Economic warfare in southern Mali
Intersections between illicit economies and violent extremism
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Summary

The densely populated southern regions of Kayes and Koulikoro in Mali are at a watershed moment, with the rapid expansion into the regions by Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) from the north and central regions. The two regions provide JNIM with new and profitable frontiers for resource exploitation, such as access to a vast tax base and control of the lucrative timber logging sector. The regions also provide JNIM with opportunities for cattle rustling, kidnapping, banditry and access to artisanal gold mining sites.

Key points

For the government

- Promote regular confidence-building initiatives between farmer and herder communities in order to reduce stigmatisation and alliance with JNIM.
- Initiate a national dialogue with the aim of prohibiting hereditary slavery.
- Work proactively together with community.

For ECOWAS

- Urge Mali to revitalise the 2015 Algiers peace agreement.
- Seek international partnerships to support developmental and humanitarian initiatives in Mali in order to prevent radicalisation in the southern regions.
- Support national consultations over the abolition of hereditary slavery.
Introduction

Illicit economies and armed groups in the Sahel region are increasingly located together and are mutually reinforcing. Armed groups rely on illicit economies to boost their control and influence in conflict zones, enabling them to purchase weapons, recruit fighters and expand their territorial control.¹

Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (‘Group to Support Islam and Muslims – JNIM), especially the Katiba Macina subgroup, has made significant inroads into the southern areas of the Kayes and Koulikoro regions in the past three years, unleashing unprecedented levels of insecurity despite the regions proximity to the capital, Bamako.

Between January 2021 and November 2023 data provided by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reflects a significant increase in violence in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions – about 229 violent events and 577 fatalities compared to the situation in 2016 when only four violent events and four fatalities were recorded and between 2018 and 2020 when there were 42 violent events and 71 fatalities.² The Koulikoro region experienced more violence due to its proximity to the central regions between 2021 and 2023 (155 violent events and 486 fatalities) than the Kayes region (74 violent events and 91 fatalities).

As JNIM infiltrates and controls villages in the two regions, it reshapes the economy in its own interests. Villagers and government officials told the research team that attacks and threats by JNIM in the two regions are reported daily. They also report a higher number of weapons in circulation, an increase in kidnappings and cattle rustling and higher banditry levels.

According to a government official, ‘although they experienced criminal activities such as banditry and robberies before, violent extremism has brought aggravated violence in the two regions – a new phenomenon that prevents us from sleeping peacefully.’³ The expansion of JNIM has further exposed deep divisions within Malian society, while redefining the rights to and usage of resources.

The insurgents have expressed the intention to encircle Mali’s capital and impose strict Sharia law across the country and beyond.⁴ The southern regions are the only major strongholds of the government, which was significantly weakened by successive coups in 2020 and 2021.

Northern Mali has been overrun by Tuareg separatists and violent extremist organisations (VEOs)⁵ since 2012. In the past six months hostilities have resumed there in response to the poor implementation of a peace deal reached in 2015.

The central region, on the other hand, is partially controlled by VEOs, who are making a concerted effort to control the entire region. They are threatening to expand their operations to many West African countries, including Senegal and Guinea, as well as to bridge the gap between affiliates operating in Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire.

While the Malian government and its newfound Wagner⁶ partners are making significant territorial gains in the northern and central regions, they are overstretched and struggling to address complex crises. French and European military forces, along with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), have withdrawn from the country at the request of the military government.

There are significant gaps in understanding and responding to the fast-evolving security and criminal environments.

The aim of this research report is to provide more information about the intersection between illicit economies and VEOs in southern Mali. Although there is little literature dealing with the situation in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions, the situation is developing rapidly, offering insights that are vital to an early response.

This research maps the dynamics and key actors involved in the unfolding southward expansion, and their ability to exploit the vulnerabilities and economies in the two regions. This is key not only to a better
understanding of the situation but also to add to the store of evidence showing the ways in which protracted insurgencies and illicit economies are mutually reinforcing.

Methodology

The research involved a comprehensive review of existing literature on VEO conquests in Mali and the Sahel region. In addition, interviews constituted a significant element because the southward expansion of JNIM is a recent dynamic and little has been written about it. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants specifically in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions.

Among those interviewed were village chiefs, villagers, traders, hunters and youth leaders, who contributed to an understanding of the dynamics of the JNIM expansion and its impact on local livelihoods and economies in the two regions. The research team also spoke to timber loggers, herders, farmers and victims of attacks and JNIM occupation.

Local government officials such as mayors, prefects and sub-prefects as well as water and forest agents provided information about the implications of the JNIM expansion for governance and security. The team conducted focus group discussions with security agencies, including the police, the Gendarmerie, the Antiterrorist Special Forces (FORSAT) and the military intelligence services about their responses to the expansion.

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS), in partnership with the Bureau of Studies on Extremism and Community Conflicts in Africa (BSECA) in Mali, conducted the interviews. BSECA is a key member of the West Africa Research Network on Organised Crime. Interviews were conducted in the cercles of Kita, Diéma, Kati, Kangaba, Banamba including communes near the Baoulé forest, which straddles the Kayes and Koulikoro regions and with experts and civil society groups in Bamako.

Because the interviews took place in areas infiltrated by JNIM forces and in which they were operating, there was a reluctance by the population in some cases to share information. Some of these challenges were mitigated by engaging and seeking approval from community leaders and verifying the evolving situation in the two regions.

The report provides background information about the push factors involved in the southward expansion of JNIM. This is followed by a section on the strategic importance of the Kayes and Koulikoro regions and the areas of influence of the VEOs. The third section examines how JNIM are exploiting existing vulnerabilities in the two regions for their benefit. The fourth discusses the role of JNIM in illicit economies and the report concludes with a review of the community and state responses to the threats and some key recommendations.

Push factors

Over the years, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have pursued a strategy of conquest and expansion across the Sahel. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), established in 2007 in Algeria, became prominent in northern Mali in 2012 following the re-emergence of well-armed Tuareg separatists after the civil war in Libya.

In some cases, the rebels and VEOs cooperated against state actors despite divisions and friction between them. This played out when the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, in cooperation with various AQIM-affiliated groups such as Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith, founded in 2011) and the Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa – MUJAO), a breakaway faction of AQIM, took over much of northern Mali, including Kidal and Gao, in 2012.

In 2015, the Algiers Peace Agreement was signed between the government and more than 20 rebel movements aligned under the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA), a larger coalition of Tuareg rebel
movements formed in 2014. The agreement reduced the levels of conflict in the north until recently when hostilities resumed between the CMA and government forces as a result of the slow implementation of the 2015 agreement.

The vast numbers of rebel units and VEO configurations in northern Mali jostle for control of strategic routes, spaces and resources. In addition, CMA rebels have a ‘legitimate’ claim on resources in the northern regions where they are fighting for liberation.

VEOs, on the other hand, have ambitions beyond northern Mali and even beyond Mali to neighbouring countries. Central and southern Mali provide access to potential caliphates and resource bases in the densely populated southern regions, and gateways to other West African countries.

According to a senior officer in the Malian intelligence services:

*We have identified since 2012 that the intention of Ansar Dine and AQIM is to spread terrorism not only throughout the territory of Mali but also through West Africa. We have shared this intelligence with neighbouring countries since then. However, instead of seeing the threat as a regional issue, the impression seemed to be that Mali was begging the countries for internal support through an alarmist view of the expansive intent of the extremist groups. We have wasted enough time in negotiations and accusations while the groups were drawing up their plans and progressing because we are far behind them.*

Three major developments account for the successful expansion of VEOs into the southern regions. The first is the merger of various Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in March 2017 into JNIM. Led by Iyad Ag Ghali founder of Ansar Dine, JNIM members include Ansar Dine, AQIM, Al Mourabitoun, and the Macina Liberation Front (Katiba Macina). As a broad-based Al Qaeda Sahelian branch, JNIM provides material and human resources that enable the groups to operate beyond their comfort zones. This reduces the competition among the different allies thereby re-orienting the entire JNIM membership to the common purpose of promoting Sharia Law throughout Mali and beyond.

The second factor in the successful expansion is the role played by Katiba Macina, JNIM’s allied party. Katiba Macina, which originated in 2015 in the central region, has significant knowledge of both the central and southern regions. It is led by Hamadou Kouffa, a well-known radical academic and preacher from the city of Koufa in the Timbuktu region.

Kouffa was a sort-after mentor of many Islamic scholars in both central and southern Mali. Prior to establishing Katiba Macina in 2015 he had been in an alliance with Ansar Dine and MUJAO since 2012. When Katiba Macina was formed it staged several insurgencies into the central regions of Mopti and Segou with significant success recorded since 2016.
The group joined the broader JNIM coalition when it was formed in 2017, thereby opening up a significant resource base and opportunity to extend its influence. When JNIM established a foothold in central Mali a 2018 study warned that ‘lessons from Mopti can be applied preventively in the south of Mali, where radical armed groups have not yet manifested their presence but similar conflicts are brewing’. Yet, the lack of a solution to the complex Malian crises created an opportunity for the rapid expansion of JNIM towards the south.

The third factor is the adaptability of JNIM and its ability to work with collaborators, including bandits, individuals and communities that are willing to cooperate with it. JNIM portrays itself as a diverse and broad-based VEO that is not restricted to one ethnic group, although its fighters are predominantly of Fulani and Tuareg origin.

The differences among the fighters from the ethnic groups in the southern region led the group to canvass for broader membership while relying on intelligence and directions from local collaborators, especially bandits operating in the area and devotees sympathetic to its cause.

JNIM also benefits from a loose structure, has ‘no fixed position and frequently replaces commanders killed in battle to avoid a leadership vacuum’.

**Strategic importance**

The Koulikoro and Kays regions are strategically important to the expanding JNIM forces. The Koulikoro region provides a direct link from their strongholds in Mopti and Segou to Bamako while the Kayes region borders on Senegal (to the west) and Guinea (to the south).

Koulikoro and Kayes share a long border with Mauritania, which, unlike Senegal and Guinea, does not seem to be in the VEOs’ sights and the country remains relatively peaceful despite what is happening in the region.

Chart 2: JNIM expansion between 2017 and 2023
Security experts say the reason for this is that Mauritania is an Islamist state and VEOs receive supplies from there. A captured JNIM fighter in a Bamako prison described the porous border between Mali and Mauritania that enables VEOs to receive supplies used to service the fighters and their caliphates:

"Most of our supplies come from the area of Bassikounou (in Mauritania), and from Ber to Timbuktu city. We have close relations with traders from our brothers of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, we receive from them mainly gasoline, flour, cooking oil and rolling stock, exchanges of money CFA-Ouguiya-euro-dollar. Thanks to these traders of Mauritania, several of our villages are supplied. We return to Mauritania without problem and several times our emirs are asked to go and address a conflict between two villages or two people on the basis of Sharia law."

Areas of influence

At the start of their incursions into the Kayes and Koulikoro regions between 2017 and 2018 JNIM fighters promised to protect villagers against bandits and security forces who extort and abuse them. Villagers and security agents say JNIM:

"sent messages through social networks urging representatives of the administration (prefects, sub-prefects, mayors, gendarmes, police, customs, water and forests agents, teachers, NGO workers and others) to leave the area under penalty of being kidnapped or even killed."

JNIM began by dislodging bandits operating in the Banamba, Nara, Nioro and Kolokani area. Water and forestry agents say that in some cases bandits who agreed to collaborate are spared and support JNIM with hiding places in the dense Baoulé forest, which covers a vast area of nearly 1,000,000 hectares. The forest is a strategic location about 160km north-west from Bamako city and has four natural reserves: the Boucle du Baoulé National Park and Badinko reserves located in south-west, the Fina to the south-east, and Kongossambougou to the north-east.

Chart 3: Map of Mali with indication of Koulikoro and Kayes regions
From the Baoulé forest, JNIM extended units of various strengths to many cercles in the two regions with areas of operation categorised as areas of territorial control, areas of operational influence, and areas undergoing infiltration.

**Territorial control**

The areas of territorial control include those in which JNIM units have established hideouts and operate with limited resistance. They include a large swathe of the Baoulé forests and nearby rural areas of Forete Classé of Baoulé and the Block of Bandinko as well as Kongossambougou and Fina, where there are two training camps.

JNIM governs through preaching and levying zakat (taxes). According to security agents, at the time the research was conducted, the unit in the Baoulé forests was led by Abdoul Fattahou who is a head of the *markaz* (base) within the ranks of Katiba Macina. He leads operations along with two combatant leaders, Boucary Petal (alias Abou Mouctar) and Cadi Imrane Sékou.

**Operational influence**

In other places, mainly rural areas located in the cercles of Kita, Diema and Nara in the Kayes Region and Kati, Kolokani, and Banamba in the Koulikoro region, JNIM carries out recurring attacks.

JNIM’s daring expansive approach is evident in its attacks on security posts and officials in the two regions. A brazen example is the attack on 22 July 2022 on Mali’s largest military barracks in Kati (Koulikoro Region), which is 15km outside Bamako. Many JNIM fighters were killed, along with one soldier. Fifteen soldiers were wounded in the attack and several army vehicles were burnt.

In the Kita cercles, a government-imposed curfew operates between 6pm and 6am with the aim of limiting the operations of JNIM. Although the Malian armed forces (FAMa) patrol communes and villages, the patrols are infrequent and the FAMa is unable to protect the villages from JNIM forces. While the state often maintains a strong presence in big urban centres in Koulikoro, most villages are left vulnerable to JNIM infiltration and attacks.

**Infiltration**

Most areas in the two regions are undergoing infiltration by JNIM forces. Some experience sporadic attacks in which armed groups do not establish themselves. Among these areas are those around the Wongo National Park and the Fangala and Bangouko forests. JNIM fighters often visit these communities to gather information both about the community and about the whereabouts of the military.

Many villagers have been displaced by the insecurity in the two regions, while others have pre-emptively moved to more secure villages and urban centres. Mainstream schools have been closed in some hard-hit areas and partially closed in others, making children vulnerable to harmful activities and radicalisation.

There are few Koranic schools because most teachers have fled to major cities because of fears of attacks by JNIM. Currently, only humanitarian non-governmental organisations working in the fields of health and nutrition may move in certain areas such as in the Baoulé Loop between Kati and Kita, in the cercle of Diéma and in the Gaviniare area near the border with Mauritania.

JNIM mostly allows these aid workers to operate in an effort to avoid becoming estranged from communities in dire need of basic services.

**Community vulnerability**

Incursions by JNIM have ignited tensions between villages that oppose them (the majority) and those that are considered to be collaborators. Villages occupied by the JNIM are sometimes blamed for shielding the extremists – an allegation they deny emphatically.
According to a respondent from an occupied village in Kiban commune in the Banamba area of Koulikoro:

[W]e are nothing for these JNIM forces. They have killed many military officers, and water and forest agents, national guards, and special forces. What can we civilians do? We constantly alerted security agents of their presence from the beginning but no reaction.\textsuperscript{24}

A villager in Kiban, a small town and commune in the Cercle of Banamba in the Koulikoro Region, tells of the community’s first encounter with the jihadi group:

[T]hey arrived on a Tuesday with heavily armed youth, ethnic Fulani and Arabs of Mauritanian origin and some Bambara speakers. They gathered us at the mosque from 16h to 19h where they preached. They told the population that they want to live in the area quietly. However, they warn the population to avoid communication about their presence to the armed forces. To avoid reprisals and make our traditional agricultural and livestock activities prosper we decided to stay quiet in our village. We cannot cooperate with soldiers and lose the comfort of our village to be refugees in Koulikoro and Kita or Kati where our wives and children will be beggars or engage in prostitution activities. We will stay here until the state takes these areas back from these VEOs. We are not going to go against their will because they are stronger than us, but we continue to help and love our country.

JNIM expansion has not only led to suspicion, it has aggravated the divide between farmers and herders and between those communities that support hereditary slavery and those that do not.

**Farmer-herder conflict**

Farmer-herder conflict is a long-running issue between communities in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions who are predominantly agriculturalists and Fulani communities, who are pastoralists.

Most of the Fulani herders originate from the central regions while some are based in the towns of Kayes and Bafoulabe in the Kayes region. The clashes relate to the use of land, especially during the winter season from June to October, when pastoralists move southwards.

According to state agents, ‘climate change and desertification are affecting the availability of grazing land and water sources. We regularly try to bring farmers and herders together to find peace, but to no avail.’\textsuperscript{25}

Katiba Macina, the predominant JNIM group in the region, originated in the central region and its founder is Fulani. This leads to a blanket assumption that the entire ethnic group is radicalised, although field research shows that both Fulani communities are also victims of JNIM attacks regardless of the so-called ethnic categorisation.\textsuperscript{26}

JNIM advancement in the region has led to attacks on Fulani populations. The Malian army, along with Wagner mercenaries, has also been implicated in the execution of ethnic Fulanis who were allegedly linked to the extremists, especially in the central region, with a few reported cases in southern Mali.\textsuperscript{27}

In December 2021, for instance, Human Rights Watch (HRW) alleged that FAMa executed 13 men in Boudjiguiré in the cercles of Nara in Koulikoro region believing they were involved in an attack that killed 8 soldiers.\textsuperscript{28} The Fulani (also known as the Fula or Fulbe) are the ethnic group predominant in Boudjiguiré. The government of Mali refutes the claim of human rights violations and abuse.\textsuperscript{29}

Since May 2018, members of the Fulani communities have established a self-defence group called Alliance pour le Salut du Sahel to counter aggressors.\textsuperscript{30} The alliance also seeks to ensure the ‘survival of [its] traditions and resistance to the imposition of Sharia’, indicating that many Fulani groups are opposed to the JNIM’s imposition of these laws.

While the alliance protects Fulani communities from government-linked attacks, it was formed predominantly to counter self-defence groups in central Mali. Among these are the Dozos, a hunting association, and the Dogon self-defence group called Dan Na Amassagou (DNA). These self-defence groups have engaged in reprisal attacks both on the basis of long term farmer-herder conflict and over suspicion of alliance with JNIM forces.
Anti-slavery movements

An emerging dynamic in the Kayes region is that populations who are anti-slavery are suspected of alliances with JNIM forces. The Soninké ethnic group (also known as Marka community) is plagued by a cultural system of stratification involving descent-slavery, a system in which individuals are born into slavery and their status is determined by their ancestry.31

The so-called slaves are considered to be the property of their masters and are often subjected to 'forced labor without pay, denial of education, and civil right abuses'.32 This hereditary form of slavery is practised in the Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu and Kayes regions.

Although slavery is prohibited globally, Mali, unlike its neighbours Niger, Senegal and Mauritania, has no law that criminalises hereditary slavery. While it has a law against human trafficking and has signed the Forced Labour Convention, communities practising descent-based slavery say it is a cultural practice that must not be tampered with.

The government recently developed a strategy requiring all authorities to reject any association of an ethnic nature in order to minimise discrimination. This includes promoting sensitisation programmes against slavery. However, the challenge of social cohesion persists between the slave masters and so-called slaves.

The situation leads to violence between proponents and opponents of slavery such as the anti-slavery association Gambana, which was formed in 2017 to promote equality and protect the rights of so-called slaves. According to a news report in 2021, ‘between 2018 and early 2021, more than 3,000 people who were descendants of slaves were forcibly displaced in Kayes’.33 The servitude, hardships and abuse of the rights of so-called slaves play into the hands of JNIM.

According to a member of Gambana in the Kayes region:

[W]e have a duty to take up arms in the face of people who claim our skin because of the facts of history. In the Republic of Mali, all citizens are born free and equal before the law we cannot understand how individuals can say they are masters of an individual like them. We called on the tired government, but it is inefficient. Many of our young people join JNIM to restore our dignity.34

Many so-called slaves have reportedly joined the ranks of JNIM35 and there have been confrontations between slave masters and the anti-slavery group operating allegedly with the support of JNIM. However, there are no officially recognised organic links between the anti-slavery group and JNIM.

Illicit economies

Most respondents maintain that illicit economies play a critical role in the successful expansion of JNIM from its comfort zones in the north to the central and southern regions. This expansion extends beyond the ideological aspiration of promoting Sharia to a keen interest in controlling key trade corridors from Mali to many countries in West Africa.36

JNIM’s involvement in illicit economies also serves to showcase it as a governance provider keen to improve livelihoods, especially by opening up opportunities for illicit trade, which were previously restricted by the government.37

JNIM are attracted by five major economic opportunities: taxation, cattle rustling, protection economies in timber logging sites, kidnapping and banditry targeting gold miners and travellers on the highway.

Taxation and cattle rustling

In its so-called areas of territorial control and operational influence, JNIM uses zakat as a tool to demand and measure acceptance of its governance. Each village is required to pay zakat at the end of each year to JNIM emissaries through community leaders.38
Taxation requirements were communicated to villages in early 2021. Specifically, many communities in which JNIM wields significant influence report that the organisation often demands cattle as a form of payment. In return, it protects the villages from thieves.

Villages that fail to pay zakat automatically become a target for aggravated attacks, intimidation, cattle theft and robbery. In many of these villages, fears of JNIM attacks have slowed down economic activities such as farming, herding, fishing, collecting firewood for charcoal and trading.

In many communities undergoing infiltrated by JNIM, cattle rustling was highlighted during the field research as a common practice. Although they are stigmatised as accomplices in the expansion of JNIM, Fulani herders have reported that JNIM requires them to give an animal as a zakat payment. The more cattle the herders have, the more animals they provide as zakat. Fulani herders told the research team that JNIM fighters count the cows and take 1 cow out of every 25 cows counted. Cattle are forcibly taken by JNIM fighters in the Baoulé forest if the herders fail to pay zakat or to subscribe to their ideology. In other cases, JNIM fighters kill herders who seek to resist the JNIM fighters.

Field research shows that cows are the major source of livelihood even for security forces and that JNIM rustles cattle belonging to security agents both to generate funds and as a form of economic warfare against their adversaries.

The cattle are stolen and sold in other regions of Mali or in Mauritania and Senegal. In the Mopti region of Mali, the average price of a bull ranges between €458 and €458, while the cost of a cow is between €335 and €335. In the Kayes and Koulikoro region, the cost of a cow ranges between €450 and €687. The actual prices depend on a number of factors such as the size of the cow, the number of cows being bought, inflation, and the season it’s being sold. The large numbers of cattle stolen make it evident that rustling is a significant resource for JNIM forces.

Cattle rustling in Mali is a complex business that involves ‘cattle laundering’, whereby VEOs and bandits steal herds belonging to the military and citizens in the central region. Middlemen and traders are used to transport the cattle to the southern region, where they are exchanged with stolen cows from that region. This enables the VEOs to herd or sell cattle whose origin has been disguised without being confronted in the originating regions.

**Timber logging**

Prior to the JNIM incursions into the two regions, timber logging was an important occupation for villagers. It involves regular truckloads of timber being transported out of the forest, attracting huge funds for loggers. In the municipality of Keniéba in the Kayes region alone, about €12.2 million has reportedly been made in three years by exploiting timber. Some of the timber is transported to Mauritania for sale, and some are sold locally for construction use and charcoal production.

The JNIM insurgency reshaped the timber logging economy in the Baoulé forest area. Logging in the forest was initially managed by water and forestry agents who provided permits and access, although many loggers told the research team that the permit process is costly and time consuming and almost no permits are issued. Instead, the agents are accused of collecting fees to allow the loggers to operate – a role now taken over by JNIM fighters.

Initially, JNIM fighters did not demand fees from loggers. Responding to the grievances of the loggers, JNIM fighters drove away the water and forestry agents and the bandits who were robbing the loggers. In some cases, loggers willingly provide the whereabouts of bandits, enabling the fighters to try to recruit them and use their knowledge of the forest areas. Failure to help leads to attacks on the bandits. This served as a significant move to further build relationships with communities seeking better livelihoods.
A water and forestry agent told the research team:

[W]e were at least 70 agents who were always taking turns and night for the protection of this forest, today most of us are in the big cities like Kati and Kita and other localities where there is the presence of the army for our security.44

Over time however, JNIM fighters began demanding administration fees from loggers to protect them against bandits who operate in the forests and to allow them to continue their activities. The fees are paid in cash, fuel, or food items. Some loggers say that logging is too profitable and essential to their livelihoods for them to avoid paying the fees. JNIM fighters are not involved in logging itself, instead they demand zakat from loggers.

By 2021 JNIM had liberalised logging, opening it up to more loggers willing to obey their rules and pay zakat. Many loggers often pay FCFA5000 francs per month, others however choose to pay on needs basis per cart.45 However, some loggers indicate that the fee paid to JNIM depends on arrangements made by each logger and the JNIM fighters.

This highlights how those involved in illicit economies often adapt to security situations by aligning with armed groups to maintain their source of livelihood.46 Some loggers said it was far easier to engage in timber logging than it had been in the past because restricted areas had been reopened. Forest agents say there is excessive cutting and trafficking of timber, especially Kosso, a rosewood specie, in the Baoulé forest.

Kosso, known locally as ‘n’guénou’, is an endangered species that is highly regulated in line with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Much of the harvesting and export of the wood is carried out illegally in the southern regions, Kayes, Koulikoro and Sikasso, and involves bribery of water and forestry agents as well as armed groups that control the areas.47

Civil society in the Kenieba areas of the Kayes region has consistently protested against poorly regulated rosewood logging, although many key state and civil society actors are paid off.

News reports were indicating that Chinese traders were involved in larger-scale illicit timber logging and trafficking to Mauritania and directly to China even before the emergence of JNIM.48 A 2022 report by the Environmental Investigation Agency indicts China for importing more than ‘half a million kosso trees (a type of rosewood) from Mali – worth approximately US$220 million, between January 2017 and January 2022’.49

China reportedly imported more than 5 500 containers (approximately 220 000 trees) from Mali between May 2020 and March 2022. The wood is used to make luxury furniture.

Despite allegations by villagers that Chinese traders pay protection fees to JNIM fighters in the forest, it is not clear that JNIM do indeed play a role in the logging of trees destined for China.

Kidnapping

Kidnapping serves multiple purposes for JNIM in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions. Al Mourabitoun, specifically Belmokhtar’s Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), comprising Algerian and Mauritanian fighters, has been identified as specialising in kidnapping and arms and drugs trafficking. This long-term knowledge by the AMB is brought to bear in new areas of conquest especially areas of operational influence and those undergoing infiltration.

Among the victims of kidnapping are state security agents, their relatives, and their property. The agents are kidnapped to secure ransom payments and to intimidate other agents, many of whom have abandoned their posts and retreated either to the capital of a cercle or to cities, depending on where JNIM fighters are operating. In early June 2023, JNIM released several videos including one showing an agent of the presidency who was captured during an ambush en route to Banamba, a cercle in the Koulikoro region. In April 2023 the chief of staff of the interim president of Mali was killed in an ambush along with three others in the rural area of Nara in the same region.50
JNIM sometimes kidnaps local leaders to gain a foothold in local communities, especially in areas that have consistently resisted the group. This type of kidnapping is, however, rare as the group prefers to work with community leaders to generate long-term popular support. Intimidation and threats of attacks/kidnappings are used instead to demand allegiance. Foreigners and aid workers are kidnapped largely to extort ransom payments.51

**Mining and banditry**

Gold mines play a significant role in JNIM’s expansion into the Sahel region.52 The group is reported to control sites in Mali and Burkina Faso.53 In the Kayes region, which is rich in gold deposits, there is large-scale industrial and artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM).

According to security agents, JNIM plans to control mining sites in the southern regions as they do in northern and central Mali. There have been attacks on gold mines and transport systems in the Kayes region, although these have had limited success.

In September 2021, for instance, JNIM claimed responsibility for an attack on a convoy on its way to deliver equipment to the Australian-owned Morila Gold Mine.54 Five gendarmes were reportedly killed in the attack and four were injured. The government is making an effort to prevent terrorists from taking over gold mining sites in the southern region, its most valuable source of gold revenue.55

While large-scale gold mining is regulated by the government, some mining activities in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions are artisanal and take place without proper licences and oversight, especially in Kéniéba in the Kayes region along the Senegalese and Guinean borders.56

Intense artisanal gold mining activity has been reported in Baboto, Médinandi, Sitakily, Dialafara and Sadiola, where miners often pay customary vigilantes called Tomboloma who act on behalf of site owners and village chiefs, granting miners permission to operate in a village site for a fee.

Some civil society groups protest against alleged illegal Chinese miners in the area and government agencies make sporadic arrests.57 Artisanal miners use harmful chemicals and dredge rivers in search of gold, with severe health and environmental implications.58

Extracted gold is often transported and sold informally, thereby creating significant risks for miners. Illegally mined gold is transported to black markets either in Bamako or in neighbouring countries such as Senegal and Guinea. Motorbikes, public transport and personal vehicles are used to transport extracted gold to Bamako, where it is sold to ‘local licensed collectors or to other intermediary collectors or jewelers’.59

There are, however, a significant number of reports of bandits operating in the area stealing gold from miners and making their way to Bamako. Attacks have also been recorded in areas bordering Guinea, where heavy traffic makes it possible to rob traders, travellers, and miners leaving gold sites in Kéniéba.

According to villagers and security agents, bandits were a common phenomenon in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions even before the JNIM arrived. The bandits are indigenous to the Kita cercle and neighbouring countries such as Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania.

One well-known group operating in the area is called ‘Terere’ (looter) but there is no indication that it has a monopoly. However, since the emergence of JNIM, bandits operating in the area are using more sophisticated weapons and the attacks have become more brazen, indicating a link with JNIM.60

**Responses to VEOs expansion into southern Mali**

Communities experiencing JNIM attacks have devised various coping strategies. An association of village chiefs issues early-warning alerts of terror threats in the Kayes region and a crisis commission has been formed to support the internal security forces with fuel for patrols. However, most communities expect state security bodies to respond to the expansion of JNIM in the two regions.
JNIM incursions into the southern region pose a complex challenge for the government of Mali because the region, which is densely populated has been its remaining stronghold since rebels and VEOs overran many areas in the northern and central regions.

Several security agencies have been deployed in the two regions, including the police force, the national guard, the Gendarmerie and FORSAT, who have conducted patrols, thereby reducing the overt presence of the JNIM. Their greatest success was a special operation (Operation Kelêtigui), conducted in 2022.\(^{61}\)

However, JNIM are highly mobile and adaptable, using intelligence operatives in communities, thus making it difficult for security forces to dislodge them from specific hideouts. In some cases, security operatives along with Wagner mercenaries are being hunted down by JNIM operating in the forest areas.

Although most of the communities patrolled by security agents have a good relationship with the Malian agencies, there is still a degree of mistrust. Prior to the incursion of violent extremists, some villages had had no contact with police officers. The deployment of the police in the Diéma area in early 2023 remains a phenomenon that the villagers struggle to comprehend especially because most of the police officers do not speak the local language.

The police chief in Diéma also recounted challenges he faced when the police were ordered to conduct regular checks on the owners of motorcycles.\(^{62}\) The villagers, unused to such controls, revolted.

The police chief also told the research team that his officers lack the resources to combat the JNIM and he has received no gasoline to enable the conduct of patrols. The police station, located 400m from the city of Diéma, has only two computers for a staff of about 100 officers. It is situated in an area with poor lighting, making the officers vulnerable to attacks. Several have been victims of JNIM onslaughts.

While the National Guard and the Gendarmerie are viewed by some villagers as proactive forces that carry out frequent patrols and offensives against JNIM, their experience is not always positive because the forces are accused of taking bribes at checkpoints.

Villagers are also scared to share information about the whereabouts of JNIM because it is alleged that the National Guards and the Gendarmerie do not preserve their anonymity. Some village leaders worry that if they frequently visit or report cases at stations they may be exposed, and any leaks on the sources of intelligence could lead to reprisal attacks on the entire village. According to a villager in Diéma:

> when you communicate information to the guard or Gendarmerie these same guys go to the places of conversation to say that it is such and such who communicated the information. The National Guard and Gendarmerie are sometimes slow to respond to security threats. There was a robbery 1km from the Gendarmerie station but they did not intervene.\(^{63}\)

Many villagers prefer to collaborate with FORSAT than with other security actors operating in the area because they believe it to be more discreet and diligent than other forces. One villager told the research team that

> since the arrival of FORSAT, whenever they were alerted, they responded immediately. Last year armed young people came frequently to my village, and in their sermon they told us clearly that if we want to continue to cultivate our fields and go to our occupations, we should abandon our old practices and not inform security about their presence. The FORSAT presence reduces such encounters.

FORSAT’s success is attributable to the fact that it uses a consultative approach that involves traditional and local authorities. Every three months it makes courtesy visits to these authorities as well as to the youth and the Dozos to encourage cooperation to overcome the problem of jihadism.

There is an ongoing effort to reinforce cercles such as Kita\(^{64}\) and Diéma using new mobile units. The people of Diéma have such a good relationship with FORSAT that they are raising funds to repair the only armoured vehicle available for patrols, a fact that points to the limited resources available.
The military is also overstretched by the vast and inaccessible areas of operation. In other communities, such as areas populated by Fulanis and members of Gambana, security actors are considered to be aggressive because they treat the inhabitants as collaborators with JNIM.

Conclusion

This report reveals the steady expansion of JNIM into the densely populated southern regions of Kayes and Koulikoro in the past five years, creating a highly volatile and fast-evolving situation.

JNIM exploits community cleavages to maintain strong footholds in the two regions. Already deep divisions and clashes between sedentary communities and pastoralist Fulani herders have been aggravated, with the herders frequently accused of collaborating with the JNIM.

The emergence of JNIM is also shaping the stand-off between those communities who practise slavery and the so-called slaves, some of whom have allegedly joined JNIM forces to protect themselves.

The research data shows that the strategic importance of the two regions extends beyond JNIM’s drive to coerce the population into strict adherence to Sharia law. The regions afford the group significant economic benefits and a direct link to other West African targets such as Senegal and Guinea.

Research shows that JNIM extract zakat from communities under their control. Cattle theft and looting is on the rise, as is ‘cattle laundering’, where stolen cows from one region are exchanged with those from another in order to disguise their origins.

One of the most lucrative illicit activities is taking over the administration of timber logging rights in the Baoulé forest having dislodged Mali’s water and forest agents. JNIM fighters do not participate in logging but they collect zakat to allow loggers to operate.

Chinese traders are implicated in large-scale trafficking of Kosso trees, with unproven allegations that the traders pay off both government workers and JNIM to facilitate their activities.

While the attempts by the JNIM to control mining operations in the region have been unsuccessful thus far, they appear to have a growing alliance with bandits who target gold miners.

Recommendations

For the government

- While the government is struggling to address Mali’s complex problems the following measures are key to addressing the increasing foothold of JNIM in the Kayes and Koulikoro regions:

- It should promote regular confidence-building initiatives between farmer and herder communities in order to reduce stigmatisation and alliances with JNIM and should initiate a national dialogue with the aim of prohibiting hereditary-based slavery. Such a prohibition will ease tensions and prevent radicalisation in favour of JNIM.

- Security agents should increase the frequency and quality of their patrols and engage in dialogue with local communities. This will help to create confidence in the security sector’s commitment to protecting villages from JNIM onsloughts, thereby increasing opportunities for information sharing and community policing.

- While communities play a role in providing fuel for patrol teams, the government should provide combat-ready resources to security agencies, including fuel supplies, to enable them to carry out long-range and consistent patrols.

- The government, together with community and religious leaders, should proactively counter disinformation campaigns by JNIM networks using social media and praying centres.
For ECOWAS

- The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is constrained by the coup situation in Mali as well as the limited commitment of the junta to a speedy transition to democratic government. However, the VEO threats have had a significant influence on West African states, including on the recent wave of coups, specifically in Burkina Faso and Niger.

- ECOWAS, along with its international partners, must urge Mali to revitalise the 2015 Algiers peace agreement. This will help to address the grievances of Tuareg separatists and curtail their support for AQIM affiliates who seek to degrade government forces.

- It should support Mali in addressing the transhumance crisis that affects most West African states.

- It should also support national consultations in Mali to abolish hereditary slavery.

- It should seek international partnerships to support developmental and humanitarian initiatives in Mali in order to prevent radicalisation in the southern regions.
Notes

3. Interview, first deputy mayor of Kita, June 2023.
5. Violent extremist organisations (VEOs) is used more broadly in this report to refer to various groups that belong to JNIM and a few others that are not part of the JNIM alliance.
8. AQIM’s origins lie in a failed armed Salafist movements in Algeria that moved to the southern Sahara, with Mali as a major target; Mali has a history of Tuareg uprisings, with incidents taking place between 1962 and 1964, 1991 and 1992 and 2006 and 2009 as well as the ongoing rebellion that began in 2011.
9. On 8 February 2023 the key representatives of the three allies cooperating under the CMA announced their agreement to merge into a single political and military entity.
12. Al Mourabitoun is composed of two of AQIM’s splinter movements – the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s Al Mulathamun Battalion (AMB), also known as Those Who Sign in Blood Brigade, which merged in August 2013. MUJAO separated from AQIM in October 2011 and the AMB late 2012; Ba, Boubacar and Beås, Morten, Mali: A Political Economy Analysis. 2017.
14. Ibid.
15. Interviews, senior security officer in Bamako, June 2023.
17. Since 2012 Mauritania has welcomed tens of thousands of Malian refugees fleeing the war.
19. Interviews with youth leaders in Kati, village chiefs in Diéma and focus group discussion with FORSAT, June 2023.
21. The Diéma cercle in the Kayes region was the first to suffer attacks on the Gendarmerie and toll booths, starting in 2019.
23. A total of 920 schools in Mali are listed as closed, more than two-thirds of them in the three central regions – Mopti, Segou and Koulikoro, see www.vanguardngr.com/2019/10/920-schools-listed-closed-across-mali-amidst-conflict.
34. Interview, member of Gambana, May 2023.
35. Within the Muslim community the emergence of VEOs has created fractures between the Hamalilist branch of the Sheikh of Nioro and Wahabis newcomers who help associations in the fight against slavery by descent.
36. Interview, first secretary of Coordination des Associations et ONG féminines (CAFO), May 2023.
37. Nsibia, Beevor and Berger, Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies.
Most villagers cite these emissaries as Demba Sow and Abu Sow. Field research shows that the following villages are already forced to pay zakat: Soribougou, Neguela, Soriboubougou, Sebecoro, Sanacoro, Madina, in the Baoulé Loop National Park, Kongassambougou reserve, Fina reserve, Fouladougou, Kakolo, Sagabari, Kokofata, Didjan, Sefeto, Tokoto, Niama, Tafla-chou, Fignan, Toucoroba, Toubacoro, Cho-Fignan, Sebete, Boron, Kerouane, and Duguwoliwila.

Interview, Fulani herder, Kita, June 2023.

Interview, Fulani herder, Kita, June 2023.


A forestry agent who was interviewed by the research team was reportedly killed by JNIM fighters in the forest area just days after the interview.

Interview, water and forestry agent. May 2023

Interview, loggers in Baoulé, June 2023.

Judith Vorrath and Laura Marcela Zuñiga, Key Features of Illicit Economies in African Conflicts: Insights from the Reports of UN Panels of Experts, SWP Comment 36.

Most of the timber is transported to China by General Timber Manufacturing, the only company in the country authorised to export wood.

France 24, Legal loopholes.

EIA, POACHED TIMBER.


Nsaibia, Beevor and Berger, Non-State Armed Groups and Illicit Economies.


Mali is Africa’s third-largest gold producer. The government recently initiated a review of the 2019 Mining Code, setting up a gold refining company called Marina Gold, which, for the most part, belongs to the Wagner mercenaries who help the government in the fight against terrorists.


Focus group discussion with police, June 2023.


Focus group discussion with police.

Interview, president of the youth of Diéma, May 2023.

In Kita’s rural commune of Founia, for instance, the government laid the first stone of the military camp of the 35th motorised infantry regiment on 4 May 2023. The aim is to strengthen the operational capacity of the military in the fight against terrorism and all other forms of banditry in the region.
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