



ISSUE BRIEF

The Islamic State's Growing Footprint in the Sahel

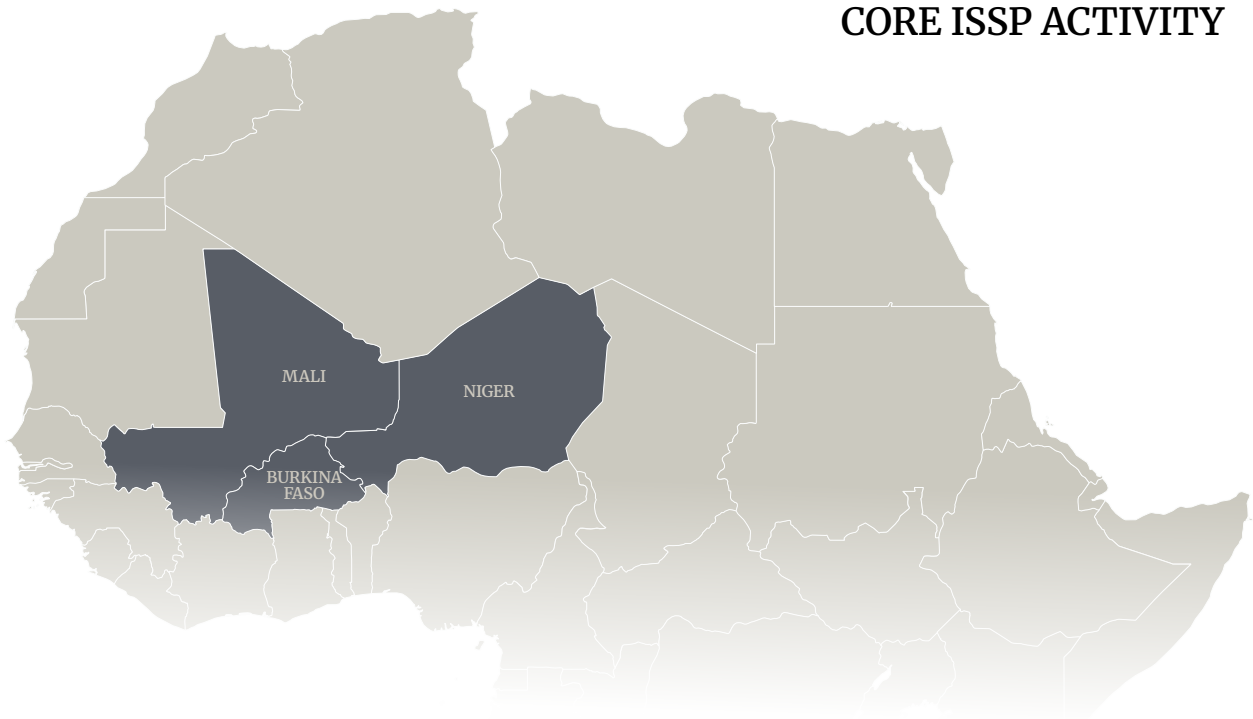
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June 2026

Cover Image: Screengrab from The Islamic State in the Sahel video

COUNTRIES WITH CORE ISSP ACTIVITY



INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State (IS) has been active in the Sahel region for more than a decade and has entered a new phase as it seeks to consolidate its territorial control in the region. Since 2022, the strategic goal of IS has been to consolidate its two most powerful affiliates in Africa, the West Africa and Sahel Provinces. The U.S. strikes in Nigeria’s northern state of Sokoto, on the border with Niger, on December 25, 2025, and the joint U.S.-Nigerian operation that killed Abu Bilal al-Minuki, an important figure in Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), on May 16, 2026, attest to the growing threat posed by these provinces. The two operations serve a necessary aim: countering the group by severing the links between West Africa and the Sahel province and working to contain terrorist violence in a region engulfed by jihadist activity and a war between al-Qaeda (AQ) and the IS affiliates.¹

Although AQ’s Sahelian affiliate *Jamaa’t Nusra’t al-islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) remains the most dominant jihadist force in the Sahel, contested only by Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP) in Mali’s Ménaka region and northeast Burkina Faso, the IS affiliate has demonstrated significant and growing operational capabilities since 2019. That year, it demonstrated the ability to maintain a high operational tempo with deadly attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It also marked the first battles between ISSP and JNIM, which continue to occur on and off and ebb and flow in

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/middle-east-center/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>; Héni Nseibia and Caleb Weiss, “The End of the Sahelian Anomaly: How the Global Conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qaida Finally Came to West Africa,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2020, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa/>.

1 Wassim Nasr, “ISIS in Africa: The End of the ‘Sahel Exception,’” New Lines Institute, June 2, 2020,

terms of intensity. Since then, ISSP has continued to expand its footprint and, in January 2026, with its deadly attack on Niamey's international airport, demonstrated its expanding capabilities to strike hard targets, including strategically valuable infrastructure.

This TSC Issue Brief details the emergence and evolution of IS in the Sahel, its relation to other jihadist groups in the region, and its likely future trajectory as it contends with JNIM. It argues that ISSP has entered a new phase of operational maturity, confirmed by its January 2026 attack on Niamey's international airport and driven by territorial consolidation in the Ménaka region and strengthened ties with ISWAP. While JNIM remains the primary jihadist force in the Sahel, this evolution in ISSP's capabilities is reshaping the balance of power and accelerating ISSP's foothold.

The emergence of the Islamic State Sahel Province

IS activity has been evolving in the Sahel region since mid-2015, when Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, founder and leader of IS globally.² Both jihadist leaders have been killed since: Al-Baghdadi by the U.S. in Syria in October 2019, and Al-Sahrawi by the French in Mali in August 2021. As IS's footprint in the Sahel has steadily expanded, so too has the group's lethality. On November 1, 2019, IS claimed its first lethal attack on a French mili-

tary soldier who died after an improvised explosive device (IED) struck his vehicle.³ Weeks later, on November 25, 13 French servicemen were killed after the collision of two helicopters during an operation against the group.⁴ The death toll of French servicemen killed by IS has reached almost half of those killed by local AQ affiliates since 2013.⁵ In 2017, it was in Niger's Tongo-Tongo attack that IS killed four U.S. Green Berets in a fight that also involved local armed forces and French Special Forces who came to the rescue.⁶ The French military surge that followed against the group contained the IS affiliate in what is known as the three-border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.⁷ Monitoring and targeting the movements of the group limited its freedom of action, constrained territorial expansion and operational tempo, put it under sustained military pressure, and finally led to the killing of Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi on the border between Mali and Burkina Faso.⁸

3 Wassim Nasr, "Le brigadier Ronan Pointeau du 1er régiment de Spahis est le 1er militaire français Barkhane à tomber face aux jihadistes de l'EI au sahel et sa mort revendiquée par le groupe," X, November 2, 2019, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/1190761469413076992>.

4 RFI, "France Honours 13 Soldiers Killed in Helicopter Crash in Mali," RFI, December 2, 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20191202-france-honours-13-soldiers-killed-helicopter-crash-mali>.

5 Ministère des Armées, infographic on French personnel killed in the Sahel-Sahara band (Bande sahélo-saharienne), 2022, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/221110_EMACOM_MortPourLaFrance_BSS%20-%20Copie.jpg.

6 A member of that French rescue team was killed in Erbil in February 2026 after an Iranian drone attack. "French Soldier Killed by Iranian Drone Was on Anti-Jihad Mission in Iraq," *France 24*, March 14, 2026, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260314-french-soldier-killed-by-iran-made-drone-was-in-iraq-on-anti-jihad-operation>.

7 France24, "France to Send 600 More Troops to Afrca's Sahel," *France 24*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200202-france-sahel-africa-parly-troops-army-soldiers-defence-minister-flor-ence-mali-burkina-faso-niger>.

8 Wassim Nasr, "The Top Sahel Jihadist Killed in French 'Opportunistic Hit,'" *France 24*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210916-the-assassinated-abou-walid-al-sahrawi-france-s-major-enemy-in-the-sahel>.

2 It is only in October 2016, more than a year later, that the Islamic State central recognized officially the allegiance of Sahrawi through an Amaq communiqué. Wassim Nasr, "ISIS Africa: The End of the Sahel Exception," New Lines Institute, February 6, 2020, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/middle-east-center/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>; "Adnan Abou Walid al-Sahraoui," UN Security Council, <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/adnan-abou-walid-al-sahraoui>; Jim Garamone, "U.S. Forces Kill ISIS Founder, Leader Baghdadi in Syria," U.S. Department of War, October 27, 2019, <https://www.war.gov/news/news-stories/article/article/1999751/us-forces-kill-isis-founder-leader-baghdadi-in-syria/>.

Only after Sahrawi's death in 2021 did the IS affiliate receive official status as a province. Prior to that, the jihadist fighting force — active in the region spanning Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso — remained under the “command” of ISWAP, operating in northeastern Nigeria. This organizational affiliation persisted despite the lack of geographic continuity between the two areas of operation, with no official statement clarifying the rationale for this structure. The group was not represented in any official ISWAP claims until 2019, four years after al-Sahrawi's pledge of allegiance to IS. Many documented attacks took place between 2016 and 2019, including the October 2017 Tongo-Tongo attack, which was only claimed two years later, in 2019, in the first long propaganda video produced to illustrate and promote IS activity in the Sahel region.⁹

The most plausible reason for the delay between the pledge of allegiance in 2015, the group's official recognition in 2016, its inclusion in official ISWAP claims in 2019, and finally its official province status in 2021 separate from ISWAP — six years later and only after the killing of Sahrawi — was the fear of a second “Jolani-like event,” a reference to the changing group affiliations of the current President of Syria, Ahmed Al-Sharaa.¹⁰ There may have been genuine concern that al-Sahrawi would defect from IS and rejoin AQ, dealing IS a devastating blow in sub-Saharan Africa. Myriad factors were at play in delaying

Sahrawi's vetting: the geographical distance, the lack of interest from IS central (which was focused on the war in the Levant and Libya), and an overall lack of trust. Finally, it appears his death led to the full recognition of the Sahel affiliate as a separate province for IS. Instead of destroying the group, Sahrawi's death provided it with much-needed momentum at a crucial time.¹¹

2022 proved to be a decisive year for ISSP: the French departure from Mali,¹² Wagner's arrival and heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaign,¹³ the newly distinguished status of its Sahel affiliate, and emboldened local Fulani field commanders led to the Ménaka battles and, subsequently, the group's control of its first meaningful swath of territory on Malian soil. The French departure from Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023, followed by the U.S. evacuation of the Agadez Drone Base in 2024,¹⁴ granted both ISSP and

11 High-value target assassinations can be compared to a lottery in their effect: they have undeniable direct tactical effects, but they can have unexpected and unintended effects on the targeted groups in the medium and long term. One of the clearest examples is the killing of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, who headed the Islamic State in Iraq. His assassination brought Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to head the Islamic State of Iraq, the leader who eventually succeeded in exporting the group to Syria and far beyond. A different example lays in the survival of Iyad Ag Ghali and Mohammed Kouffa, the top brass of JNIM, both on the French high value targets list and at the same time the main obstacles to IS's expansion further South towards the Gulf of Guinea countries.

12 Between 2020 and 2024, six coups d'état took place in the region: Chad, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon. In this period French military forces, notably those engaged the counterinsurgency operation Operation Barkhane, were pushed out of the region. France handed over its last military bases in Senegal in 2025, ending its military presence in West Africa.

13 Wassim Nasr, “How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, November/December 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel/>.

14 Wassim Nasr, “IntelBrief: Niger: The Inevitable Revocation,” The Soufan Center, March 22, 2024; “US Agrees to Withdraw Troops from Key Drone Base in Niger,” *France 24*, April 20, 2024, <https://thesoufan->

9 Wassim Nasr, “Dernière remarque, pendant l'attaque contre les bérets verts US à Tongo-Tongo Niger (Oct 2017) on entend clairement un jihadiste scander ‘Dawlat al-Islam Allah Akbar’ ce qui laisse peu de doute sur la réalité de l'allégeance du groupe d'Abou al-Walid à l'EI et sa responsabilité,” X, January 11, 2020, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/1215977147287986176/photo/1>.

10 Current Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, first was a fighter in the ranks of AQ in Iraq, later founded al-Nusra front in Syria, which he subsequently refused to see absorb in IS, instead pledging allegiance to AQ's central leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. He later severed ties with AQ and eventually founded Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which served as the de facto authorities of Idlib before the fall of Syrian President Bashir Al-Assad. As de facto authorities, the group squashed radical AQ and ISIS elements in Northwest Syria.

JNIM a de facto safe haven, with a no-fly zone for U.S. and French forces over Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. An unprecedented opportunity to move mostly unchecked in a vast, unsecured territory arose, only constrained by periodic Turkish-made drone attacks conducted by the military forces of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.¹⁵

Between 2022 and 2023, ISSP fought against all active state and non-state armed parties in Ménaka, in northeast Mali – ranging from the army to local militias to JNIM. All failed to counter the expansion of the group. One by one, local Tuareg factions, the Malian army, the Wagner Group, and, lastly, JNIM, each failed to prevent ISSP from asserting control over most of the Malian territory bordering Niger. The town of Ménaka itself remains under government control, with support from the Russian Africa Corps (the successor to the Wagner Group),¹⁶ but most of the broader region has been under ISSP's control since early 2023. With JNIM abandoning the fight for Ménaka in 2023, and a fragile ceasefire holding in Ansongo between JNIM and ISSP,¹⁷ ISSP was able to entrench and consolidate its control, with the capacity of holding territory and moving hostages across the border, either on its own or through local intermediaries, all the way from Agadez in Niger and even from its capital, Niamey. For example, in 2025, two elderly women of Austrian and Swiss nationalities were taken hostage in Agadez.¹⁸ An American

center.org/intelbrief-2024-march-22/.

15 Benjamin Roger and Thomas Eydoux, "Turkish Drones and Russian Planes: Aerial Warfare Comes to West Africa," *Le Monde*, November 20, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/11/20/turkish-drones-and-russian-planes-aerial-warfare-comes-to-west-africa_6733455_124.html.

16 Christopher Faulkner, Marcel Plichta, and Raphael Parens, "Africa Corps: Has Russia Hit a Ceiling in Africa?," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, December 2024, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/africa-corps-has-russia-hit-a-ceiling-in-africa/>.

17 The ceasefire here, formalized in the Algiers Accord, was voided by the military government in January 2024.

18 Danai Nesta Kupemba, "Austrian Woman Kidnapped by Unknown Assailants in Niger," *BBC*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgy015l22do>; "Swiss Woman Abducted in Niger,"

missionary and pilot was kidnapped in the heart of the capital, Niamey, less than 150 yards from the Presidential palace.¹⁹ Last year, Indian mining workers were abducted in Niger, and four Moroccan truck drivers were abducted in Burkina Faso. Both groups of workers have been freed since.²⁰

The consolidation of ISSP's sanctuary in the Ménaka region was confirmed again in February 2026. An attack against a Malian military convoy and Africa Corps fighters using a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) signaled that the group continued to innovate, enhancing its tactics through leveraging asymmetric capabilities.²¹ It had recovered its ability to conduct such attacks in the summer of 2024 after a four-year gap. Prior to that, the last SVBIED attack targeted JNIM on the border region between Mali and Burkina Faso in 2020.²² Most recently, Ménaka was also attacked by ISSP in the wake of the coordinated attacks conducted by JNIM and rebel factions on April 25, 2026, across Mali. ISSP jihadists entered the town before being repelled jointly by the Malian military, loyalist Tuareg factions, and the Africa Corps. Over-

Swiss Info, April 14, 2025, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/swiss-abroad/swiss-woman-kidnapped-in-niger-says-fdfa/89161718>.

19 Nadine Yousif, "American Missionary Reportedly Kidnapped in Niger," *BBC*, October 22, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgzy3z8lm4o>.

20 Baba Ahmed and Akram Oubachir, "Moroccan Truck Drivers Kidnapped by Islamic State Group Released in Mali," *AP News*, August 5, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/morocco-truck-drivers-kidnapped-mali-release-ffa2e443a-5c8a618aedaa46049055051>; "5 Jharkhand Labourers Kidnapped in Niger Return after 8 Months in Captivity," *NDTV*, January 14, 2026, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/5-jharkhand-labourers-kidnapped-in-niger-return-after-8-months-in-captivity-10584761>.

21 Wassim Nasr, "Mali l'EI Sahel revendique 'une attaque contre un convoi de l'armée & Africa Corps entre Ansongo et Ménaka [...] 10 morts et blessés' / l'usage des SVBIED est assez rare dans le secteur et pourrait, comme l'attaque de l'aéroport de Niamey, signifier un transfert de compétence," *X*, February 12, 2026, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2021985999363223617>.

22 Wassim Nasr, "End of the Sahel exception AQMI& the Islamic State fighting and IS used a kamikaze," *X*, May 7, 2020, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/1258429682300719107>.

all, this territorial consolidation in the Ménaka region has provided ISSP with the freedom of movement necessary to expand its operational ambitions.

The ISSP change of command in 2021 after the death of al-Sahrawi, the consolidation of its presence in Ménaka in 2022-2023, and the de facto “no-fly zone” resulting from the departure of U.S. and French forces from the region since 2024, have all enabled ISSP’s maturation. The end, or at least, significantly reduced intelligence-sharing by the U.S. and the French with the Sahelian juntas and the security gaps that materialized after the 2023 military coup in Niger made it easier for fighters from ISWAP elements north of Sokoto to cross into the Sahel, though this development had already commenced in 2022, during the group’s Ménaka battles with Tuareg factions and Ansongo battles with JNIM. In previous years, a few recruits took the opposite route to join ISWAP-controlled territory in Nigeria.²³ Despite the current apparent calm between JNIM and ISSP, with the exception of northeast Burkina Faso,²⁴ hostilities will certainly re-emerge. Mohamed Koufa, the second most senior leader in JNIM, described ISSP members “as deviants” and declared the villagers who were supporting them as “legitimate targets.”²⁵

Currently, due to these shifting geopolitical dynamics, the corridor between eastern Nigeria and the Sahel region is wide open, with an ef-

fective ISSP stronghold north and west of Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria. This is the exact area where U.S. strikes were conducted on December 25, 2025.²⁶ It is also through this corridor that ISWAP was able to fill the gap in skilled human resources within the ranks of ISSP.²⁷ A May 2026 issue of *Al-Naba*, claiming ISSP attacks in Nigeria, now appears to indicate that Lakurawa, the terrorist group whose affiliation had been contested, does indeed fall under the IS umbrella. This shows ISSP and ISWAP are inching closer to bridging their operational zones, enabling the broader Islamic State network to coordinate movements and transfer equipment across the zone stretching from the Sahel into the Lake Chad Basin.

The Niamey International Airport attack

Confirmation of the group’s expanding operational capabilities and effective plugging of the skill gaps it previously faced came in the form of ISSP’s ability to carry out the complex attack on Base 101 at Niamey’s international airport in January 2026. The attack on the base, reportedly one of the Niger’s most protected military facilities, marked the first time an international airport was targeted by ISSP²⁸ and the second time by IS worldwide.²⁹ Before the ISSP attack on

23 The Islamic State outlet, *al-Naba*, no. 540, issued March 26, 2026, “Journey of Abu Yahya al-Muhajir,” as one of its commanders who migrated from Dosso in Niger to join ISWAP in Nigeria.

24 Wassim Nasr, “l’EI Sahel revendique une attaque contre le JNIM à Adoudji ‘mardi dernier [...] 23 morts,’” X, February 14, 2026.

25 Wassim Nasr, “Focus on the Sahel: Terrorism, NGOs and the Fulani Communities,” *France 24*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20241023-focus-sahel-terrorism-ngos-fulani-communities-alqaeda-jnim>; Paul Cruickshank, “Answers from the Sahel: Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24, on His Interview with Deputy JNIM Leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/answers-from-the-sahel-wassim-nasr-journalist-france24-on-his-interview-with-deputy-jnim-leader-mohamed-amadou-koufa/>.

26 AFRICOM, “U.S. Africa Command Conducts Strike against ISIS in Nigeria,” December 25, 2025, <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/36158/us-africa-command-conducts-strike-against-isis-in-nigeria>.

27 James Barnett and Omar Musa, “Kachallas and Kinship: Understanding Jihadi Expansion and Diffusion in Nigeria,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 2026, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/kachallas-and-kinship-understanding-jihadi-expansion-and-diffusion-in-nigeria/>.

28 Wassim Nasr, “Niger: Who Attacked Niamey’s Airport and What It Reveals?,” *France 24*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.france24.com/en/niger-who-attacked-niamey-s-airport-and-what-it-reveals>; “Brussels Terrorist Attack Trial: Belgian Court Hands Out Sentences to Eight Men,” *Le Monde*, September 15, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2023/09/15/brussels-terrorist-attack-trial-belgian-court-hands-out-sentences-to-eight-men_6136210_143.html.

29 The first international airport targeted by IS was

Niamey's international airport, Bamako's airport had been attacked by JNIM on September 17, 2024.³⁰ ISSP became the second terrorist group in the region to attack an international airport, showing its capabilities matched JNIM's and, to some extent, surpassed them, at least in terms of orchestrating this particular complex attack. JNIM's 2024 attack was more traditional: the militants breached the airport using small arms and light weapons and fought relentlessly with no plan to retreat, while ISSP chose a different approach in Niamey, demonstrating a growing sophistication.

The coordinated attack by ISSP against Base 101 at Niamey's international airport occurred on the night of January 28-29, 2026, and followed similar objectives to JNIM's earlier attacks: destroying military assets and undermining the authority of the ruling junta. But the comparison stops there. According to the official claim by ISSP, the group "monitored the airport for weeks, if not months, and decided to delay the

in Brussels, Belgium in 2016. Considering that IS control of the international airport of Sirte in Libya (2015) happened as the airport was out of service since 2013; and that the ISKP suicide bombing at the Kabul airport in Afghanistan (2021) was not an attack on the airport per se, despite the high number of civilian and military casualties.

30 Wassim Nasr, "Mali: Al-Qaïda revendique l'attaque d'un camp de gendarmerie et d'une base aérienne à Bamako," *France 24*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20240917-mali-attaque-contre-un-camp-militaire-tirs-et-explosions-%C3%A0-bamako>. The attack used two crews: one targeted and breached the police academy, and the other targeted and breached the military section of Bamako's international airport. The terminal was overrun, and several planes were damaged, among them the presidential plane. All attackers, in both locations, were killed in action after a few hours of exchange of fire with Malian and Wagner forces deployed in the airport. Casualties are estimated to be more than 75 killed and 200 wounded. The objective of the attack and the choice of the target were political: Besides undermining the capabilities of the Malian armed forces, JNIM staged a show of force in the heart of the Malian capital and made clear its policy of attacking hard military targets rather than soft targets such as hotels or civilian infrastructure.

attack at least once."³¹ Once the group entered the military facility, militants began targeting the hangars housing surveillance planes and at least one military helicopter. Twenty motorbikes and at least one Toyota were used in the attack, using common weapons, from rifles to 12.7 mounted machine-guns, RPG7 rockets, and mortars.³² The ISSP fighters who breached the airport in Niamey enjoyed fire support with mortars from the outside of the facility, and the immediate combat area was monitored from the air with commercial drones equipped with thermal vision. This was not a suicide mission; the jihadists had a retreat plan, and withdrew after almost two hours of fighting, following the deployment of Africa Corps to the airport.³³

In the video of the Niamey airport attack published by *Amaq News Agency*, the official IS media outlet, damaged planes and hangars can be seen, and interestingly, fighters yelling in Arabic, Hausa, and Kanuri with a Borno state accent can be heard. The latter is a language commonly used in northeastern Nigeria, the main area of ISWAP's activity. In *al-Naba*, IS's official weekly magazine, the skill to retreat successfully was highlighted: "The retreating force was hit by a drone, though most of the attackers succeeded in leaving the scene."³⁴ The effective command-and-control displayed during the attack, the multidomain elements of the operation, and the nature of the target are clear evidence that ISSP benefited from new skills and capabilities that were lacking in its original ranks, likely transferred from ISWAP.³⁵ This skilled attack, avoided

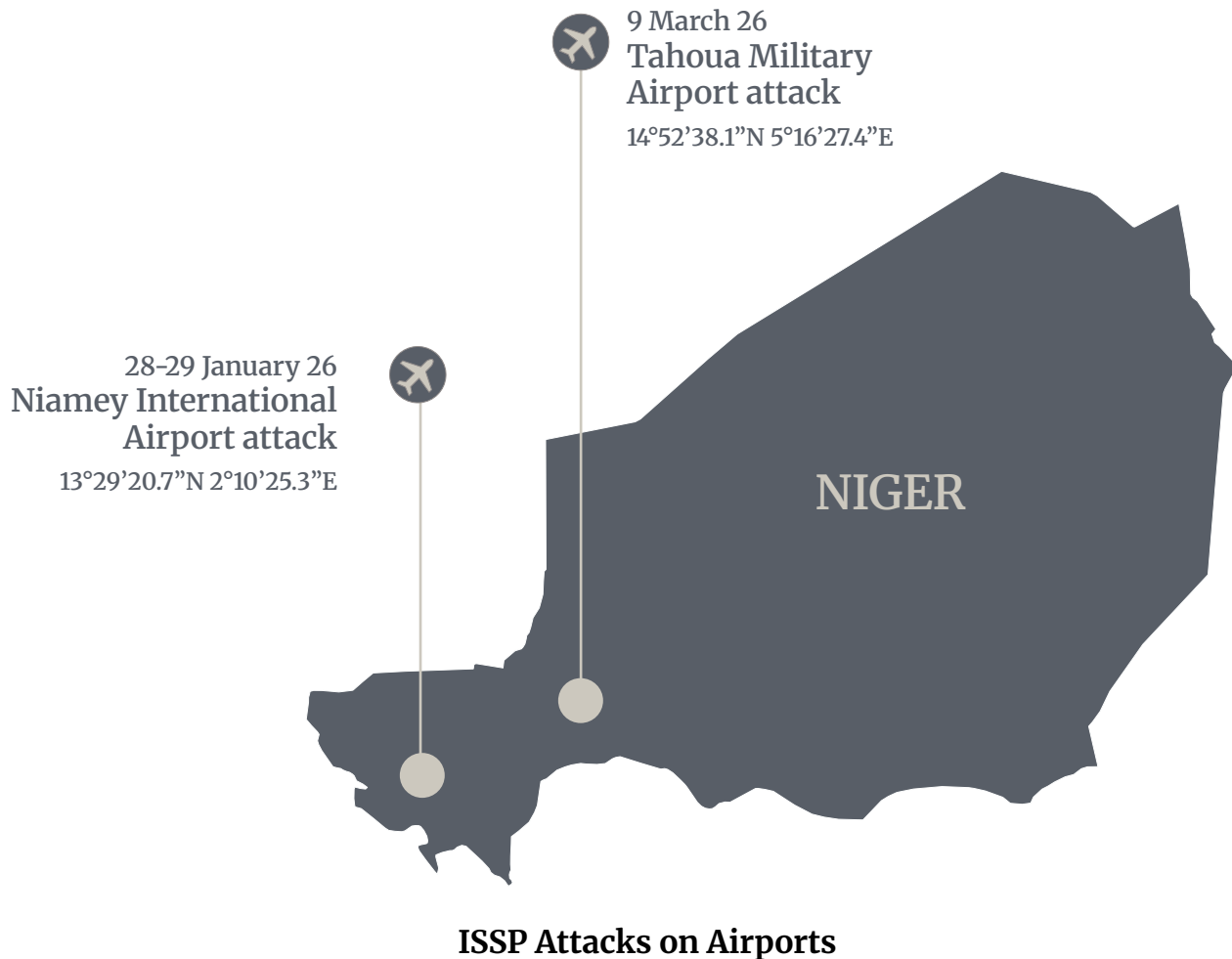
31 *al-Naba*, no. 533, February 5, 2026.

32 Author interview, security source, identity, name, and date withheld.

33 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press Release on Terrorist Attack at Niamey International Airport," February 2, 2026, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2076334/.

34 Wassim Nasr, "la Une, l'édito et une page de demi pour l'attaque de l'aéroport de Niamey 'une nouvelle phase du jihad en Afrique' / l'EI reconnaît 7 morts, dont 5 suite à une frappe, nie que des jihadistes ont été capturés et moque les théories du complot dont celle du 'Yellow Cake,'" X, February 5, 2026, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2019448534710296908>.

35 Wassim Nasr, "After two years of silence the



ISSP Attacks on Airports

for years through combined French and U.S. efforts and President Bazoum's military and political engagement, materialized under the junta's rule. The Niamey international airport attack definitively proved the threat posed by ISSP and its growing capabilities. The acquired capacities are directly linked to the exchange of assets and human resources with ISWAP. This includes the capacity to manufacture IEDs, fire support, training, and command-and-control skills, but also extends to the fatwa that "legitimized" attacking and displacing loyalist Tuareg *Dawshak* tribes in Ménaka.

Islamic State spokes confirmed the presence of foreign fighters during the Niamey airport attack," X, February 22, 2026, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2025502033952772139>.

ISSP's activity near Niger's capital began as early as 2016, including an attack on the prison in Koutoukalé that failed to cause damage or casualties. A decade later, Niamey is one of the most dangerous capitals in the Sahel due to parallel activity by ISSP and JNIM in and around the city and the lack of effective CT campaigns. This complex terrorist threat landscape is attested to by the fact that 48 hours before the airport attack, JNIM detonated an IED on a road leading to the airport, leading some analysts to believe JNIM was behind the airport attack; few expected ISSP to have such capabilities. In the aftermath, diplomatic delegations were evacuated, and foreign nationals were asked to leave the capital due to the sudden increase in insecurity.

ISSP's Outreach post-Niamey

Less than two months after the Niamey airport attack, on the morning of March 9, following the same logic of destroying Niger's drone capabilities, ISSP attacked Tahoua's military airport, "base 401," which hosts Niger's TB2 drone arsenal. Two drones were damaged, and the control station was destroyed.³⁶ This was also a first for the group. In a second wave, on the same day, ISSP attacked the military barracks in the town. The facility was known among locals as the "American base" because the U.S. used to train local Special Forces there until 2024.³⁷

Of the three Sahel countries where ISSP is active, Niger has been the last to witness infighting between ISSP and JNIM, which occurred for the first time in Pétèl-Kolé on the Burkina Faso border in early April 2026.³⁸ Both groups are still in the process of marking geographic zones of activity, with JNIM currently absent in the southeast and along the border with Nigeria, from Diffa to the border with Benin.³⁹ However, it is in this triangle between Niger, Nigeria, and Benin that an increased number of attacks, from both ISSP and JNIM against government forces and affiliated militias, have taken place. This development should not be viewed as evidence of a "tacit alliance" between ISSP and JNIM, but rather as a concentration of means and manpower in a race for control of the borders between the three countries, in preparation for the inevitable fight that could quickly evolve between the groups on Niger's soil in Dosso or even in Benin.

ISSP has recently extended its reach to Benin. In

2022, a unit of ISSP already tried to gain a foothold in Benin.⁴⁰ However, the unit was quickly wiped out by JNIM, to which it had belonged before defecting to ISSP. JNIM, on March 6, 2026, attacked military barracks in the Pendjari Park, Benin, killing at least 15 soldiers and capturing a U.S.-made M113 armed personnel carrier.⁴¹ Since then, local authorities have been encouraging, though not sustaining or actively supporting, local self-defense initiatives. However, these could backfire against civilians, as prior initiatives have shown in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.⁴² The reason for this peak in violence in Benin against armed forces in February 2026 could be the defection of a JNIM commander in Burkina Faso to ISSP and the accusations he made about a "cease-fire deal between JNIM command and Benin's government." According to a JNIM source who spoke to the author, "he left with his bodyguard for personal reasons."⁴³ This serves as a reminder of the reality and impact of opposing narratives between the two warring parties, and that any negotiation or deal can have real operational consequences for both.

Simultaneously, ISSP is actively preparing a new phase of expansion farther west in the Gourma

40 Wassim Nasr, "Bénin prises de guerres de l'EI au niveau de Guéné 'sur la route entre Kandi et Malanville sur la RNIE2,'" X, September 23, 2022, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/1573371354207997952>.

41 RFI, "Bénin: quinze militaires tués dans une attaque du Jnim contre une position militaire dans le nord du pays," RFI, March 6, 2026, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260305-b%C3%A9nin-quinze-militaires-tu%C3%A9s-dans-une-attaque-du-jnim-contre-une-position-militaire-dans-le-nord-du-pays>; Wassim Nasr, "Bénin à 10 km de la frontière du Burkina Faso, le JNIM a attaqué avant hier une base avancée de l'armée dans la parc de Pendjari / on voit un transport de troupes M113 de l'armée béninoise à l'image, cette attaque est la 2e en une semaine après les accusations de trêve par l'EI," X, March 9, 2026, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2031010176501755972>.

42 Author interview, Benin security source, identity, name, and date withheld.

43 Author interview, local source, identity, name and date withheld. Wassim Nasr, "Burkina Faso, de source propre 'Sadou a bien fait défection [du JNIM vers l'EI Sahel], il a été accompagné de son garde du corps et personne d'autre [...] les raisons de sa défection ne sont pas claires, mais probablement pour des raisons d'intérêt personnel,'" X, February 10, 2026, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2021339938432876848>.

36 Author interview, local security source, identity, name, and date withheld.

37 RFI, "Niger: des groupes terroristes ont attaqué pour la première fois l'importante ville de Tahoua," RFI, March 9, 2026, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20260309-niger-des-groupes-terroristes-ont-attaqu%C3%A9-pour-la-premi%C3%A8re-fois-l-importante-ville-de-tahoua>.

38 FRANCE 24 English, "'Race to the Border' as Islamic State Group and JNIM Clash in Niger," YouTube video, 4:45, April 14, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrVSvD4Cb9M>.

39 Jules Duhamel, "Map of JNIM and ISSP Activity in Benin, Niger and Nigeria Borderlands," December 5, 2025, <https://www.julesduhamel.com/jnim-and-issp-activity-in-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands/>.

region of Mali while consolidating its hold on territory east of the Niger River. The building of human and military capabilities is ongoing, likely for both battles with government forces and JNIM.⁴⁴ These latest developments and loss of men and resources of both groups over the years indicate that they are prioritizing fighting each other while simultaneously attacking local army facilities to expand their zones of activity, assert control over local populations, and amass weapons, ammunition, and other resources. Both share the same potential vital space and recruitment basins. For now, only JNIM has succeeded in becoming a trans-ethnic group, making it a bigger threat as a terrorist group, but also as a regional political player.⁴⁵

Looking ahead

ISSP has entered a phase of operational maturity, driven by territorial consolidation in the Ménaka region of Mali and strengthened operational links with ISWAP, enabling it to conduct more complex and significant attacks and increasingly challenge JNIM in the Sahel. Notably, this ongoing war between JNIM and ISSP in Mali and Burkina Faso is preventing the latter from expanding further south towards the Gulf of Guinea countries, at least for now. Additionally, the relationship between JNIM leadership and local commanders, who often retain autonomy and initiative, has so far prevented large-scale defections from JNIM to ISSP and ISSP from recruiting further south. Nonetheless, despite these constraints, these groups' race to the borders is currently underway. These groups' desire to expand the territory under their control should not be assessed solely as a strategic decision made by the leadership of ISSP and JNIM, respectively. It is also bound by the local realities and aspirations of local commanders, as well as by military pressure from lo-

cal and/or foreign parties.⁴⁶

JNIM's de facto role as a bulwark against ISSP expansion imposes a new reality in the Sahel and throughout West Africa. The most powerful group, JNIM, a military and de facto political actor in at least three Western African countries, is undoubtedly still AQ-linked. The group has not committed or plotted terrorist attacks in Europe or the U.S., but has not hesitated to attack Western interests in the Sahel countries, has killed and kidnapped Western citizens across the region, and has confronted French forces for more than a decade. Nevertheless, while the group is still practicing a policy of blockades, attacking "hostile" communities and human rights abuses in rural areas,⁴⁷ random attacks on soft targets involving mainly Western personnel or tourists have stopped since 2017, with the exception of the never claimed 2017 attack on the "Aziz Istanbul" restaurant in the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou.⁴⁸ And prior to the French departure from Mali, JNIM issued multiple communiqués stressing that the "war with France does not concern French or European soil."⁴⁹ Following what looks like a formal policy, the group stopped kidnapping Westerners and focused on "foe countries backing the juntas."⁵⁰ Since the liberation of the last three Italian hostages in February 2024,⁵¹ JNIM holds foreigners from

46 Jules Duhamel, "Central Sahel Conflict Map 2025 – JNIM & Islamic State Activity," August 18, 2025, <https://www.julesduhamel.com/central-sahel-conflict-map-2025-jnim-islamic-state-activity/>.

47 Ilaria Allegrozzi, Jean Baptiste Gallopin, Lewis Mudge, Anagha Neelakantan "None Can Run Away," Human Rights Watch, April 2, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2026/04/02/none-can-run-away/war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-in-burkina-faso-by-all>.

48 BBC "Burkina Faso Gun Attack Kills 18 People at Café," *BBC*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-40920338>.

49 Wassim Nasr, "In Context: FRANCE 24 Analyses Comments by al Qaeda's North Africa Leader," *France 24*, March 6, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20230306-al-qaeda-leader-in-north-africa-grants-exclusive-interview-to-france-24>.

50 Author interview, local on the ground source, identity, name, and date withheld.

51 "Statement by Palazzo Chigi on Release of Three Kidnapped Italian in Mali," Italian Government,

44 Author interview, local source, identity, name, and date withheld.

45 JNIM is deliberately trans-ethnic (Tuareg, Arab, and Fulani fighters) under a Tuareg emir (Ag Ghali) and Fulani deputy (Kouffa). ISSP has a Sahrawi top leadership core with recruits and operational commanders drawn mostly from Fulani communities.

China, India, Egypt, and Iran, along with several locals. JNIM scored the highest ransom ever in the region, with the amount of at least 50 million dollars for the release of a UAE citizen.⁵²

JNIM is at a crossroads between territorial governance that could lead to a break with AQ central, following the “Syrian blueprint,”⁵³ or could, on the contrary, unhindered expansion that would reinforce its links to the core group. The more plausible way forward for JNIM would be a “breaking ties through governance” model rather than a “breaking ties as a prerequisite to governance” model.⁵⁴ This would mean that if JNIM is able to forge a deal with other political parties in Mali that includes provisions for Islamic governance,⁵⁵ it could de facto break ties with AQ central. On the other hand, ISSP is becoming a key player in IS's African presence. The Niamey international airport attack is a clear indication of a qualitative leap by the group after a buildup in the three border regions and the securing of a corridor with the group's most territorialized and efficient affiliate, ISWAP, in Nigeria. A chaotic break of JNIM from AQ might result in the loss of territory, recruits, and assets to an ascendant ISSP. At the same time, if the latest attacks in

Mali⁵⁶ do not lead to a political outcome⁵⁷ other than in the northern part of the country, the frustration of a stalemate in the central part of the country could weaken the ranks of JNIM and benefit IS, which commented and mocked the military and political alliance between JNIM and the “Azawad Liberation Front” in an *al-Naba* editorial.⁵⁸

International and regional power brokers and decision-makers are also at a crossroads, thus leading to another dilemma: whether to negotiate, or at least facilitate negotiations, with JNIM, a designated foreign terrorist organization. The choices come down to fighting the “war on terror” as it was fought for more than two decades, or exploring alternative ways of counterinsurgency where military power, negotiations⁵⁹, and policy go hand in hand.⁶⁰ Moreover, this needs to be considered against the backdrop of the fact that the interests and priorities of Western capitals, particularly Washington and Paris, are not necessarily those of various local partners.

Presidency of the Council of Ministers, February 27, 2024, <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/statement-palazzo-chigi-release-three-kidnapped-italians-mali/25098>.

52 Wassim Nasr, “Mali: UAE Hostages Freed amid JNIM Threat to Bamako,” *France 24*, November 11, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/video/20251103-mali-uae-hostages-freed-amid-jnim-threat-to-bamako>.

53 Paul Cruickshank, “Journey to Idlib: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2023, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/journey-to-idlib-an-interview-with-wassim-nasr-journalist-france24/>.

54 Author interview, on the ground source, identity, name, and date withheld.

55 Wassim Nasr, “Jihadist's Fuel Blockade Squeezes Mali's Military Rulers,” *France 24*, November 4, 2025.

56 Don Rassler and Kristina Hummel, “Developments in the Sahel: An Interview with Wassim Nasr,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point 19, no. 5 (May 2026), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/developments-in-the-sahel-an-interview-with-wassim-nasr-journalist-france24-senior-research-fellow-soufan-center/>.

57 The official statement by JNIM after the coordinated attacks with the Azawad Liberation Front of April 25, 2026, again highlighted its wish to end the junta in Mali through a peaceful, responsible, and inclusive transition to establish a Mali which is governed by Sharia. See: Wassim Nasr (@SimNasr), X, <https://x.com/SimNasr/status/2049909839212453953/photo/2>.

58 Wassim Nasr, “L'édito d'al-Naba contre l'alliance es apostas entre le JNIM et le FLA avec une attaque contre al-Qaeda et les nouvelles autorités syriennes,” X, April 30, 2026.

59 Wassim Nasr, “IntelBrief: Negotiating out of Counterterrorism in the Sahel,” The Soufan Center, August 6, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intel-brief-2021-august-6/>.

60 Wassim Nasr and Raphael Parens, “France's Missed Moments in Mali,” The Soufan Center, July 2023, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/TSC-Insights-Frances-Missed-Moments-In-Mali.pdf>.

In the Middle East, the war on terror indirectly empowered Shia militias across the region, with Tehran controlling four Arab capitals and jeopardizing two vital sea straits, thereby constituting a greater threat to world peace and the global economy than any jihadist group ever did, even at the height of the Islamic State's territorial control in Iraq and Syria. Similar strategic blindness should be avoided on the African continent and in relation to the three Sahel juntas ruling Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey. Granular conflict resolution should be the final objective. The war on terror, like any war, should not become an end in itself but rather a tool, among others, for a political end, keeping in mind that terrorism is rarely an end in itself but rather a tool used by non-state armed groups to achieve their political goals.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses gratitude to Colin Clarke, Clara Broekaert, and Caroline Rose for their careful review and feedback.

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