NATO Southern HUB

MAPPING
THE TERRORIST THREAT
IN THE SOUTH

Case Study: Rivalry and Confrontation among Sahelian Terrorist Groups

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the tri-border region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger the relationship between Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) has gone through various phases over recent years. From peaceful co-existence and even collaboration up to and including most of 2019, there followed high intensity conflict in 2020, only for there to be a return to relatively low levels of violence thus far in 2021.

Critical changes in the conduct of terrorist groups, from Mali to the Lake Chad Basin, such as the sudden transition from a non-aggressive posture towards full-scale conflict or the forging of new alliances, have the potential to alter the entire security dynamics in the Sahel. Undoubtedly, the volatility of the relationship between JNIM and ISGS represents a constant threat to stability across the whole region.

Consequently, there is a pressing need for more complete understanding of this intricate relationship, including: the complexity of their relationships with the local populations and their traditions and religious beliefs; the reasons for the highly unusual peaceful period between the two groups and, perhaps more importantly, the subsequent descent into violent conflict; and the effects on regional security of their conflictual relationship. Additionally, greater knowledge regarding each group's activities is necessary, including: the relevance of changing/removing key leaders; the abilities of the groups to provide informal governance; the increased focus on the acquisition of natural resources and access to other sources of wealth; and the developing recruiting process. Fundamentally, the terrorist groups' activities should be carefully monitored in order not only to understand the history and current state of the security dynamics, but also to ensure the best possible preparation should the extreme violence flare up again.

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INTRODUCTION

The central Sahel region, located south of the Sahara and bordering the Lake Chad region, has joined the Levant as an epicenter of global terrorism. Since the geopolitical upheavals of the so called "Arab Spring", in particular the fall of Gaddafi in Libya, the Sahel has been caught up in a vortex of endless violence.

The destabilisation of the region began in 2012 when the Malian government lost control of the northern part of its territory, which fell into the hands of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Touaregs of Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), who concluded an alliance. Very soon after the outbreak of this crisis, and to prevent the terrorists from advancing southwards to Mopti or Bamako, Mali decided to respond militarily and accepted international collaboration. By 2015, the terrorist groups had spread to remote areas where there was less state presence in Mali and Niger, and later into Burkina Faso. Also, Boko Haram was already present in Chad, Nigeria and eastern Niger.

The two groups under study in this work are the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Daesh-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Despite the presence of international missions, they have both succeeded in expanding and spreading the geographical reach of their activities. After years of relatively peaceful co-existence, since the beginning of 2020 the Sahel has become the scene of a large-scale, violent confrontation between these two local branches of global terrorism, especially in the tri-border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, known as the Liptako, an area approximately one quarter the size of France.

Methodology

In order to obtain greater understanding of this transition, the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub ("NSD-S Hub") drafted a Food for Thought paper which investigated each organisation's roots individually, then examined their ideologies and strategies before going into an in-depth analysis of the conflictual relationship existing between them.

That document was used as the basis for a workshop organized by NSD-S Hub on 1 July, 2021 in collaboration with and attended by representatives of three organisations belonging to the African Union: the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT/CAERT), the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA) and the African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL). This collective effort, to develop and carry out a complex and cross-cutting project, was made possible by the excellent presentations of the institutions involved and is a demonstration of the strength and importance of the partnership between the NSD-S Hub and the African Union.

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The NSD-S Hub was delighted to host such renowned and experienced participants whose willing and insightful involvement were fundamental to the success of this collaborative project. This report compiles and outlines the main findings and results.

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PART 1

BACKGROUND

It is well known that ISGS and JNIM do not only carry out terrorist activities but are also highly relevant in the religious radicalisation, criminal and informal governance domains. Though the precise links to the global organisations of Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Daesh might remain unclear, being seen to be affiliated with them provides a sort of validation and is clearly a strategy to attract international recognition, recruits and resources. Considered "glocal" organisations, complex and multi-faceted relationships with all relevant actors are a common trait for both JNIM and ISGS.
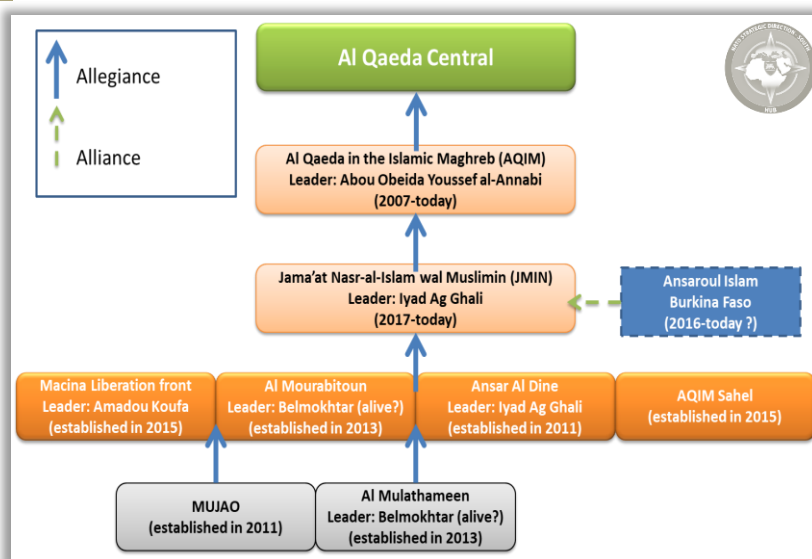
JNIM

JNIM was founded in March 2017 as a coalition of the Sahara branch of AQIM, Ansar Dine, Macina Liberation Front (MLF) and Al Mourabitoun. It is extremely active in Mali, where it is considered to be the dominant terrorist group, in Burkina Faso and also in west Niger. It has demonstrated considerable financial abilities, so the economic factor is an important indicator of its relevance.

The two most influential individuals in this organisation are undoubtedly: Iyad Ag Ghali (also known as Abū al-Fadl), founder of Ansar Dine in 2012; and Amadou Koufa, also known as Amadou Diallo, founder of MLF in 2015.

Figure 1: *JNIM Organization Chart*

The general consensus is that AQ has minimal direct influence on JNIM operations. Just as AQ acts in a largely decentralised manner, which has often been a key to its success, so do the factions within JNIM. For example, Iyad Ag Ghali has demonstrated interest in engaging in dialogue with the Malian authorities and perhaps re-enter the national political scene. Amadou Koufa, however, seems to have shown other priorities, such as armed action and expanding towards new horizons.[1]

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[1] Jean-Philippe Rémy and Madjid Zerrouky (2021), *Derrière l'enlèvement d'Olivier Dubois, le GSIM, un groupe djihadiste affilié à Al-Qaida*, Le Monde:
https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/05/06/le-gsim-et-la-strategie-de-la-prise-d-otages_6079349_3212.html

Regarding the relationship between JNIM and AQIM, there is, at the very least, a consultation process at the leadership level. As Al-Annabi, the AQIM leader, expressed in an interview: "*JNIM is a non-dissociable part of AQIM, which in its turn is a non-dissociable part of al-Qaeda central. … Regarding the geographical reality and the military pressure on its leaders and commanders, al Qaeda had to adapt with flexible command and control, therefore giving general and strategic guidelines, and then tactically it is up to each branch to reach toward achieving those guidelines depending on their realities. … AQIM follows the same process of leadership regarding its activity in different African countries*".[2]

ISGS

The ISGS was formed in May 2015 as the result of a split within the militant group Al-Mourabitoun. The latter was created in August 2013 after the merging of MUJAO and Al Mulathameen. It has been growing ever since and is currently very active in Niger and Burkina Faso while also extending its operations in Mali (Menaka region).

Its leader is Adnan abu Walid al-Sahraoui and it progressed from a recognized, though unofficial (and generally ignored) Daesh affiliate to an increasingly important and – as of March 2019 – according to Daesh narrative is a member of the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP). However, the precise relationships ISGS has with ISWAP and Daesh remain unclear. In particular, the issues of authority and hierarchy[3] between ISGS and ISWAP are still debatable. Since 2018, ISGS has reportedly strengthened its links with ISWAP, Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) and militants in the Democratic Republic of Congo.[4] In addition to the growing capability among the insurgents to take control of key territories, such alleged cooperation might enable Daesh to be present from the Gulf of Guinea to Mozambique.

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[2] Wassim Nasr (2021), *Implications of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's New Leadership, Newlines Institute,* https://newlinesinstitute.org/al-qaeda/implications-of-al-qaeda-in-the-islamic-maghrebs-new-leadership/

[3] Janie Gosselin (2021), *Le Sahel, théâtre d'opérations des djihadistes*, La Presse, https://www.lapresse.ca/international/afrique/2021-01-08/le-sahel-theatre-d-operations-des-djihadistes.php

[4] Dr. Theodore Karasik (2021), *West must not ignore growing Daesh threat in Mozambique*, ArabNews, https://www.arabnews.com/node/1837526

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PART 2

OBJECTIVES, METHODS AND RESOURCES

By virtue of their allegiances with their respective global organizations, the fundamentals of JNIM and ISGS ideologies are rooted in the radical Salafi ideology adopted by AQ and Daesh globally. As a result, the implementation of an Islamic State, built on a strict interpretation of Sharia is a common ideal and a central value for both JNIM and ISGS. Therefore, both groups oppose what is being perceived as falling outside their idealistic models of state, in particular the international community and the secular state authorities.

Aside from the aforementioned key commonalities, there are also some notable ideological differences between JNIM and ISGS concerning, in particular, the relationship with the civilian population, as well as the methods and the extent of the Sharia implementation. Drawing from the global AQ approach, JNIM attempts to portray itself as a "moderate alternative" to ISGS, therefore tending to have a more tolerant relationship with fellow Muslims.[5] As for ISGS, a fundamentalist interpretation of the Takfirist ideology, largely embraced by Daesh in the Middle East and elsewhere, legitimize the use of violence against all civilians, to include Muslims, whenever they are seen as not compliant with the radical views of the organization.[6]

The figures recorded during 2019-2020 show 49% of JNIM's attacks targeted civilians, compared to ISGS for which the figures stood significantly higher at 64%. However, when accounting for the weight of the civilian deaths in the overall death toll during the same timeframe, the differences are very much reduced: 63% of JNIM and 61% of ISGS caused fatalities were civilians.[7] Notably, the relatively softer JNIM approach is not distributed equally throughout the region.[8] In areas where the ideological approach has to accommodate more practical considerations, violence against Muslim civilians belonging to rival ethnic groups or with alleged ties to the government, such as the Dogon in central Mali, is far more common than, for instance, in the northern part of the country.

The implementation of Sharia-based governance remains a common trait of both organizations, although the intensity of the measures used is different. Again, JNIM

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[5] Center for Strategic and International Studies (2018), *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat Current and uture Challenges from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and Other Groups*, https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-salafi-jihadist-threat

[6] Jamileh Kadivar (2020), *Exploring Takfir, Its Origins and Contemporary Use: The Case of Takfiri Approach in Daesh's Media*, retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921706

[7] NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub), African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) (2021), *Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures", 3rd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report, Jan 2019 – Dec 2020,* https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/joint-report-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel; report using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project(ACLED); www.acleddata.com

[8] Megan Zimmerer (2019) *Terror in West Africa: a threat assessment of the new Al Qaeda affiliate in Mali, Critical Studies on Terrorism*, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1599531

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has a softer approach, aiming to gain the loyalty of the local communities by voluntary acceptance rather than by coercion. This attitude can be traced to the early stages of the Malian conflict, when the then AQIM senior commander Abdelmalek Droukdel, in the 2013 "Timbuktu letters", advised the AQ-offshoots in Mali to refrain from a radical enforcement of Sharia in an environment "ignorant of religion", but rather to attempt to educate the population towards acceptance.[9,10] As for the ISGS, anecdotal evidence suggests that it employs more radical methods for implementing the Sharia.[11]

Deeply entrenched in local realities, the phenomenon of violent extremism in Central Sahel cannot be fully understood if limited to analysis of the ideological motivators behind JNIM and ISGS behaviour. In a region where the importance of ethnicity is ever-present in violent extremist groups, practical considerations, such as social dynamics, although possibly tempered by ideological concepts at leadership level, are ever-present at the tactical level. The exploitation of local grievances by the extremist groups, in particular in the tri-border area, shows how ideology is often being traded for achieving more practical gains. In the case of JNIM, which is a relatively heterogeneous coalition, the balance between ideology and practical considerations also differs among its factions based on their nature and areas of operation. As mentioned above, while in northern Mali the violence against civilians is lower, thus illustrating a relatively high adherence to ideological precepts, the MLF participation in the intercommunal conflicts against the farming communities in the central part of the country shows that concepts such as non-violence against fellow Muslims can become of secondary importance when local realities dictate.[12]

Terrorist group strategies in the Sahel have often been described as "glocal", where the philosophies of their respective global organizations are followed by adapting to and exploiting local realities. In order to illustrate the strategic approach of such terrorist groups, the "ends, ways and means" strategy model, first promoted by Art Lykke,[13] is very useful. The fundamentals of this model can provide a comprehensive explanation of how the strategic objectives ("ends") of the terrorist groups are being followed ("ways") through the employment of available resources ("means").

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[9] Rukmini Callimachi (2013), *In Timbuktu, al-Qaida left behind a manifesto*, Associated Press, retrieved from https://www.pulitzer.org/files/2014/international-reporting/callimachi/04callimachi2014.pdf

[10] Associated Press, *Al-Qaida Papers: Al-Qaida's Sahara Playbook*, retrieved from https://www.openbriefing.org/docs/aqsaharaplaybook.pdf

[11] FDD Long War Journal (2021), *Islamic State documents implementation of Sharia law in northern Mali*, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/05/islamic-state-documents-implementation-of-sharia-law-in-northern-mali.php

[12] Troels Burchall Henningsen (2021): *The crafting of alliance cohesion among insurgents: The case of al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the Sahel region*, Contemporary Security Policy, retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1876455

[13] Yarger, Harry R. "*Toward a Theory of Strategy.*" Chapter 8 in Guide to National Security Policy and Strategy, 2nd edition. U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, June 2006, pp. 107-113

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Strategic Objectives - "The Ends"

JNIM and ISGS strategic objectives are based on combinations of their ideological beliefs and practical interests depending on the circumstances. First and foremost, the overarching strategic goal for both organizations remains the implementation of Islamic states based on a more or less fundamentalist interpretation of the Sharia in the areas under their control. To this end, the

Figure 2: *Key Elements of JNIM and ISGS Strategies*
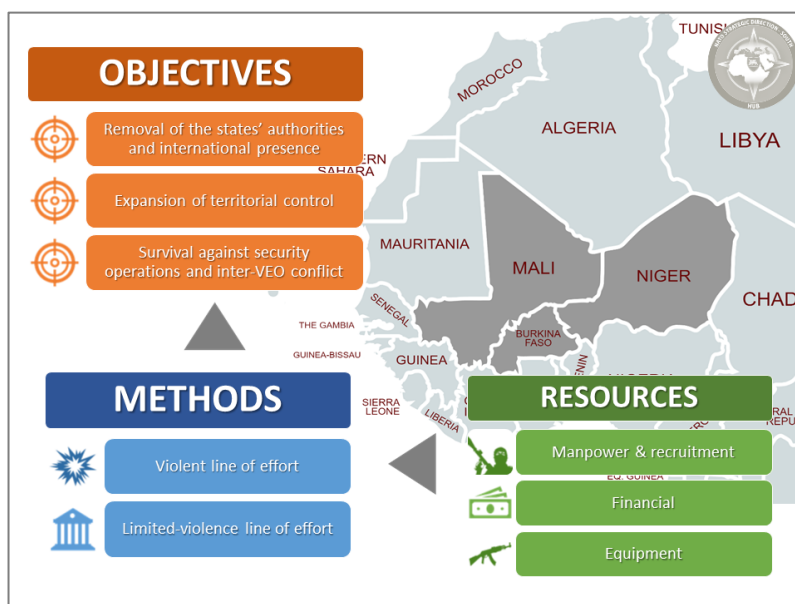
state authorities and the international community - French military and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in particular - are seen as the main enemies. On a more practical level, the control of territory and populations to achieve increasing legitimacy and access to resources (human, financial, material, etc.) would appear to be an equally important objective. Thirdly, the survival of the organizations, in the context of the conflicts with the local governments and their international partners, as well as between them, is also of strategic importance.

However, these strategic goals can be reassessed and re-adjusted. For instance, the admission from JNIM of possible reconciliation talks with the government of Mali[14] is a clear deviation from the assumed strategic objective of removing the secular models of governance, while at the same time illustrative of the extent to which ideology is relevant when opportunities for more practical gains arise. At the same time, in a relatively decentralized coalition such as JNIM, some of the priorities of its factions may not always concur. For example, the goals of Ansar Dine and the MLF to control the Azawad and the former Macina territories might entail a nationalistic dimension, whereas a non-Sahelian group such as AQIM would not share such ambitions. Also, for a group such as MLF, the overarching idea of an Islamic state may be less of a priority when confronted with more pressing problems such as the intercommunal conflict between the Fulani, from where it recruits most of its members, and opposing ethnic groups.

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[14] The National (2020), *Al Qaeda affiliate open to talks with Mali government if French forces leave Sahel*, https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/al-qaeda-affiliate-open-to-talks-with-mali-government-if-french-forces-leave-sahel-1.990684

Operational methods – "The Ways"

Both JNIM and ISGS employ a wide variety of methods to achieve their strategic goals. Although violent attacks are the most visible, less violent means, such as the provision of informal governance, are equally important elements of their strategies.
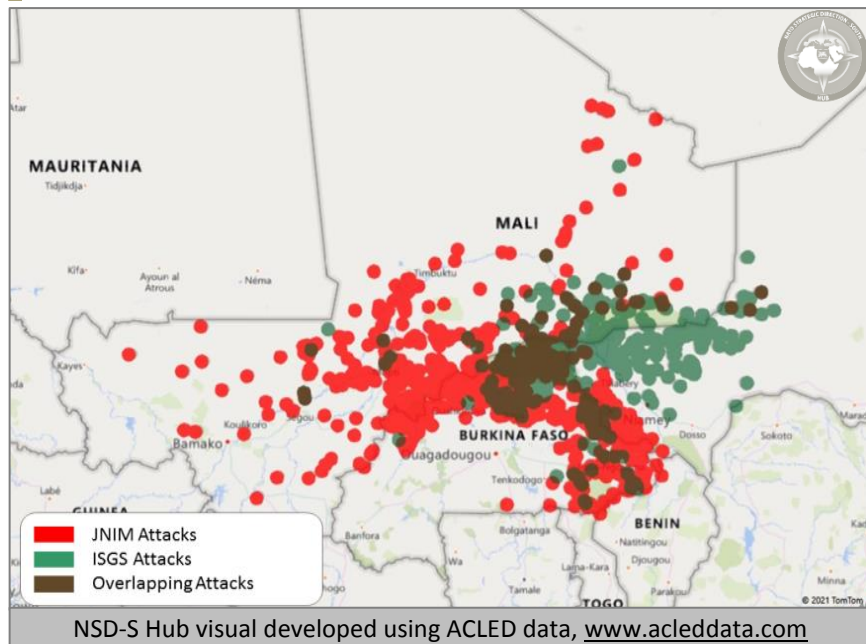
Mirroring the experiences of Daesh and AQ in other parts of the world, the

Figure 3: *JNIM and ISGS attacks January 2019 - April 2021*

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com

purpose of the violence is primarily to dislodge the state – including its security forces and international enablers - from certain areas, to allow terrorist groups to fill the void and build control by implementing alternate systems of governance. However, sometimes the local considerations prevail, so the violence perpetrated by the terrorist groups is not always for strategic objectives purposes. For instance, the decentralized JNIM model leaves a large degree of autonomy to the local commanders, so the attacks perpetrated against rival ethnic groups as part of score settling, although recorded as terrorist attacks, have little to do with the overarching ideological and political goals of the organization.

Violent lines of effort are mostly employed across the contested territories, rather than where terrorist groups already have a strong degree of control. The epicentre of violence is represented by the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where the presence of the security forces and the hostility of some populations require a more aggressive approach. High levels of violence are also recorded in eastern Burkina Faso and western Niger. Additionally, there have been recent indications that the terrorist groups are attempting to expand further westward into Senegal and southward into the Gulf of Guinea countries.

With 479 attacks in 2020, JNIM is the more active of the two groups, operating mainly in Mali and Burkina Faso. On the other hand, there has been a marked increase in ISGS violent activity over the course of the last several years. Its 355 attacks in 2020

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marked a growth of 74% compared to 2019. ISGS is mostly active in Burkina Faso and Niger, and to a lesser extent in Mali. [15]

Mali was the country most affected by violent JNIM and ISGS activity in 2020, when the 344 recorded attacks also marked a 56% increase compared to the previous year. Similar levels of violence have been recorded in Burkina Faso, although the 333 attacks which occurred in 2020 represented a notable 15% decrease compared to 2019. Conversely, Niger saw JNIM and ISGS attacks more than doubling in 2020 compared to the previous year, although the recorded number of attacks (133) still makes it the least affected by the two groups. However, Niger's security situation is far from ideal, since it has to simultaneously fight ISWAP and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region.[16]

Civilians are the preferred targets for both JNIM and ISGS, with 2,055 people losing their lives in the 824 incidents which occurred during 2019-2020. The national defence and security forces have also been heavily targeted, with a total of 1,068 service members being killed during the same two-year period. In addition, 105 public administration representatives and 51 members of international organizations lost their lives in terrorist attacks carried out by both groups between 2019 and 2020.[17]

Less violent lines of effort, in particular represented by informal governance, is employed by terrorist groups as an instrument of gaining and maintaining control over territories and populations by substituting the states' authority. Although certain degrees of violence against non-compliant individuals and populations may be employed when required, this is not a purpose per se. Instead, the terrorist groups' goal through informal governance is to expand their income streams through taxation and gain more access to human resources for recruitment, as well as to gain legitimacy at the local population level by portraying itself as a better alternative to the state administration. The informal governance is visible in four key domains: security; justice; political and economic administration; and social support and rules.[18] Considering the various degrees of control that the two groups have over the territories and populations in their specific areas of operations, it is likely that informal governance is more solid in northern Mali, where JNIM's Ansar Dine is the major terrorist group, while it is less developed in other regions.

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[15] NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub), African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) (2021), *Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures", 3rd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report, Jan 2019 – Dec 2020,* https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/joint-report-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel; report using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); www.acleddata.com

[16] Ibidem

[17] Ibidem

[18] NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub), University of Kent (2019), *Informal Governance of Non-State Armed Groups In The Sahel,* https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/informal-governance-of-non-state-armed-groups-in-the-sahel

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Resources – "The Means"

Manpower and recruitment: According to 2020 estimates, JNIM has approximately 2,000 fighters, while ISGS relies on approximately 500 members.[19] However, a precise account of JNIM and ISGS militants is difficult given the loose organizational structure of the two organizations, changing loyalties of some local groups and continuous recruitment, as well as the likelihood that many of its fighters are only active in a part-time capacity.

Both JNIM and ISGS recruit their members from the local communities in their areas of operations through a variety of methods. If in northern Mali the Ansar Dine bases its recruitment on the tribal loyalties within the Tuareg Ifoghas tribe, in the rest of the region its recruitment strategy largely capitalizes on radicalized communities. Somehow counterintuitively, in the Sahel the religious radicalization plays a less significant role than commonly believed. In fact, most of the drivers of radicalization are to be found in the security (ethnic conflicts, abuses by security forces and government-endorsed non-state armed groups/NSAGs), social (perceived ethnic marginalization) or economic (perceived economic marginalization, pastoral insecurity) domains. Terrorist group recruitment is also facilitated by the fact that, unlike in other regions of the world, radicalization in the Sahel regularly involves whole communities rather than just individuals. The high number of Fulani fighters that both JNIM (MLF in particular) and ISGS have within their ranks is illustrative of how radicalization at multiple levels is being exploited by terrorist groups.[20,21]

Funding: JNIM predominantly obtains its funds from kidnapping-for-ransom, extortion and from smugglers and traffickers who pay a tax in exchange for permission and safe transit through JNIM-controlled trafficking routes in Mali.[22] Illegal taxation of local populations in the areas that it controls is almost certainly another source of its revenue. According to estimates, JNIM's total income is thought to be in the range of US$18 million – US$35 million per year.[23] As for ISGS, specific sources and the

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[19] Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, retrieved on 26 May 2021, Terrorist Organizations - The World Factbook (cia.gov)

[20] NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (2020), *Drivers of Religious Radicalisation and Extremism in the Sahel,* https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/drivers-of-religious-radicalisation-and-extremism-in-the-sahel

[21] Luca Raineri (2020): *Explaining the Rise of Jihadism in Africa: The Crucial Case of the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara*, Terrorism and Political Violence, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1828078

[22] US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/#JNIM

[23] Nellemann, C.; Henriksen, R., Pravettoni, R., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Schlingemann, M.A.J, Shaw, M. and Reitano, T. (Eds). 2018. *World atlas of illicit flows. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment.* RHIPTO -Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, INTERPOL and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized crime. www.rhipto.org www.interpol.int; link to paper https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/world-atlas-of-illicit-flows/

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amount of its income are largely unknown, [24] however evidence suggests that the sources of its revenues include smuggling activities, local donations and taxation, kidnapping for ransom and other such activities.

Kidnapping for ransom is assessed as providing the majority of JNIM's funding, standing at US$8 million in 2017.[25] According to estimates, JNIM earned as much as US$40 million in ransom fees between 2017 and 2020.[26] Reportedly, in October 2020, JNIM received at least US$10 million as part of the deal that saw the release of the former Malian opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé and three European hostages in exchange for around 200 JNIM prisoners.[27]

The involvement in organized crime is critical to the financial sustainment of the groups. The terrorist groups are beneficiaries of illicit activities, and often act as service providers and/or 'regulators'. Their involvement appears to be generally indirect, in that they do not own the trafficked products. They may be simple beneficiaries of smuggling, or they may be involved in a given activity and derive financial benefits from it in several ways: by collecting taxes on convoys of goods passing through an area under their control; by providing escort, protection or transport services; and by the income from the sale of products, such as stolen livestock.

Artisanal gold mining also represents an important source of income for both groups, particularly in Burkina Faso and Niger, and to a lesser extent in Mali. According to a 2019 Reuters investigation, for the terrorists *"the mines are both a hideout and a treasure trove of funds with which to recruit new members and buy arms, and of explosives and detonators to stage the attacks that extend their power"*.[28]

Equipment: JNIM and ISGS rely on arsenals consisting mainly of small arms and light weapons (SALW), heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers and, to a lesser extent, mortars. Improvised explosive devices are also used by the two groups, albeit with different frequencies. The weapons are accessible through two

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[24] US Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/#ISIS-Greater-Sahara

[25] Nellemann, C.; Henriksen, R., Pravettoni, R., Stewart, D., Kotsovou, M., Schlingemann, M.A.J, Shaw, M. and Reitano, T. (Eds). 2018. *World atlas of illicit flows. A RHIPTO-INTERPOL-GI Assessment.* RHIPTO -Norwegian Center for Global Analyses, INTERPOL and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized crime. www.rhipto.org www.interpol.int; link to paper https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/world-atlas-of-illicit-flows/

[26] Daren Davids (2020), *Snatched in the Sahel; Militant Kidnappings in Mali*, S-RM, https://insights.s-rminform.com/militant-kidnappings-in-mali

[27] Rida Lyammouri (2020), *Kidnapping Remains a Big Deal in the Sahel*, Policy Center for the New South, Policy Brief October 2020 PB-20/78, https://media.africaportal.org/documents/PB_-_20-78_Lyammouri5.pdf

[28] David Lewis and Ryan Mcneill (2019), *How jihadists struck gold in Africa's Sahel*, Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/gold-africa-islamists/

main supply channels: arms dealers and weapons recovered following attacks on defence and security forces.[29]

During 2019-2020, 75% of JNIM's attacks involved small arms and light weapons (SALW); another 21% involved improvised explosive devices. As for ISGS, the vast majority of the attacks, in excess of 90%, involved SALW, while the use of improvised explosive devices accounted for only 6% of the total, showing less sophistication compared to JNIM.[30]

Participating, even indirectly, in trafficking or having links with traffickers facilitates the ability of violent extremist groups to obtain subsistence means (including consumer goods - food, medicine, etc.), operational means (arms, ammunition, motorbikes, spare parts, fuel) and communications means - telephones, etc. Of course, such activities could lead to competition over resources and, therefore, provide yet another cause of conflict.

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[29] William Assanvo , Baba Dakono , Lori-Anne Théroux-Bénoni and Ibrahim Maïga (2019), *Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma*, Institute for Security Studies, https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/violent-extremism-organised-crime-and-local-conflicts-in-liptako-gourma

[30] NATO Strategic Direction South Hub (NSD-S Hub), *African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) (2021), Terrorism in the Sahel: Facts and Figures", 3rd Joint NSD-S HUB & ACRST Four-Monthly Report, Jan 2019 – Dec 2020*, https://thesouthernhub.org/publications/nsds-hub-publications/joint-report-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel; report using data from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project(ACLED); www.acleddata.com

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PART 3

MAPPING THE JNIM/ISGS CONFLICT

Tensions between JNIM and ISGS began to grow considerably in 2019, leading to 2 incidents, one of which involved a fatality. However, the first few months of 2020 is generally regarded as the period when all-out conflict began. A proper understanding of how the relationship developed between the two organisations is certainly useful, including an analysis of the increased use of violence. Nevertheless, the most pressing question at this stage would seem to be what has caused the apparent reduction in the geographical spread and intensity of the conflict that has characterised the first half of 2021.

JNIM vs. ISGS Relationship – The First Years

ISGS emerged as a small and shadowy group, reliant on limited infrastructure to promote its struggle. It was therefore at a considerable disadvantage to JNIM, which in contrast inherited the combined numerical strength and military/media capabilities from its already well-known constituent elements.[31]

Figure 4: *JNIM and ISGS presence*

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com
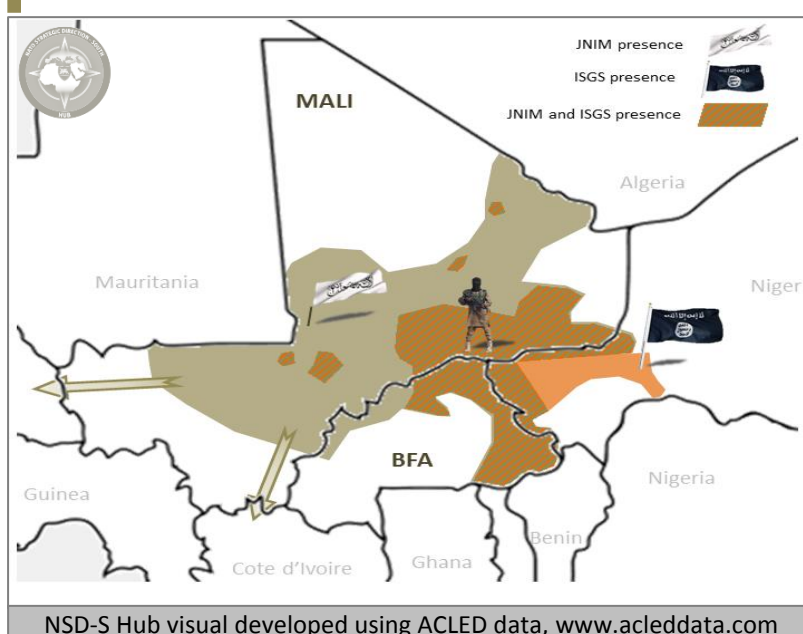
Despite this difference, from 2016 to 2019, JNIM and ISGS were capable of co-existing in relative harmony, having a common background and tending to cooperate, probably related to the fact that they were rarely present in the same territory. This was unusual, as in the rest of the world AQ and Daesh do not have neutral/friendly relations. This began to change when the groups started to expand into newer territories, leading to greater contact with each other, which led to a growth in competition and some skirmishes for governance and resources.

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[31] Heni Nsaibia (2021), *The Conflict between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On.* The Conflict Between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Sahel, A Year On | ISPI (ispionline.it)

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JNIM vs. ISGS Relationship – Increased Violence

The first violent confrontation occurred on 15 July, 2019 in Nassoumbou (in Soum province, Burkina Faso). By the end of 2019, disputes were arising regularly due to growing grievances. Nonetheless, the terrorist groups managed to continue a relatively amicable coexistence in the area, being able to divide their spheres of influence.

Figure 5: *Clashes between JNIM and ISGS, Jan 2019 – Apr 2021*

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com
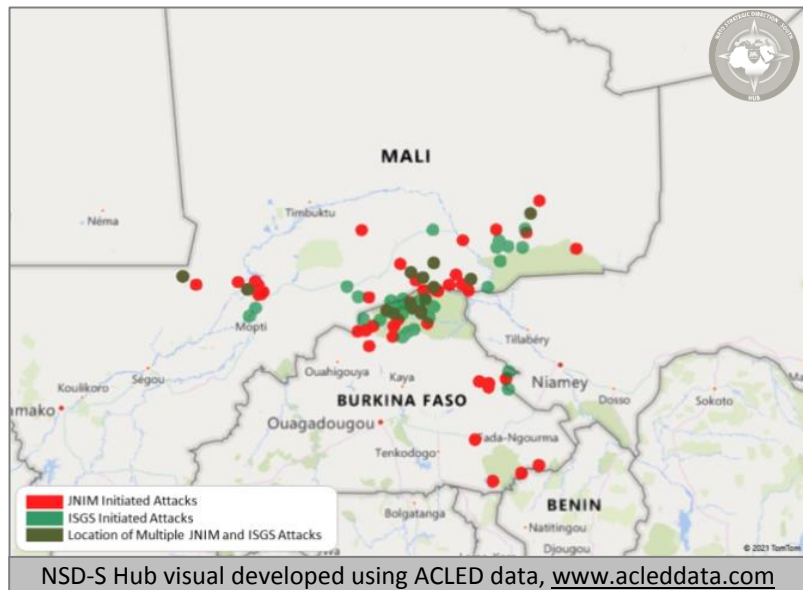
This changed radically in early 2020. During the initial escalation in Mali, the confrontation affected the Inner Niger Delta in the Mopti Region and the borders with Niger and Burkina Faso.

Figure 6: *Clashes between JNIM and ISGS by Administrative Region*

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com

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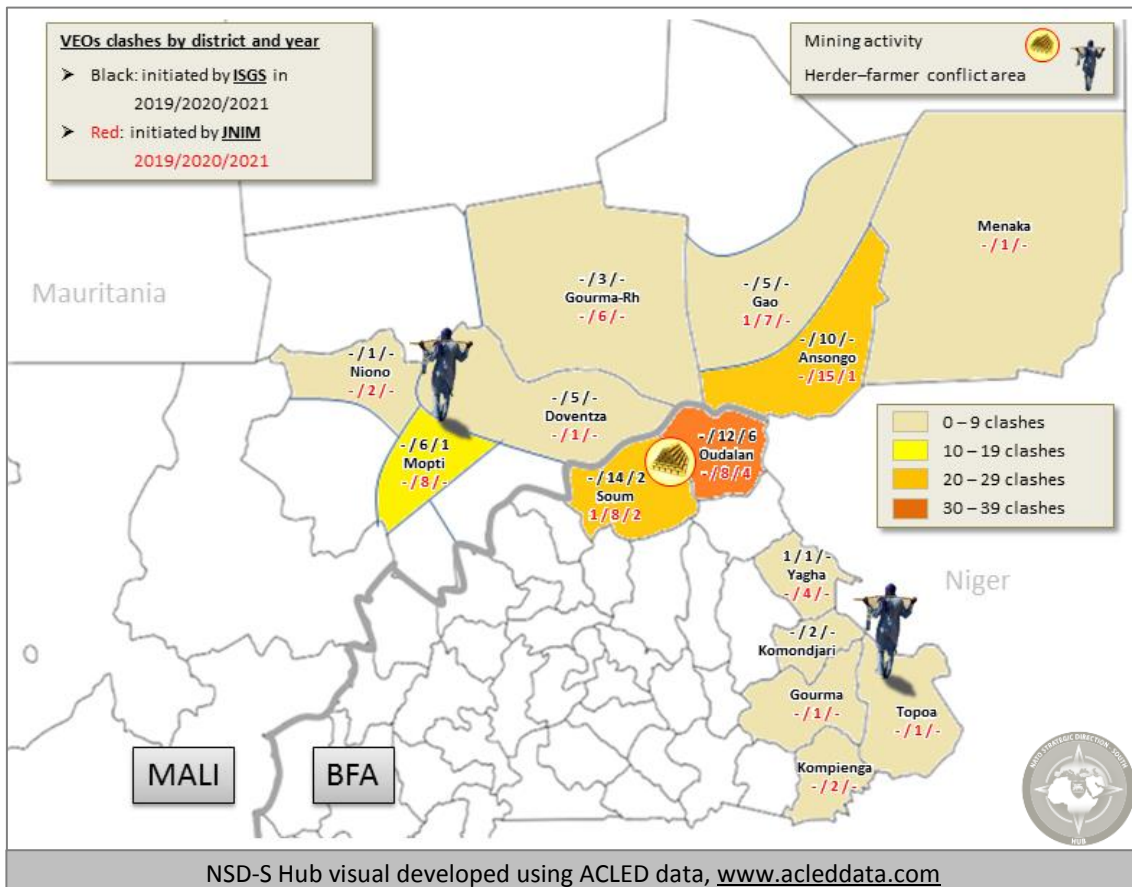
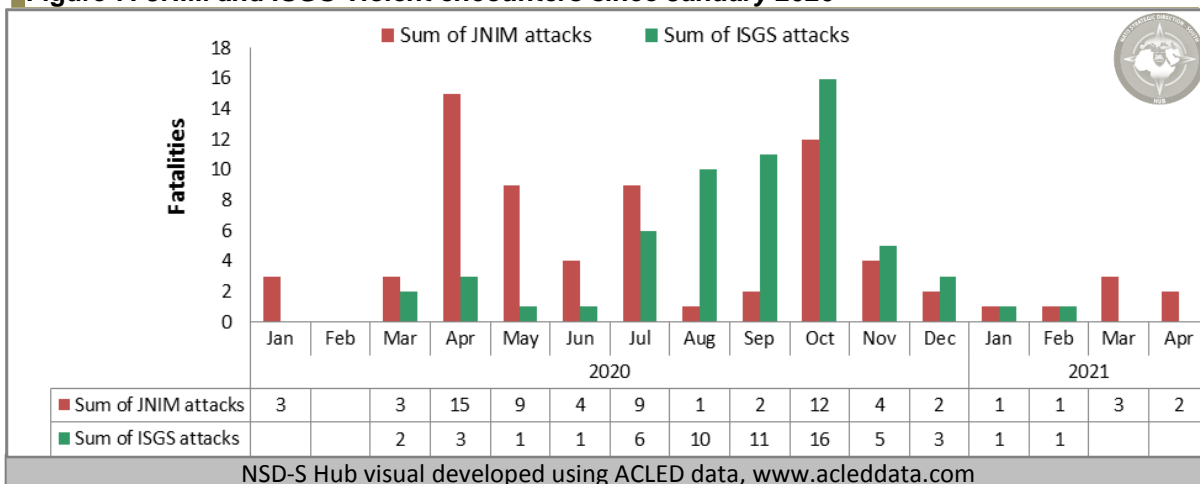The spread of fighting led to a rapid concentration of attacks in the tri-border region. This was where the two groups had been sizing each other up and it also constitutes the longest section of border between them. Since it is rich in mining, this territory is a key area. It is, therefore, considered highly unlikely that JNIM and ISGS will be able to reach an agreement so as to return the situation to as it had once been.

In 2021, there has been a marked increase in the level of terrorist activity in Burkina Faso. The JNIM coalition activity has been practically equal to that of ISGS, with the former focusing on the border with Mali, while the latter has acted in the eastern zone. Both groups are also expanding towards the south of the country, in which the JNIM presence predominates, although with increasing pressure from ISGS. Most of the terrorist attacks took place in the mining-rich, northern half of the country where there are important gold deposits which attract the interest of terrorist groups. Neither JNIM nor ISGS have managed to establish and maintain a significant presence within the territory of the other, although it is ISGS which habitually challenges JNIM by trying to get its members to swear allegiance to Daesh. The failure of these attempts reflects the importance of the ethnic factor and tribal integration when it comes to sharing a greater affinity with one terrorist group or another.
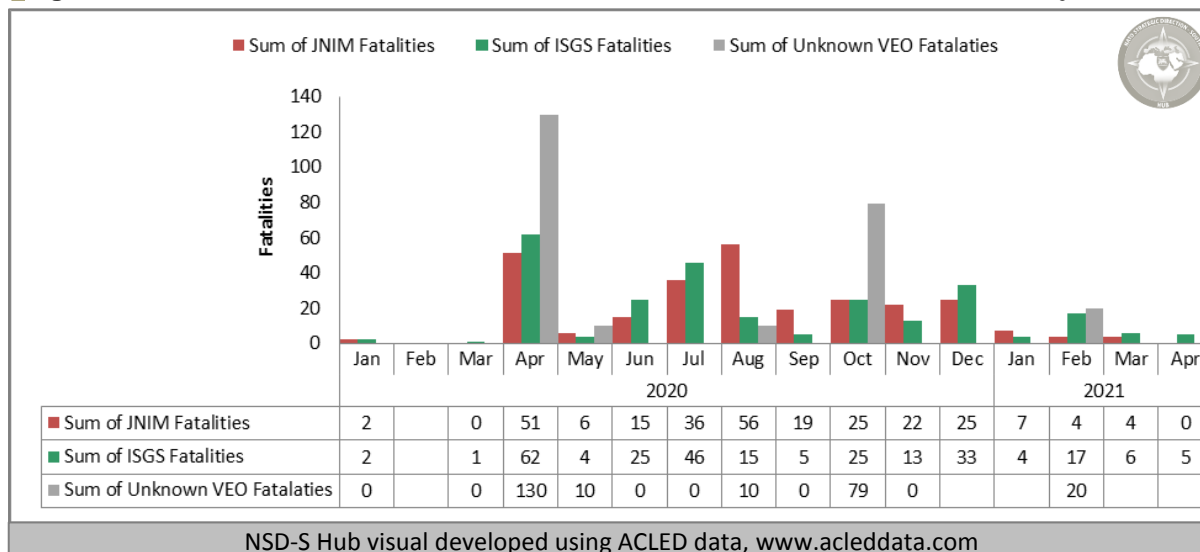
Fundamentally, originating in Mali and west Niger, the potential areas of operation of the two groups are still increasing, especially to the south and the west. Burkina Faso is the main battlefield and the availability of natural resources (artisanal mining) and raw materials is undoubtedly central to the conflict.

Figure 7: *JNIM and ISGS Violent encounters since January 2020*

	Jan		Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
						2020								2021		
Sum of JNIM attacks	3		3	15	9	4	9	1	2	12	4	2	1	1	3	2
Sum of ISGS attacks			2	3	1	1	6	10	11	16	5	3	1	1		

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com

Although there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate the deterioration of the relationship between JNIM and ISGS, there is less regarding what the causes were and what the current relationship between them may be. It is possible that among the reasons for this heightened rivalry were more similar combat capabilities, perhaps making the 'alliances of convenience' less necessary or even redundant.

Figure 8: *JNIM and ISGS Fatalities Resulted from violent encounters since January 2020*

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
							2020								2021	
■ Sum of JNIM Fatalities	2	0	51	6	15	36	56	19	25	22	25	7	4	4	0	
■ Sum of ISGS Fatalities	2	1	62	4	25	46	15	5	25	13	33	4	17	6	5	
■ Sum of Unknown VEO Fatalities	0	0	130	10	0	0	10	0	79	0			20			

NSD-S Hub visual developed using ACLED data, www.acleddata.com

JNIM's admittance of potential talks with the government of Mali might also have added to the move away from peaceful coexistence. In January 2020, ISGS publically denounced JNIM, which began a tit-for-tat battle of inflammatory and propaganda publications, although the JNIM produced publications demonizing ISGS came subsequent to and were lesser in number than ISGS's. ISGS refers to the issue of JNIM's rapprochement with the Malian government by making a comparison as "pushing them to follow a path similar to that of the apostate Taliban". Official messaging and claims will likely continue throughout 2021.

During the same period, some JNIM fighters in the Mopti region started to defect and pledge allegiance to ISGS. JNIM reacted aggressively, arresting and killing several fighters leaving the group.[32]

In addition to ideological differences, the aforementioned competition for resources is likely to have been a driver behind the deadly clashes between JNIM and ISGS, with nearly half of these reported to have occurred at hubs for artisanal gold mining or illicit transit.[33]

Finally, the growing number of deceased, 784[34] deaths in 131 attacks since July 2019, almost certainly has helped to fuel the hatred and makes the de-escalation of the conflict unlikely. To summarize, the most likely reasons for the increase in conflict would appear to be:

- Gaining, maintaining and expanding control over populations and territories;

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[32] Al-Muraqib (2020), *A Brief Note on the Spike in Intra-Sahelian Conflict in Light of al-Naba*. https://www.jihadica.com/a-brief-note-on-the-spike-in-intra-sahelian-conflict-in-light-of-al-naba/

[33] Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2020), *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara Expanding Its Threat and Reach in the Sahel*, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara-expanding-its-threat-and-reach-in-the-sahel/

[34] Fatalities distributed as follows: 272 JNIM, 263 ISGS, 249 Unknown (JNIM or ISGS); NSD-S Hub counting based on "*Armed Conflict location & Event Data Project* (ACLED) information. www.acleddata.com

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- Competition for resources;
- Aggravation of pre-existing ideological differences, possibly based on the methods of imposing Sharia Law, following the alleged change in JNIM's attitude towards state authorities;
- Claims by ISGS that JNIM compromised the fight against national and international actors;
- JNIM's fight with its defector groups was labelled as part of the conflict with ISGS.

JNIM vs. ISGS – Reduction in the conflict

During the first four months of 2021, however, apart from the increase in violence in Burkina Faso, it seems that the reduction in inter-group violence between JNIM and ISGS, first evidenced towards the end of 2020, has continued.

It is likely that there is a variety of causes for such a reduction, and even a multitude of permeations and combinations of them. Probable issues of relevance include: pressure from counter-insurgency forces; a multi-front war doesn't allow the groups to concentrate on offensives against each other; the conviction that the governments and international forces supporting them are the only enemies; and awareness that there is plenty of territory to conquer without the need to enter each other's.

PART 4

JOINT ASSESSMENT

This section provides the results of a Joint Assessment elaborated by ACSRT, CISSA and the NSD-S Hub carried out during an on-line workshop held in June 2021.

Despite the plethora of data regarding the evolution of the relationship between JNIM and ISGS, the degree to which the conflict between the two impacted their operations remains debatable. While some experts believed that the conflictual relationship resulted in an increased resilience and had little effect on regular operations, others considered that the conflict eroded their operational capacity due to the increased drain on human and financial resources. Discussions did reveal a common opinion, however: the conflict between JNIM and ISGS led to an initial decrease in activity, but their ability to adapt to the new conditions permitted each group to return their operations to normal levels in the later stages.

Provided the conflict between JNIM and ISGS continues, it will likely be concentrated in the following three areas across the Sahel: the Tillabéri region in Niger, with the goal of gaining control of the illegal trafficking routes; Burkina Faso, in order to control the exploitation of mineral resources and gain access to explosives used in the mining process; central Mali, with ISGS aiming to gain local loyalties in a JNIM-controlled area

Affecting both Niger and Chad, the security dynamics in the Lake Chad basin are increasingly relevant to the development of the overall security context in the broader Sahel.

Recent developments indicate a re-merger between Boko Haram and ISWAP following the death of Abubakar Shekau.

A BH/ISWAP re-unification is likely to pose a renewed challenge for the security forces of Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and particularly Niger which is already facing terrorist attacks by JNIM and ISGS in the west.

In relation to the Central Sahel, a worst case scenario would see the consolidation of relations between the BH/ISWAP block and the ISGS, although some notable ideological differences between the two terrorist entities may complicate such a process.

by portraying the latter as "weak" with reference to the alleged reconciliation process between it and regional governments.

Changes in the key leadership are unlikely to alter the overall level of threat posed by the terrorist groups. While the resilience of a terrorist organization is largely dependent on how well they can generate new leaders, the proven ability of terrorist fighters to "migrate" from one group to another, while still maintaining their combat capabilities

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and operational outreach, call into question the real impact of "neutralizing" leaders. An octopus allegory was used by the experts to better illustrate the complexity of the terrorist groups' inter- and intra-dynamics.

Although uncertain for the time being, possible increased cooperation between ISWAP (to include its upgraded version which would assimilate Boko Haram elements) and ISGS is realistic and it should be given particular attention. Should the two groups manage to strengthen their ties, Niger would find itself in a critical situation. It would have to face a complex security threat composed of a coordinated effort by Daesh offshoots at both its western (Tillabéri region) and eastern (Diffa region) borders, as well as facing JNIM which is increasingly active in the Tillabéri region.

According to the experts, the posture of the international security presence, which includes the envisaged reconfigurations through increased "internalization", is likely to have a strong impact on the balance of power across the Sahel. With local security forces still unable to manage the current security challenges in an independent manner, a worst-case scenario withdrawal of the current international military presence would risk generating a critical situation similar to that existing in Mali in 2013, prior to the intervention of Operation Serval. In such circumstances, the regional governments would likely find themselves in unfavorable positions with respect to the terrorist groups, which could opt to attempt to overthrow the national authorities instead of searching for more peaceful means to settle the conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

After years of relatively peaceful coexistence between JNIM and ISGS, in 2020 the Sahel became the scene of an open war between them. However, there has been a reduction in the geographical spread and intensity of the conflict so far in 2021. Some notable differences exist between JNIM and ISGS concerning, in particular, the relationship with the civilian population, as well as the methods and the extent of the Sharia implementation. Although violent attacks are the most visible, informal governance is employed by both JNIM and ISGS as instruments of gaining and maintaining control over new territories and populations by substituting the state authority. The state authorities and the international community are seen as the main enemies.

Importantly, neither JNIM nor ISGS have managed to establish a significant presence within the territory of the other and the dynamics in the relationship is ever evolving and adapting to suit local conditions. The effect of these clashes on the groups' abilities to effectively carry out their activities is not absolutely clear. It seems that the reduction in activity caused by the surge in violent rivalry has tended to be purely short term, as both groups have demonstrated an ability to return to their previous levels.

Given the highly volatile relationship witnessed over the past two years, the outlook for the conflict between JNIM and ISGS provides for a very wide range of possibilities. With this in mind, close monitoring of the developments will be required, and should focus on:

- The evolving JNIM attitude towards local authorities, in particular regarding the alleged talks with the Mali and Burkina Faso governments, as this has the potential to shape ISGS attitude towards JNIM.

- The reconfiguration of the international presence in the Sahel and the effects this would have, including, but not limited to, how any resulting alteration in the strength of local authorities might affect the abovementioned dialogues with JNIM.

- The yet unconfirmed but realistic possibility of an increasingly consolidated Daesh front in the larger Sahel. An ISWAP/BH merger, possibly combined with improved cooperation between the Lake Chad terrorist block and ISGS, might sway the balance of power towards the latter. If this were to happen, the wider consequences for the region would be severe and would almost certainly lead to a more aggressive ISGS posture in relation to JNIM.

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