm.⁶⁴ This perspective reflects the shift toward embracing the wider Sunni scholarly tradition rather than the narrower interpretive framework often associated with Salafism.

4. NKRI Is Theologically Legitimate. Building on the above points, Wijayanto contends that NKRI has strong theological foundations and JI members should accept it as a legitimate alternative to the classical form of Islamic government.⁶⁵

5. NKRI Unites Indonesia under Muslim Domination. The book revisits the withdrawal of the controversial clause in the 1945 Jakarta Charter (akin to Indonesia's declaration of independence) that had required the implementation of sharia for Muslim citizens,⁶⁶ thus avoiding any explicit attempt to make NKRI an Islamic state. It calls on JI members to consider Indonesia's 1945 pre-independence context: The *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and Muslim political parties of the time, such as Masyumi, were grappling with multiple challenges, particularly external threats of Dutch reoccupation after the surrender of the Japanese imperial army and the need to preserve the national unity amid diverse faiths, cultures, and ideologies. They viewed the removal of the initial clause in 1945 as a strategic concession to preserve NKRI's cohesion.

Wijayanto regards the adoption of NKRI as consistent with sharia, which permits tolerating a less-than-ideal form of governance. According to him, NKRI sans the Jakarta Charter's clause on sharia achieves a greater good by uniting the vast Indonesian archipelago under a nation-state that Muslims dominate. Had the clause on sharia remained in the Jakarta Charter, Indonesia would have faced a serious risk of failure: Non-Muslim Indonesians might have been unwilling to be part of Indonesia under

such terms, and territories with non-Muslim majorities might have seceded, triggering conflicts and facilitating Dutch intervention.⁶⁷

6. De Facto Sharia Is Compatible with Islam. The book cautions against the simplistic classification of NKRI as totally un-Islamic or *thaghut* simply because it does not explicitly recognize sharia as the law of the land. The book points to elements of the NKRI that are consistent with sharia, although not explicitly labeled so. The majority of Indonesian laws are congruent with the traditional *ta'zir* (the authorities' discretionary power). The constitution recognizes equal citizenship regardless of faith and belief. It is similar to the Medina Charter of the Prophet Muhammad, which established a multi-religious community based on shared rights and responsibilities. Similarly, the Pancasila, despite the absence of an overtly Islamic terminology, is compatible with Islamic teachings as long as it is not interpreted in a manner that contradicts Islam and applied for the purpose of marginalizing it.⁶⁸

7. The Ulama Has Never Denounced NKRI. The book asserts that no mainstream ulama has ever denounced NKRI as un-Islamic. This affirms the long-standing acceptance of NKRI by the broader Islamic scholarly establishment since independence.⁶⁹ The point is particularly significant as a repudiation of earlier jihadist positions, which often dismissed or ignored the authority of mainstream scholars when their views conflicted with militant interpretations. By explicitly invoking the consensus of established ulama, the book signals a notable shift toward recognizing the legitimacy of the broader Sunni scholarly tradition as a source of religious authority.

8. Democracy Resembles Syura. The book challenges its earlier rejection of democracy, arguing that democracy is the closest alternative to *syura* (consultation) in Islam. Matters of *syura* are subject to *ijtihad* when determining

the most practical and suitable form in accordance with place and time. Democratic mechanisms and institutions, such as *pemilu* (general elections), *pilpres* (presidential elections), *pilkada* (provincial elections), and the *Majlis Perwakilan Rakyat* (People's Representatives Council, the Indonesian equivalent of a parliament), are modern applications of *syura*. This point represents one of the key ideological departures from JI's prior view, which abhorred democracy because it attributed legislative power to people rather than God.⁷⁰

9. The Prophet Prefers Dawah over Force. While the book remains committed to JI's rejection of secularism as a philosophical worldview, it advocates a nonconfrontational, non-militant, and pragmatic approach. This approach begins with a recognition of secularism among Muslim societies globally. Deep-rooted problems are better addressed through effective dawah and public education of Muslims instead of forceful change or imposition. This approach is closer to the Prophet's way and the Quranic injunction that gives preference to dawah with "wisdom, kind advice, and debate in the best manner."⁷¹

10. Nationalism Is Not Prohibited. The book addresses JI's rejection of nationalism, which it once viewed as anathema to Islam. It argues that nationalism unites the people and therefore does not inherently oppose Islamic principles, noting that many of the Prophet's companions maintained their tribal identities after converting to Islam without any reprimand from the Prophet. Nationalism is abhorrent only if it leads to group fanaticism that denigrates or harms others. The book warns against any prejudicial view of nationalism as anti-Islamic because it misrepresents reality. A nationalist can simultaneously be a devout Muslim, friend, and partner in promoting shared goals.⁷²

The above arguments are not new within Indonesian Islamic discourse. Nahdhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Muslim organizations

representing millions of Indonesians, have affirmed them since independence in 1945. Both affirmed the Pancasila when all Muslim organizations made it obligatory as their sole ideology in 1985. Many contemporary Muslim scholars also hold these positions.⁷³ What is significant is not the arguments themselves but JI's formal willingness to embrace them, signaling a shift from its previous extremist views.

Practice of Jihad

Wijayanto does not advocate for the absolute abandonment of armed jihad. Rather, he calls for a return to the traditional understanding of Sunni scholars, which defines jihad as more than armed struggle and strictly regulates the use of force. Waging war and carrying arms remain permissible only as defensive measures in response to aggression against Muslims, and Muslims can declare and practice these measures in Indonesia only under the right authority.

The book declares that it is not permissible to wage armed jihad against the Indonesian government for the purpose of establishing an Islamic state or correcting social vices. It provides three core justifications. First, the new JI vision recognizes NKRI as a valid polity for Indonesian Muslims. Second, since Muslims constitute the majority of the population, Indonesia is considered a Muslim nation, and Muslims cannot wage armed jihad against fellow Muslims. Third, such actions would constitute a forbidden rebellion against authorities in the Sunni tradition, even against corrupt and unjust rulers, due to the harms of such action being greater than the benefits.⁷⁴

In addressing what JI members may perceive as shortcomings of the Indonesian state—whether governmental or societal—the book limits them to peaceful *dawah*, nonviolent social activism, and participation in democratic political processes.⁷⁵ At the same time, it continues to express a commitment to armed jihad, if necessary, for the purpose of defending oppressed Muslims outside Indonesia.⁷⁶ This position leaves ambiguity regarding JI's future orientation. If the commitment to external jihad becomes central to JI's renewed mission, it could provide a pretext for maintaining military preparedness. Even if the group no longer directs its animosity toward the Indonesian state, a jihad-centered organizational culture could persist within JI. Many segments of Indonesian societies and authorities may therefore continue to harbor suspicion toward JI members, which may hinder their reintegration into society.⁷⁷

Practice of Takfir

While Wijayanto does not acknowledge the full extent of the takfir problem among JI members, he treats the issue with considerable gravity. He identifies takfir as the first problem to address and devotes a full chapter to it,⁷⁸ including a detailed formulation of 15 guiding principles to govern its use, indicating the need for a high degree of caution and restraint.⁷⁹ The book's emphasis on the gravity of this practice aligns with broader findings in various studies on the *takfiri* nature of Muslim extremist groups.⁸⁰ Takfir is a fundamental issue that remains central to radicalization, and analysts must address it as a key component of any credible effort to counter extremist ideological frameworks.

Importance of Tarbiyah and Dawah

Historically, JI was part of the tarbiyah movement in Indonesia in the early 1980s. Tarbiyah was characterized by cadre programs that systematically train and develop Muslims to be dawah activists. These are often conducted through small study circles known as *usrah*, as influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. Throughout the 1980s, the movement managed to grow its influence underground amid Suharto-era restrictions and avoided political activism. In the 1990s, it had established influence over many intra-university student organizations and discussion forums. It accommodated various Islamic religious strands, from traditionalists to modernists, and was flexible on political questions.⁸¹ After the fall of Suharto's New Order regime in 1998, some tarbiyah activists founded an Islamist political party, the Justice Party (PK), which they renamed the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) in 2002. While these political parties hold conservative agendas on social issues, they prioritize electoral gains through pragmatic links with secular parties. Today the tarbiyah movement remains relevant by continuously shaping current trends in dawah and Islamic socio-religious movements and by mobilizing members through offline and online initiatives.⁸²

Wijayanto indicates that tarbiyah played a formative role in cultivating JI members' dedication to the group's cause and broader Islamic mission. It contributed to the group's internal resilience during two decades of adversity while under intense pressure from law enforcement agencies. In the post-dissolution period, Wijayanto regards tarbiyah as an important instrument to reframe JI members' mindsets and facilitate ideological transformation. The efforts JI is

taking in reviewing the curriculum, textbooks, and other educational materials within its pesantren underscore this important pedagogical turn.

Insights

Jl's ideological shift is not merely a denunciation of the terrorist acts that some of its members committed, nor is it simply a tactical disengagement from violence. Rather, it represents a fundamental reorientation of the group's strategic vision. Most significantly, Jl now theologically recognizes the legitimacy of the Indonesian nation-state (NKRI), the constitution, and Pancasila. Consequently, it deems armed jihad an impermissible means of achieving political or societal change.

On the Islamism-jihadism spectrum (i.e., passive/quietist Islamist, social activist Islamist, democrat Islamist, non-democrat Islamist, and violent jihadist),⁸³ this repositioning reflects not only a transition from violent jihadism to nonviolent Islamism but also a movement further toward the center of the spectrum. Jl's stance now resembles that of contemporary Islamist actors participating in democratic politics, such as PAS (Islamic Party) in Malaysia, PKS in Indonesia, and Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan. Remarkably, it appears even more moderate than another Indonesian Islamist group, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), which rejects violence but continues to oppose the nation-state system, democracy, and nationalism as Western constructs incompatible with Islam.⁸⁴

Although such ideological transformations are not unprecedented among former extremist groups, their significance should not be understated. Historically, Jl has been the most lethal terrorist organization in Indonesia. Its withdrawal from militancy therefore represents a major development for national security and a potentially important milestone in counterterrorism efforts.

Following Jl's June 2024 announcement, many observers adopted a cautious stance, questioning whether the shift was genuine or merely a tactical response to organizational weakening. Some analysts also raised concerns about the possibility of splinter groups emerging from disenchanted members who remained committed to the original doctrine that the PUPJI articulated.⁸⁵ However, developments in the subsequent year provide grounds for a more positive assessment. Jl leaders have actively promoted the new direction

through nationwide outreach to their members, a process that began prior to the official announcement of dissolution and continues today. The organization has also fulfilled commitments to surrender hidden weapons caches and initiate reforms in its pesantrens and educational institutions in coordination with the authorities. Notably, there have been no major terrorist incidents by rogue members or arrests of breakaway factions since the announcement, contrasting with other cases in which splinter groups attempted attacks to signal defiance.

Positive assessments have also emerged from practitioners and scholars. The head of D88, in his memoir *Ji: The Untold Story*, expresses cautious optimism about the organization's transformation based on his two decades of engagement with JI.⁸⁶ Zachary Abuza similarly argues that JI's disbandment and ideological shift appear largely genuine and potentially irreversible, though he notes that the group's denunciation of violence "has not been robust enough."⁸⁷ Similarly, Solahudin—an Indonesian researcher and journalist who has authored two books on JI⁸⁸—views the group's ideological change as broadly consistent with patterns of collective deradicalization seen elsewhere.⁸⁹ He draws on Omar Ashour's study of militant Islamist groups in Egypt and Algeria, which identifies four variables that can lead jihadist organizations to abandon violence: state repression, charismatic leadership, social interaction, and selective inducement.⁹⁰ He argues that all four are present in the JI case. State repression and deradicalization initiatives, which D88 primarily carried out, constitute the first level and enabled the emergence of the other variables—charismatic leadership, social interaction, and selective inducement. Without this initial pressure, the latter factors likely would not have developed. Solahudin also highlights differences in political context. Ashour's cases occurred under authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Algeria, while JI's transformation took place within Indonesia's democratic system under legal oversight. Solahudin concludes that combining measured repression under rule of law with rehabilitative programs creates more favorable conditions for collective deradicalization.⁹¹

Nevertheless, the formal dissolution of JI does not necessarily dissolve the relational bonds among its former members. Shared experiences in pesantren, training camps, overseas conflicts, and kinship networks have forged enduring ties of *ukhuwwah* (brotherhood).⁹² While JI leaders may have nullified the *bai'ah* (oath) their members pledged to them,⁹³ these networks persist. Rather than being viewed solely as a security risk, they can serve as channels for continued engagement, enabling authorities to disseminate JI's revised ideologi-

cal position, maintain communication with former members, and anticipate potential challenges.

Moreover, militant jihad has not been the sole definer of JI's identity. Its doctrinal texts, including the PUPJI, emphasized dawah as a foundational priority and framed armed struggle as a later stage.⁹⁴ This suggests dawah activism is deeply embedded in the movement's organizational culture. A plausible trajectory, therefore, is the emergence of a new and open organization centered on dawah, in which former members—and possibly new participants—engage voluntarily through initiatives that former JI leaders direct or that the state facilitates. The character of such an organization, however, remains uncertain. The group could still adopt a hardline Islamist orientation in its dawah or political strategies, similar to the now-proscribed Front Pembela Islam, despite its public endorsement of NKRI and Pancasila and its rejection of violence; these do not eliminate all potential concerns.⁹⁵ Continued adherence to Salafi doctrinal orientations may also generate tensions with Indonesia's traditionalist Muslim organizations, which have historically expressed opposition to local Salafi movements. While many Salafi institutions have contributed positively to Indonesia's religious landscape, theological disagreements could develop into social friction if leaders do not carefully manage them. Given JI's historical baggage, prudence requires continued vigilance and proactive measures in the reintegration process.

At present, it would be prudent to give time and support for JI's leaders to institutionalize new organizational behavior.⁹⁶ Their ongoing nationwide engagement with members involves sustained internal dialogue and doctrinal revision, including reexamining concepts of iman, correcting the misuse of takfir, and reassessing interpretations of jihad within mainstream Sunni frameworks. Such theological recalibration is a demanding process that may require considerable time—perhaps even generational change.⁹⁷

Ashour's framework of collective deradicalization suggests that durable transformation requires change in three domains: ideology, organizational structure, and social behavior. Achieving *wasatiyyah* (moderation) ultimately requires not only ideological revision but also acceptance of democratic norms—particularly pluralism and the peaceful transfer of power—and their demonstration through participation in social and political life. In the case of JI, the post-dissolution phase remains in its early stages. While the ideological shift is significant, whether the organization—or its former members—will evolve into a genuinely moderate and mainstream actor will depend on their behavior in Indonesia's sociopolitical sphere in the years ahead. Much

will hinge on whether their future engagement is constructive rather than confrontational, inclusive rather than exclusionary, and persuasive rather than coercive. The trajectory will likely become clearer once the current phase of internal reform gives way to broader social and political participation.

Conclusion

THE DISSOLUTION OF JEMAAH ISLAMIYAH (JI) REPRESENTS A RARE AND SIGNIFICANT development in the study of militant movements and ideological disengagement. As *At Tathorruf* reflects, the transformation that JI has undertaken appears to involve more than a tactical adjustment. Instead it signals an effort to reframe the organization's ideological foundations and strategic outlook. By renouncing armed struggle in Indonesia, recognizing the legitimacy of NKRI, and advocating engagement within the existing political order, the organization seeks to redefine its role within Indonesian society.

The process through which this shift emerged also offers important insights. The sheer scale of the intellectual effort behind the book—which Wijayanto produced while in detention—together with its extensive references and the nationwide engagement and outreach it later generated, demonstrates a substantial effort at theological recalibration within JI. Wijayanto acknowledges that his detention created opportunities for constructive interactions with personnel from D88, which contributed to his ideological reevaluation.⁹⁸ According to his account, the unit facilitated aspects of his personal research by providing books, resources, and access to local scholars as he reassessed the organization's earlier doctrinal positions. In a related account, the head of D88 notes that the agency runs deradicalization programs for terrorism detainees, though he does not elaborate on their specific design or implementation. Together, these developments highlight how sustained engagement, intellectual reflection, and access to alternative scholarly perspectives can contribute to ideological change.⁹⁹

More broadly, the JI case reinforces an important insight in terrorism studies: While multiple factors—organizational, political, and social—drive radicalization, religious theology remains a central driver and resource in both radicalization and deradicalization processes for ideologically motivated movements.¹⁰⁰ The Indonesian experience suggests that effective counter-ex-

tremism strategies may require a combination of consistent law-enforcement pressure and credible ideological engagement capable of addressing the doctrinal foundations of militant activism.

At the same time, JI's transformation remains in its early stages. Whether the organization will ultimately evolve into a hardline but nonviolent movement or gradually transition toward a more mainstream posture remains uncertain. Questions also persist regarding the implications of its evolving ideological orientation within Indonesia's diverse Islamic landscape as well as the potential impact of its stance on armed conflicts beyond Indonesia's borders. These uncertainties underscore the importance of continued monitoring and sustained engagement as the post-dissolution trajectory unfolds.

Finally, the issue of transitional justice for victims of JI's past attacks remains unclear. Many survivors continue to grapple with the physical and emotional trauma that the bombings caused, making forgiveness difficult despite the organization's proclaimed transformation.¹⁰¹ At the same time, some victims have expressed a willingness to move forward, forgive, and cautiously welcome signs of change.¹⁰² This underscores the complex moral and social challenges of reconciliation after decades of violence, issues that the Indonesian government will need to confront and address as part of any broader effort to consolidate the gains from JI's ideological transformation.¹⁰³

The JI experience demonstrates that ideological trajectories within militant movements are not necessarily fixed.¹⁰⁴ Under certain conditions—combining sustained institutional pressure, internal reflection, and meaningful intellectual engagement—pathways toward disengagement from violence can emerge.¹⁰⁵ For scholars and practitioners alike, the case offers valuable insights into the dynamics of collective deradicalization and the complex processes through which militant organizations may reconsider and transform their ideological commitments.

ENDNOTES

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