

# **Unmasking the Rivalry: The Battle for Dominance Between ISGS and JNIM in the Sahel**

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## **Abstract**

This policy paper examines the escalating rivalry between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the two dominant jihadist coalitions shaping the security trajectory of the Sahel. Far from being an internal jihadist dispute, their competition has become a primary driver of instability across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, transforming the tri-border region into the epicentre of one of the world's fastest-growing insurgencies. Through comparative analysis of their ideological doctrines, recruitment models, territorial strategies, and governance practices, the paper demonstrates how their struggle for supremacy has intensified violence, deepened inter-communal divisions, and accelerated the collapse of state authority. The paper further highlights the broader regional implications, including the southward spread of jihadist activity toward West Africa's coastal states and the erosion of international peacekeeping frameworks. It concludes by proposing a multidimensional policy response centred on restoring state legitimacy, strengthening community-based security, disrupting insurgent financing, and developing a unified regional strategy to prevent the Sahel's progressive fragmentation into jihadist-controlled enclaves.

**Keyword:** Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) , Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), Sahel

## **Introduction**

The Sahel, a wide semi-arid strip below the Sahara Desert, has become one of the most volatile and complex conflict zones in the world today. What started ten years ago as a localized rebellion in northern Mali has evolved into a full-blown regional crisis, drawing in foreign armies, triggering successive military coups, and producing a humanitarian disaster of immense scale. At the heart of this instability is not a single unified actor, but an intense and layered power struggle between two major jihadist coalitions: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), aligned with the Islamic State (IS), and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), loyal to al-Qaeda. Their confrontation is not merely a territorial dispute, it is a decisive struggle over the direction of the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, where contrasting ideological visions, strategic goals, and governance models compete for control of vulnerable and neglected populations.

To grasp the roots of this rivalry, one must recognize the permissive environment in which it thrives. The governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have long suffered from deep governance failures, especially in their remote regions, where state authority is either predatory or entirely absent. This neglect has allowed grievances among marginalized groups such as the Fulani and Tuareg to deepen (International Crisis Group, 2022). Both ISGS and JNIM have exploited this vacuum. JNIM formed in 2017 from several al-Qaeda-linked factions—relies on a slow, community-based approach, presenting itself as a more acceptable alternative to state repression. It inserts itself into local disputes, provides basic judicial mechanisms, and co-opts traditional structures to secure local support (Thurston, 2020).

ISGS, by contrast, arose from the remnants of Al-Mourabitoun and adopted the more uncompromising and sectarian brand of Islamic State ideology. Its approach combines exploitation

of local grievances with displays of extreme violence, strict enforcement of social codes, and the deliberate fueling of ethnic conflict to divide communities and weaken rivals (Warren & Weiss, 2021). This fundamental difference JNIM's pragmatic strategy versus ISGS's rigid and violent absolutism defines the core of their rivalry.

The competition unfolds on several interlinked fronts. Ideologically, it mirrors the global split between al-Qaeda and IS, centered on issues such as the treatment of Muslim civilians, the speed and scope of jihad, and the grounds for declaring other Muslims apostates (Lister, 2022). Militarily, it has sparked a fierce internal jihadist war marked by assassinations, attacks, and massacres as each side tries to destroy the other's networks. Politically, both groups seek the loyalty of local populations, JNIM through negotiation and accommodation, ISGS through uncompromising domination. This rivalry has drastically escalated violence, trapping communities between state forces, JNIM, and ISGS, and contributing to one of the fastest-growing displacement crises on earth (United Nations, 2023). This paper, "Unmasking the Rivalry: The Battle for Dominance Between ISGS and JNIM in the Sahel," examines this pivotal struggle. It contends that the ISGS–JNIM conflict is not a side issue, but one of the main drivers of the Sahel's collapse, one that both shapes and is shaped by regional and international responses. By analyzing their shifting tactics, ideologies, and governance strategies, this study reveals how the quest for supremacy between these two factions is redefining the nature of warfare in the Sahel. Understanding these dynamics allows us to move beyond simplified narratives of a single terrorist threat and better grasp the forces that will influence the future of this deeply troubled but strategically vital region.

### **The Rise of ISGS and JNIM in the Sahel: Background and Organizational Context**

The Sahel region of West Africa has become a central arena in the global jihadist struggle, where two dominant armed coalitions compete for supremacy: The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), linked to the Islamic State (IS), and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the official branch of Al-Qaeda in the region. Their simultaneous emergence from the aftermath of Mali's 2012 crisis marks a decisive break within contemporary jihadism, as two rival transnational ideologies clash within a local setting shaped by state collapse, ethnic tensions, and long-standing communal grievances (Warner & Weiss, 2021). ISGS arose directly from the fragmentation of the

jihadist scene in Mali after the 2013 international intervention. It was founded by Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a former Polisario Front member who later joined MUJWA, an offshoot of AQIM (Warner, 2017). The decisive rupture came in 2015 when al-Sahrawi pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, openly rejecting the authority of Iyad Ag Ghaly, the AQIM-aligned leader in Mali (Zenn, 2020). IS acknowledged the “West Africa Province” in October 2016, confirming ISGS as an official affiliate (Warner & Weiss, 2021). Al-Sahrawi’s leadership—defined by harsh ideology, violent methods, and prolific propaganda—remained the core of ISGS until his death in August 2021 (UNSC, 2022).

ISGS focuses its operations in remote, weakly governed border zones of the central Sahel. Its main base of activity is the Tri-Border Area (Tillabéri region of Niger), where the vast desert terrain and minimal state control provide ideal conditions for insurgency. The group exploits local disputes—especially between Fulani herders and sedentary farming communities—carrying out mass killings to deepen social fractures and recruit through revenge cycles (Human Rights Watch, 2021; ICG, 2021). Since al-Sahrawi’s death, ISGS’s fiercest confrontations with JNIM have shifted to Mali’s Ménaka region, where it exploits rivalries among Tuareg communities, notably between Daoussahak groups and JNIM-aligned Idnan factions, turning the area into a violent proxy battlefield (Morgan, 2023).

ISGS combines strict transnational ideology with pragmatic local strategy. Ideologically, it follows IS’s ultra-takfiri doctrine, declaring other Muslims illegitimate and justifying attacks on civilians as well as branding JNIM as apostates (Zenn, 2020). Its long-term aim is to build a wilayat (province) of the global caliphate. Strategically, it seeks control of illicit trans-Sahel smuggling corridors to fund itself independently (ICG, 2021). A key method is “outbidding”: acting more extreme and aggressive than JNIM to attract hardline recruits and force its rival into costly escalation (Torelli, 2018).

In contrast, JNIM emerged not as a new group but as a merger of existing AQIM-aligned factions. Announced in March 2017 under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly, the coalition brought together AQIM’s Sahara branch, Ag Ghaly’s Ansar Dine, Mokhtar Belmokhtar’s Al-Murabitoun, and the Fulani-based Katiba Macina led by Amadou Kouffa (Solomon, 2019). The merger was a calculated response to ISGS’s rise and foreign military pressure, designed to coordinate resources and

strengthen cohesion (Lecocq et al., 2020). JNIM serves as Al-Qaeda's official representative in the Sahel. Its loyalty to Al-Qaeda leadership shapes a strategy focused on gradual, community-rooted expansion rather than immediate territorial control. Unlike ISGS, it prioritizes building local legitimacy through population-centric tactics—addressing grievances, offering basic governance, and forming tactical alliances with non-jihadist actors, including some Tuareg separatists (ICG, 2020; Zenn, 2021).

The group is led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg leader with deep roots in local rebellions and jihadist networks. JNIM functions as a loose federation of semi-autonomous brigades—such as Katiba Macina in central Mali and Burkina Faso, and the Sahara Emirate in northern Mali and the tri-border zone (UNSC, 2023). Its objectives in the region include expelling foreign troops, overthrowing “apostate” governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, establishing an Islamic emirate ruled by Sharia, and eliminating ISGS to become the uncontested jihadist authority in the Sahel.

### **Comparative Overview: ISGS vs. JNIM**

#### **Key Differences**

The rivalry between ISGS and JNIM is driven by deep ideological differences rooted in the wider divide between the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Their contrasting visions shape how they wage jihad. ISGS follows an ultra-takfirist, globally focused doctrine, prioritizing the establishment of a worldwide caliphate and readily labeling other Muslims including JNIM, as apostates, while rejecting any form of local nationalism as un-Islamic. JNIM, by contrast, adopts a more pragmatic, locally grounded Salafi-jihadist outlook aligned with Al-Qaeda, favoring gradual expansion, community engagement, and restraint in declaring takfir.

Their recruitment and governance methods also diverge sharply. ISGS relies on opportunistic, cross-border recruitment, drawing in hardliners and exploiting ethnic tensions. Its rule is marked by extreme violence, coercion, and resource extraction. JNIM, on the other hand, embeds itself within local societies, recruiting heavily from particular ethnic groups whose grievances it amplifies, such as the Fulani through Katiba Macina. Its governance is more adaptable and service-focused, often building parallel institutions that offer dispute resolution and basic services to

secure local acceptance. A key operational difference is that ISGS embraces a rigid “with us or against us” doctrine and refuses alliances with other armed actors. JNIM, however, adopts a more flexible approach, forming temporary partnerships with non-jihadist militias and separatist groups when tactically beneficial—an essential feature of its locally attuned, pragmatic strategy.

### **Shared Features**

Conversely, despite their fierce competition, ISGS and JNIM share core features that help explain their durability and the persistent nature of the Sahel conflict. Both movements aim to establish Islamic states governed by rigid interpretations of Sharia and to eliminate Western presence from the region. Although their strategies vary significantly, their ultimate objective—creating an Islamic political order—remains identical.

Furthermore, each group regards the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as corrupt, illegitimate, and apostate, and therefore to be toppled through armed jihad. They routinely attack state forces, infrastructure, and government representatives. Both organizations also excel at exploiting long-standing local grievances—such as state abandonment, ethnic exclusion, and abuses by national security forces—to attract recruits and justify their insurgency (ICG, 2020). Rather than inventing these conditions, they fuse jihadist ideology with pre-existing social tensions. The inability of states to resolve these underlying injustices continually fuels recruitment and territorial growth for both groups.

### **Nature and Dynamics of the ISGS-JNIM Rivalry: Drivers and Implications**

The confrontation between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) constitutes a key battleground in the broader global jihadist struggle, deeply influencing the Sahel's security dynamics. Their rivalry is not limited to control of territory but reflects a multifaceted contest over ideological authority, recruitment power, and financial resources. This competition operates under a ruthless “outbidding” logic, in which each faction attempts to prove itself stronger and more ideologically uncompromising than the other, resulting in severe repercussions for regional stability (Zenn, 2021; Torelli, 2018).

### ***Territorial Control: The Battle for the Sahelian Periphery***

The most visible aspect of the rivalry is the fierce struggle for dominance across the vast and poorly monitored borderlands of eastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and southwestern Niger. Gaining control of these areas is vital for building governance structures, maintaining supply routes, and exerting authority. Eastern Mali—particularly Ménaka and Gao—has emerged as the central battleground of this intra-jihadist confrontation. The conflict is not over empty desert, but over key villages and spheres of influence. ISGS, drawing support from parts of the Daoussahak Tuareg population, has launched a determined campaign to dismantle JNIM's previously stronger foothold, which is anchored in alliances with Idnan Tuareg groups (Morgan, 2023). The region has been marked by retaliatory massacres, as each side targets suspected collaborators of the other, fueling an endless cycle of revenge that clears territories of opposing networks (UNSC, 2023).

In the Tri-Border Area more broadly, the fighting is less concentrated but just as lethal. JNIM has long dominated northern Burkina Faso, while ISGS has consolidated its presence in Niger's Tillabéri region. As both factions extend their reach, their operational zones increasingly intersect, sparking frequent violent encounters. The inability of national armies to secure these rural zones has left a vacuum, which both groups are determined to occupy, effectively transforming the area into a constant warfront (ICG, 2021). Ultimately, the struggle over territory is a battle to determine which group will shape the political and social order in the Sahel's ungoverned spaces.

### ***Recruitment Competition: The Contest for Hearts, Minds, and Fighters***

The rivalry is, at its core, a battle for human capital. Both groups depend on a continuous influx of fighters to sustain their offensives against state authorities and one another, which has resulted in divergent recruitment tactics. JNIM, for example, has been particularly effective in rooting its narrative in local ethnic and political grievances. Its Fulani-dominated faction, Katiba Macina, attracts recruits by depicting the Burkinabè and Malian governments as anti-Fulani, while presenting JNIM as the community's defender (Thurston, 2020). ISGS counters this by condemning JNIM's approach as tribalism (*asabiyya*) that undermines true Islamic universalism. It instead portrays itself as the authentic guardian of a borderless Islamic project, appealing to those who view JNIM's approach as compromised (Zenn, 2020).

The rivalry also compels local communities and ethnic militias to take sides. A group that aligns with JNIM for protection is automatically targeted by ISGS, and the reverse is equally true. This dynamic drags whole communities into the conflict, turning local tensions over land or resources into proxy fronts in the broader jihadist competition. The result is a growing polarization of the social environment, where neutrality is no longer a viable option (Lecocq et al., 2020). In this way, the contest for allegiance embeds the conflict deeply within the social fabric of Sahelian societies.

### ***Resource Conflicts: The Economics of Insurgency***

Maintaining a large insurgent movement requires substantial resources, making control over profitable economic networks a central factor in the conflict. This financial aspect means the rivalry is driven as much by the need for material survival as by ideological differences. The Sahel is threaded with long-established smuggling routes for narcotics, arms, fuel, and human trafficking. Dominating these corridors enables armed groups to impose taxes on trade, securing a crucial and autonomous income stream (ICG, 2021). The struggle for the road networks linking Mali to Niger and Burkina Faso is therefore also a struggle for this economic lifeline. Whichever group holds these routes can better finance its activities, offering higher pay and superior equipment to attract recruits.

Livestock, particularly cattle, represents a major store of wealth in the Sahel and is vital to insurgent logistics. Cattle raiding provides food and revenue, weakens communities aligned with the opposition, and serves as a form of compensation for fighters. The sharp rise in livestock theft in the Ménaka and Tillabéri regions is closely tied to the ISGS–JNIM contest (UNSC, 2023). In addition, both organizations regularly extort local traders and artisanal gold mining sites, establishing alternative economic systems that bankroll their campaigns and tighten their hold over local populations.

### ***Ideological Legitimacy: Competing Claims to Authentic Jihad in the Sahel***

At the heart of the conflict is a struggle over which group embodies “true” jihad. This ideological contest—waged through public statements, media productions, and battlefield conduct—lies at the core of their bid for recognition within the global jihadist movement. JNIM, rooted in the Al-Qaeda school of thought, promotes a gradual, community-oriented strategy. It argues that establishing a

durable Islamic emirate requires first winning local support, even if that means forming short-term alliances with non-jihadist actors and applying Sharia law slowly and strategically. ISGS denounces this approach as betrayal and deviation. Its former leader, Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, condemned JNIM for cooperating with “tyrants and polytheists,” dismissing their claim to be genuine mujahideen (Al-Sahrawi, 2019, cited in Zenn, 2020). ISGS also makes extensive use of takfir—labeling other Muslims as apostates—against JNIM and its backers. This frames its violent campaign against JNIM as religiously justified, often taking precedence over fighting state forces (Warner & Weiss, 2021). By portraying JNIM as apostates, ISGS seeks to draw in the most hardline militants who favor immediate, uncompromising violence. This ideological escalation forces JNIM to counter with its own doctrinal arguments, intensifying both rhetoric and armed confrontation.

### ***Impact on Civilians: A Widening Human Tragedy***

The implications of this rivalry for civilians are catastrophic and multidimensional. The dynamics of outbidding and territorial control have created a human rights disaster of staggering proportions. For instance, the competition to appear stronger and more ruthless has led to a dramatic escalation in violence against civilians. Massacres of villages are now a standard tactic in the ISGS-JNIM playbook. A village accused of siding with one group is punished by the other with extreme brutality, leading to mass killings that terrorize the region (Human Rights Watch, 2021). These massacres are often meticulously documented and publicized by the perpetrators to signal their resolve and power to both their rival and the local population. Also, The Sahel is home to one of the world's fastest-growing displacement crises. Millions have been forced from their homes due to the generalized violence, a significant portion of which is directly linked to the inter-jihadist rivalry (UNSC, 2023). Civilians are displaced not only by the threat of violence from one group but also by the fear of being branded as collaborators and targeted by the other. This mass displacement has overwhelmed humanitarian capacity, creating dire conditions in informal camps and host communities, and straining fragile social structures to the breaking point. Furthermore, the conflict has shattered local economies, closed schools and health clinics, and severed social bonds that have held diverse communities together for generations. The polarization enforced by the two groups makes reconciliation and coexistence increasingly difficult, planting the seeds for long-term inter-communal strife (ICG, 2021). Furthermore, the rivalry has effectively dismantled

what little state presence existed in these peripheral regions, with both groups systematically targeting government officials, teachers, and health workers, creating a vacuum of basic services and authority.

### **Regional Security Implications of the Sahelian Insurgency**

The fierce competition between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), unfolding in a context of weak state authority and long-standing communal tensions, has triggered a deepening security emergency across the region. What began in Mali has spread far beyond its borders, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of unrest that erodes state capacity, strains international interventions, and poses a growing threat to the wider West African sub-region. The consequences extend beyond security, affecting humanitarian conditions, governance structures, and geopolitical stability, posing a fundamental challenge to continental order.

#### ***Spread of Violence and Consolidation of the Mali–Niger–Burkina Faso Tri-Border Zone***

One of the clearest regional effects is the transformation of the Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso borderlands into a single interconnected battlefield, commonly referred to as the “tri-border” zone. This is not accidental overflow but a calculated territorial expansion by both ISGS and JNIM. They exploit the vast, poorly governed desert corridors to evade security forces, conduct cross-border assaults, and establish fallback zones. For example, an operation organized in Mali may be carried out in Burkina Faso, with fighters later escaping into Niger—making conventional state-based military responses ineffective (ICG, 2021). This has produced what is essentially a “jihadist archipelago,” where militants circulate freely while national armies are restricted by borders.

The violence now functions as a regional system. A local clash between herders and farmers in Burkina Faso can be instrumentalized by JNIM’s Katiba Macina, provoking counterattacks from ISGS units based in Mali. This process internationalizes domestic grievances, vastly complicating conflict resolution (Zenn, 2021). The tri-border zone has shifted from a peripheral battlefield to the central hub of jihadist activity, with attacks growing in scale and brutality (UNSC, 2023).

#### ***Erosion of State Authority and Counterterrorism Failures***

The ongoing insurgency has severely weakened the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, deepening a crisis of state legitimacy. In many rural areas, the state has effectively vanished, allowing jihadist movements to assume basic governance functions. These groups now impose taxes, enforce strict legal codes, and regulate mobility (Thurston, 2020). The collapse is both territorial and psychological; when ISGS or JNIM offer more consistent—though ruthless—conflict resolution than an absent or corrupt state, the social contract is effectively shattered. The inability of civilian administrations to ensure security triggered a wave of military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023).

Although the juntas justified their seizures of power as necessary to confront jihadism, they have instead deepened diplomatic isolation and adopted heavy-handed, indiscriminate counterterrorism tactics. These strategies, which often target entire ethnic communities accused of aiding insurgents, have only driven more recruits into the ranks of ISGS and JNIM, perpetuating a cycle of repression and radicalization (ICG, 2022).

### ***Collapse of Peacekeeping and the Emergence of New Security Blocs***

The security architecture in the Sahel has been dramatically transformed by the failure of traditional peacekeeping missions and the rise of alternative, frequently Russia-aligned, security coalitions. The UN's MINUSMA mission was intended to stabilize Mali, but its presence became politically intolerable to the ruling junta, which forged close ties with Russia's Wagner Group. The regime's demand for MINUSMA's exit in 2023 signaled a major setback for international peacekeeping amid complex insurgencies and host-state resistance (Campbell, 2023). Its withdrawal has left a power vacuum in northern Mali, now contested by jihadists and separatist factions, deepening instability. In turn, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—facing diplomatic isolation and worsening security—formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a mutual defense pact. Although presented as a coordinated front against jihadist insurgency, the AES largely serves as a political counterweight to ECOWAS and France (Solomon, 2024). Its real military effectiveness remains uncertain, and there is a risk that its operations could inflame the conflict further if they target political rivals rather than jihadist actors.

### ***Threats to West Africa's Coastal States***

The conflict has moved beyond the Sahel and is now pushing southward, posing a direct risk to the once-stable coastal states of Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. These countries, located

just below Burkina Faso, have become new zones of confrontation. Both ISGS and JNIM are now launching regular attacks in these areas as they expand operations to secure additional resources, recruits, and trafficking routes (ICG, 2023). Northern Benin and Togo, in particular, have witnessed a sharp rise in jihadist activity, including assaults on security posts and attempts to coerce local communities.

Unlike the Sahelian states, the coastal countries are exposed for different structural reasons. Their northern regions suffer from chronic underdevelopment and political neglect, creating conditions militants can exploit. Moreover, their security forces are largely equipped for routine policing rather than countering dispersed, guerrilla-style insurgencies, leaving them highly exposed (Zenn, 2023). This southward shift marks a serious escalation, placing millions more people and key economic zones at risk of instability.

### ***Humanitarian Toll and Displacement Patterns***

The human impact of the conflict is devastating, producing one of the fastest-growing displacement and humanitarian crises in the world. More than 3 million people have been internally displaced in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with millions more in urgent need of aid (OCHA, 2024). Displacement is driven not only by jihadist attacks but also by state-led counterinsurgency abuses, forcing people to flee from rural areas to cities or even into neighboring coastal states. This large-scale movement of people is both a symptom and a catalyst of the conflict. As agriculture and trade collapse, food insecurity rises, pushing displaced communities into dependence on aid and making them more susceptible to recruitment by armed groups. At the same time, humanitarian access is shrinking, as aid workers are increasingly targeted, preventing essential relief from reaching affected populations (HRW, 2023). The breakdown of community structures and the destruction of livelihoods mean the consequences will endure for decades, even if security eventually improves.

### **Conclusion**

The rivalry between ISGS and JNIM is not a peripheral phenomenon but a central engine of the Sahel's current collapse. Their competition—driven by ideological rivalry, territorial expansion, and the quest for financial and political dominance—has produced a self-reinforcing cycle of

violence that weakens states, radicalizes communities, and widens the geographical footprint of insecurity. As governance vacuums deepen, both groups continue to entrench themselves as alternative authorities, demonstrating that military solutions alone cannot reverse the crisis.

Stabilizing the Sahel requires shifting from reactionary counterterrorism operations to strategies that restore governance, accountability, and basic service delivery in marginalized areas. Security interventions must prioritise community protection rather than punitive force, while economic reconstruction, inclusive local administration, and the rehabilitation of displaced populations must become integral components of conflict response. Equally essential is coordinated regional action: without shared border management, intelligence cooperation, and political alignment, the Sahel will continue to fragment, pushing instability further toward the Gulf of Guinea.

Ultimately, defeating the ISGS–JNIM insurgent ecosystem requires outcompeting jihadist actors not only on the battlefield but in the political, social, and economic arenas where legitimacy is earned. The future of the Sahel will depend on whether states and their partners can rebuild trust with the populations that jihadists currently claim to protect.

### **Policy Responses**

Effective stabilization of the Sahel and the dismantling of the conditions that sustain the ISGS–JNIM rivalry require moving away from purely military reactions toward the revival of governance and human-centered security. Restoring state legitimacy—especially through decentralization and inclusive governance—must be the first step. Governments need to strengthen local authorities, support traditional and religious leaders, and reestablish essential services and rule of law in long-neglected areas such as Mopti, Tillabéri, and Ménaka. Reopening schools, health facilities, and courts is crucial to rebuilding public confidence and countering jihadist claims of state abandonment and corruption.

Security strategies should focus on protecting communities rather than simply targeting insurgents. Counterinsurgency efforts must be based on local cooperation, intelligence, and civilian protection. The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) needs to enhance the professionalism and coordination of its security forces, while ensuring strict accountability to avoid abuses that fuel recruitment. Disrupting jihadist financing is equally necessary and can be achieved through

stronger border management, regulation of artisanal mining, and creating legal economic opportunities to replace informal trade networks.

Economic recovery and humanitarian relief must advance alongside security reforms. Reviving agriculture, rebuilding infrastructure, and supporting small businesses can provide tangible benefits that weaken the appeal of insurgent governance. Tailored programs for youth and women—including vocational training, microfinance, and civic participation—can reduce radicalization pathways while strengthening local resilience. Addressing displacement is also critical—returnees need protection, reintegration, and psychosocial support to prevent renewed cycles of exclusion and violence.

Countering extremist ideology is another key pillar. Supporting respected Islamic scholars and local imams to spread alternative religious messages—through radio, community outreach, and dialogue—can erode jihadist legitimacy. Rehabilitation programs for defectors and vulnerable youth, combined with community reconciliation initiatives, can help mend fractured inter-ethnic and interfaith relations.

Finally, regional and international engagement must be realigned toward shared objectives. Sahelian governments, ECOWAS, and the African Union should implement a unified Sahel Security Compact that links military, humanitarian, and development actions. Better intelligence-sharing, joint border patrols, and early-warning systems are necessary to curb cross-border attacks. International partners must prioritize strengthening local institutions rather than creating dependency or fragmented interventions.

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