



The Territorial Battle Between JNIM and ISGS: Mapping Power Struggles in the Sahel

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Abstract: The territorial conflict between Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has escalated the power struggles in the Sahel. As both groups vie for control in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, their ideological and operational distinctions fuel violent confrontations. ISGS, aligned with the Islamic State, emphasizes territorial dominance and mass civilian attacks, while JNIM, linked to al-Qaeda, seeks localized influence and community integration. This rivalry, driven by competition over resources, fighters, and strategic positions, has deepened the humanitarian crisis, leading to displacement, food insecurity, and disrupted livelihoods. The ongoing clashes have eroded state authority and heightened insecurity in a region already plagued by governance issues. Despite occasional cooperation, their intensifying competition has increased violence, impacting both fighters and civilians and raising concerns about long-term stability in the Sahel. This briefing paper examines how the clashes between ISGS and JNIM have impacted the Sahel region.

Keywords: Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Sahel, Terrorism



Introduction

The Sahel, a vast region bordering the Sahara Desert and encompassing countries like Chad, Mali, Niger, and Mauritania, has increasingly come to be known as "the newest front in the fight against terrorism" in recent years (Afriyie, 2023). In the tri-border zone of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, the two predominant insurgent groups are Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), associated with al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which is aligned with the Islamic State. Both groups operate across loosely monitored borders and reject state authority. In Niger, their tactics differ: ISGS has executed numerous large-scale attacks on civilians along the Niger-Mali border since early 2020, resulting in the displacement of entire villages. Meanwhile, JNIM has positioned itself near communities along the Niger-Burkina Faso border, where it recruits members and asserts influence over daily life (Amnesty International, 2021). The rivalry between ISGS and JNIM is rooted in their contrasting ideologies and goals. While ISGS strives to overthrow secular governments to form an autonomous province, JNIM seeks to supplant current state authority with a strict interpretation of Islamic law (Thompson, 2021). Since 2019, hostilities between these groups have escalated, following a period marked by relative peace. This shift has been driven by ideological differences and competition for resources, leading to violent confrontations and substantial casualties on both sides (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020). The conflict reflects broader geopolitical trends in the region, as both groups vie for control over territory and local populations, often exacerbating existing ethnic tensions and grievances (Haidara, 2024). As they fiercely compete for power, their actions undermine regional stability and hinder international counterterrorism initiatives aimed at curtailing the influence of jihadist movements in the Sahel. Consequently, this briefing paper seeks to address two critical questions: How



have ISGS and JNIM collaborated in recent years to expand their influence in the Sahel? And what impact have the conflicts between ISGS and JNIM had on the stability and security of the Sahel region?

The Rise of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

In the Sahel region, the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) was formed through the merger of four al-Qaeda-affiliated militant groups: the Macina Liberation Front (FLM), Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and the Sahara Emirate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This coalition was officially announced in a video on March 2, 2017, featuring leaders from these factions—Amadou Koufa (FLM), Djamel Okacha (AQIM), Iyad Ag Gali (Ansar Dine), and Muhammad Ould Nouini (al-Mourabitoun)—who confirmed the establishment of JNIM (Afriyie, 2023). The leaders' varied ethnic backgrounds, encompassing Arab, Fulani, and Tuareg groups, created a semblance of unity, despite each subgroup having its own specific goals and regional influences. Iyad Ag Gali, emerging from the Tuareg rebellion in northern Mali, heads JNIM and established Ansar Dine in 2011 after being excluded from a Tuareg separatist movement. His collaboration with AQIM and other Islamist organizations resulted in their brief hold over northern Mali in 2012 (Afriyie, 2023). Although they were eventually expelled by French and African military forces, Gali preserved his influence by forming political networks in the area. Amadou Koufa, the FLM's leader, radicalized in the 2000s and harnessed local Fulani grievances to garner support in central Mali. His forces, in partnership with Ansar Dine, extended their reach into Burkina Faso through associations with Ansaroul Islam, a radical faction established by Koufa's mentee Ibrahim Dicko. Following Dicko's death in 2017, Koufa expanded his initiatives, utilizing criminal networks to seize control of portions of the Burkina Faso-Niger border, which provided valuable recruits and funding.



While JNIM is linked to AQIM, it has attempted to distance itself from AQIM's diminishing influence in the region. The coalition projects a unified and strong image, despite encountering internal challenges. The FLM has played a crucial role in fostering violence and territorial expansion, taking advantage of resources and recruits in densely populated areas. JNIM's activities in extortion, artisanal mining, and ransom kidnappings generate substantial income, enabling them to sustain operations despite mounting pressures from regional and international military forces (Afriyie, 2023).

In contrast, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was established in 2015 by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, following the unification of several radical Islamist groups. Initially, al-Sahrawi was associated with the Polisario Front in Western Sahara, but he later joined the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) in 2012, which aimed to create a katiba of Arab fighters in northern Mali. In 2013, he became a prominent figure in the newly formed al-Mourabitoun but separated in 2015 to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, thereby forming ISGS. ISGS mainly operates in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, concentrating on expanding its influence in these border regions rather than establishing a political base. Although it officially split from al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, ISGS occasionally collaborates with them. The group is infamous for its 2017 attack in Tongo Tongo, Niger, which resulted in the deaths of several Nigerien and American soldiers. Its core membership is estimated to be between 100 and 425 fighters, but its effectiveness relies heavily on mobility, local support, and informants, which help it evade security forces in the expansive border areas. In 2021, ISGS leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi was killed in a French drone strike in Mali, delivering a significant setback to the group's leadership. Despite this loss, ISGS continues to operate, focusing on guerrilla-style assaults in the region, frequently targeting security forces (Afriyie, 2023).



How have ISGS and JNIM collaborated in recent years to expand their influence in the Sahel region?

The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) are competing terrorist organizations associated with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, respectively, as stated above. Despite their differing ideologies, they have discovered avenues for collaboration that benefit both groups. There was verified communication between their leaders until 2017, and they have continued to conduct joint operations afterward. This collaboration stems from mutual objectives, including opposing Western influence and asserting control over local areas in the Sahel. By partnering together, they can combine resources, exchange intelligence, and execute coordinated attacks, which enhances their operational effectiveness. For example, both groups participated in a coordinated raid in 2017 against MINUSMA and Malian forces, along with ambushes in Niger and Burkina Faso (Afriyie, 2023). In regions such as Tillabéri in Niger, their actions have intensified the conflict, leading to civilian displacement, the destruction of educational facilities, and the recruitment of child soldiers. Their joint efforts have allowed them to contest state authority and assert control over territories along the borders of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, resulting in a humanitarian crisis. Although there have been intermittent conflicts between the two groups and their relationship remains competitive, their tactical collaboration demonstrates a pragmatic strategy for achieving broader goals, particularly in areas where they face common adversaries (Afriyie, 2023).

How have the clashes between ISGS and JNIM affected the Sahel region?

The fight for supremacy between the Islamist factions Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in the Sahel region has escalated significantly. This rivalry between the two terrorist groups has greatly affected local populations. The unending violence has resulted in a marked increase in attacks, impacting both the rival factions and local civilians. Reports indicate a significant rise in



civilian casualties, with estimates suggesting an almost 40% increase in violence stemming from their struggle for territorial and resource control (Dahiru, 2024). Both organizations face accusations of severe human rights violations, including murders, sexual assaults, and theft. Human Rights Watch has documented numerous abuses in the regions of Mali affected by their conflict, further deepening a sense of fear and instability in local communities (Dahiru, 2024). Between 2019 and early 2021, violent incidents surged nearly fourfold, increasing from 1,180 to 2,005, with at least 125 battles taking place and 731 fighters from both factions losing their lives (Afriyie, 2023). In March 2024, the ISGS launched an assault on a JNIM stronghold in Osadia, Mali, resulting in the death of a senior commander along with several others.

Additionally, confrontations between ISGS and JNIM have occurred in several areas, including Tessit and Hourara in the Gao region of northeastern Mali in July 2023, and near Anderanboukan in the Ménaka region in October 2022 (Dahiru, 2024). In March 2023, the two groups engaged in combat in the Seytenga area of Burkina Faso's Seno province. From January to April 2023, hostilities between ISGS and JNIM in the Ménaka and Gao regions resulted in a significant decline in security, claiming hundreds of civilian lives. This violence has led to extensive displacement, especially in Tessit, compelling residents to seek safety in Gao and neighboring areas, which has triggered substantial humanitarian crises as people flee the conflict (Nsaibia, 2021). The enduring conflict disrupts agricultural activities and trade, leading to food shortages and economic hardships for the affected communities. Moreover, schools have been closed due to the unrest, further complicating the situation for families (Nsaibia, 2021). ISGS exploits existing ethnic tensions and local grievances to recruit fighters, which can heighten communal divisions and result in further conflict among the populations. In addition, ISGS employs coercive tactics to extract taxes (zakat) from civilians with no benefits in return,



while JNIM seeks to redistribute taxes to gain community support. This difference in approaches affects how communities perceive each group and their willingness to collaborate with them (Thompson, 2021). The Contention has led to fragmentation within local communities, as individuals associate themselves with either JNIM or ISGS based on ideological beliefs or personal grievances. These divisions often create tensions among those who previously coexisted peacefully. The competition between these factions frequently aggravates existing ethnic tensions, resulting in conflicts that involve different community factions and complicate local dynamics further. As both groups focus on their rivalry, effective governance has diminished in many areas, leaving local populations vulnerable without state protection or services. This power vacuum enables both groups to impose their own authority, often resorting to violence.

Conclusion

The escalating conflict between Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has profoundly destabilized the Sahel region. Their rivalry, fueled by differing ideologies and a struggle for control, has resulted in a significant rise in violence and insecurity. Clashes between the two groups have led to widespread displacement, worsened humanitarian crises, and weakened local governance. The increasing intensity and frequency of their attacks, which target both civilians and each other, underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated response to tackle the complex challenges posed by these groups.

Recommendations

Strengthened Regional Cooperation

Enhance collaboration among Sahelian countries (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania) to improve intelligence sharing, conduct joint operations, and bolster border



security. This will enable a more effective response to the activities of ISGS and JNIM, helping to prevent cross-border operations.

Assistance for Local Communities

Boost humanitarian aid and support for displaced populations to ease the suffering caused by the conflict. Focus on rebuilding infrastructure, including schools and healthcare facilities, to restore essential services in impacted regions.

Tackling Root Causes

Implement socio-economic development initiatives to address the underlying grievances that drive recruitment for both ISGS and JNIM. Emphasize economic opportunities, education, and community engagement to diminish the attraction of extremist ideologies.

Enhance Governance and Rule of Law

Promote initiatives aimed at establishing effective local governance and enhancing the rule of law in areas affected by conflict. Boost the capabilities of local authorities to ensure security, settle disputes, and manage resources efficiently.

Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Radicalization

Strengthen counter-terrorism measures by equipping and training security forces to more effectively combat militant groups. Also, invest in counter-radicalization programs to curb the spread of extremist ideologies and decrease the recruitment of new fighters.

International Support and Coordination

Advocate for greater involvement from international organizations like the United Nations and the African Union in mediating the conflict and supporting regional stabilization. Boost funding for international development and peacekeeping missions in the Sahel.

Encourage Dialogue and Negotiation

Identify opportunities for dialogue and negotiation between the conflicting groups, where possible, to de-escalate violence and pursue potential agreements that could reduce hostilities. Collaborate with local leaders and influencers who can assist in peace efforts. Addressing the complex dynamics of the Sahel's conflict necessitates a comprehensive approach that harmonizes immediate security concerns with long-term strategies for development and stability.

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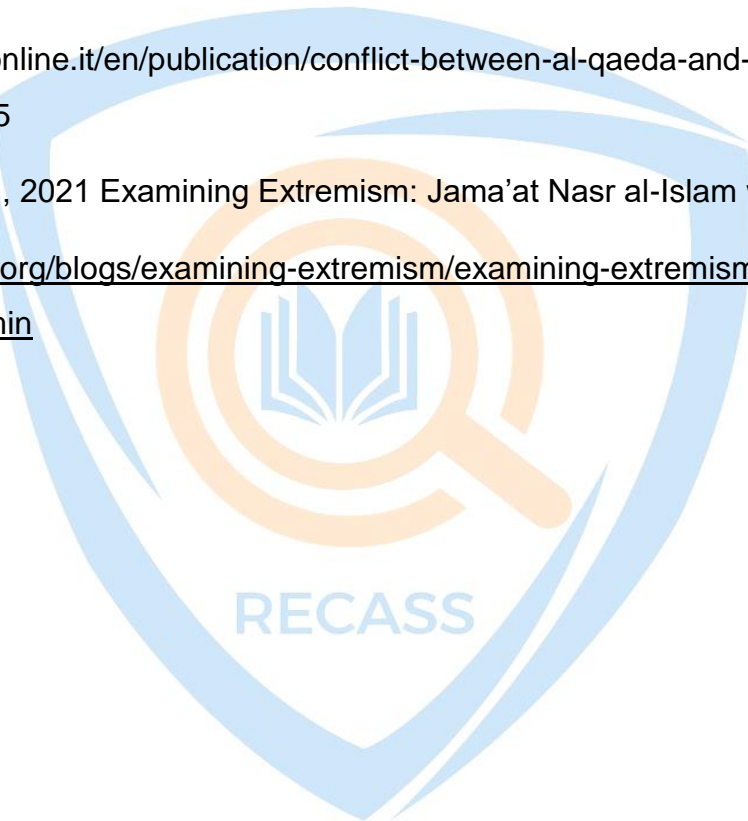


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