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JNIM THREAT IN THE TRI-BORDER AREA OF MALI, MAURITANIA AND SENEGAL



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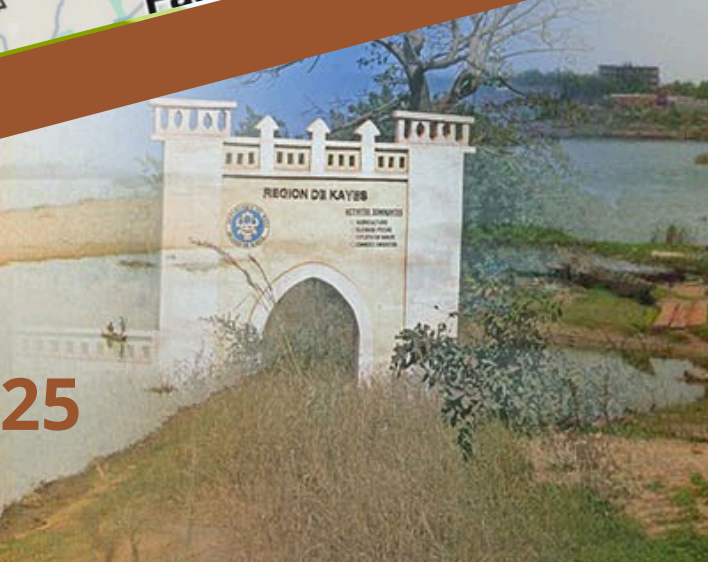


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Summary

The actions of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in southwest Mali indicate that it is seeking to infiltrate Mauritania and Senegal. JNIM has exponentially increased its activities in Kayes, Mali's border region with Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal. These activities include complex attacks on security forces, coercion of civilians and criminal economy. JNIM's main objective is to push Malian security forces out of areas close to Bamako and delegitimize the government, thus laying the foundations for an extension of its area of operations. JNIM has already illegally infiltrated key economic sectors, such as logging and mining, which depend on trade with Mauritania and Senegal. JNIM's interests in these sectors enable it to establish cross-border networks. The group is aware that it can then use these networks to facilitate the movement of affiliated people and resources to Mauritania and Senegal. Although its immediate priority is to use Mauritanian and Senegalese territory to finance its actions and recruit, JNIM will probably try to gradually extend its territorial control in the future.

Senegal presents vulnerability factors that JNIM can exploit, including a porous border, a lack of awareness of security issues among the population, pressing socio-economic challenges and the spread of Salafism. Senegal's border with Mali is already heavily exploited by smugglers, and its geography makes it more difficult to secure. However, a significant proportion of the population in regions threatened by JNIM expansion do not see the group as an immediate threat. Unemployment remains high in these regions, and caste systems in the Bakel area perpetuate inequalities and other injustices by stigmatizing entire communities. Salafist ideologues have used these grievances to influence people's religious beliefs, making them potentially more receptive to violent extremism. Ideologues offer a "liberation theology" contrasted with traditional Islam, whose actors do not sufficiently condemn the caste system and other inequalities. JNIM has already exploited similar vulnerabilities throughout the Sahel; Senegal should not be considered a sustainable exception without prevention and community resilience-building efforts.

At the same time, Senegal has resilience factors that have so far spared it, principally its social cohesion and its competent, professional security forces. Added to this are the mutual respect and spirit of peaceful cohabitation that characterize relations between different ethnic and religious groups. Their harmonious relations make it difficult for JNIM to exploit existing tensions to its own advantage, as it has been able to do elsewhere in the region. Moreover, the vast majority of Senegalese do not subscribe to the more radical ideologies shared by followers of groups like JNIM. They prefer moderate teachings of Islam, particularly those of Sufi brotherhood leaders, who reinforce social cohesion and oppose radicalization and violent extremism. Although the brotherhoods are not as influential in the eastern border regions, these regions have not, to date, seen any notable rise in extremism. In addition, Senegal has professional security forces who have established healthy and relatively peaceful relations with the local population. This mitigates another grievance that JNIM has exploited in the Sahel, namely the opposition between border populations and security forces. From this point of view, Senegal has a solid base of resilience to prevent JNIM from expanding and establishing itself in the long term.

Based on these facts, the Senegalese government could improve security in the most vulnerable parts of the country by building community resilience. It needs to strengthen the presence of its permanent security forces in border regions, as well as its cooperation with Mali and Mauritania. It should also conduct awareness-raising campaigns among local leaders - religious and traditional - and increase programs aimed at alleviating socio-economic difficulties and vulnerabilities. These holistic policies will integrate security, cultural and socio-economic aspects to limit the possibility of JNIM infiltration.

Introduction

The Tri-border region, at the junction of Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, has become a strategic theater of operations for Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a terrorist group seeking to extend its influence beyond Mali's borders. This area, marked by its proximity to key towns that supply the Malian capital, is characterized by JNIM infiltration and positioning, representing a growing threat. Already active in south-west Mali, notably in the Kayes region, JNIM is stepping up its violent activities and infiltrating cross-border economic and criminal networks while attempting to exploit the socio-economic and ideological vulnerabilities of neighboring Mauritania and eastern Senegal.

This report offers an in-depth analysis of this threat and how JNIM adapts its expansion strategy to regional dynamics. It begins by examining JNIM's activities in the Tri-border region, and its strategies for economic and territorial infiltration. It will then look at vulnerability factors in the Senegalese and Mauritanian cases. This will be followed by an analysis of the resilience factors that could slow or halt this progression. Finally, recommendations for strengthening community security and resilience in the face of this transnational threat will be put forward.

JNIM Kinetic Activity in the Tri-Border Region

JNIM has considerably increased its activity in the Kayes region over the past three years. In 2024, it increased its violent actions in the region more than sevenfold compared with 2021. In the Kayes region, JNIM has attacked security force installations, customs posts and convoys on the main roads to the capital, Bamako, that also cross into Mauritania and Senegal. Attacks often consist of raids by armed men in vehicles or roadside ambushes, including with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These attacks have mainly targeted the security forces, other government-affiliated actors and companies or businesses to limit their ability to operate. An example was a February 8 incursion by JNIM sub-group Katiba Macina near Melgué, about 35 kilometers from Bakel on the Senegalese border. This attack, which killed three Malian soldiers and wounded as many, was the third of its kind in this locality on the road between Kayes and the Senegalese border. This strategy is intended to isolate Bamako from its main supply route. It would also impact Senegal's economy, as the port of Dakar depends on routes linking it to Bamako and other Malian towns.

Nor has JNIM completely spared civilians. It has targeted communities and local chiefs who oppose its ideology and insurgency. It combines this targeting with preaching to local populations to spread its message and recruit more people. JNIM is seeking to reproduce the strategy it has adopted throughout the Sahel, including in Kayes's neighboring region to the east, Koulikoro : intensify its attacks on government actors and establish relations of complicity in communities - using coercion if necessary - to delegitimize the state and ultimately replace it. JNIM's December 2024 kidnapping of the Caliph of the Omar branch of the Tijaniyya Sufi brotherhood in Mali, Thierno Hady Tall, in Nioro du Sahel area is evidence of this strategy. -The kidnapping was especially notable because, up to that point, JNIM had avoided direct confrontation with local religious communities to establish alliances and "local incubators" that it needs to operate more effectively. By claiming responsibility for the kidnapping of such a respected Sufi religious leader, JNIM is asserting itself as the moral and religious authority that the population should follow.

While the sources interviewed by the Timbuktu Institute agree that the risk of attacks is higher in Mali than over the border in Mauritania or Senegal, increased activity near these borders indicates that JNIM will continue to threaten the latter two countries. The road axis between Bamako and Kayes has become a JNIM circulation zone, according to concordant testimonies from local residents. Some of them claim to have identified "certain possible supply points for terrorists in Kayes region" around the commune of Dioumara, east of Diéma: Nankoumana (south-east of Dioumara), Kaladiango (south-west of Dioumara), and Mousafa (north-west of Dioumara).

These neighboring localities "are said to host elements of the Katiba Macina, who frequently go there to stock up on foodstuffs and basic necessities". A source in the Kayes region affirms that another temporary refuge is the Baoulé forest, south-west of Dioumara. While the Macina Katiba has not yet succeeded in establishing itself socioreligiously or setting up a logistical base on Senegalese territory, it is increasingly positioned to attempt to do so.

JNIM Economic Activity in the Tri-Border Region

JNIM's increased activity in south-west Mali has enabled it to increase its involvement in economic sectors and networks that cross into Mauritania and Senegal. These include livestock breeding, smuggling and logging. Large volumes of livestock, timber, weapons and drugs are transported across the tri-border area, and JNIM often infiltrates these activities illicitly. For example, the terrorist group is increasingly involved in large-scale cattle theft from its area of operations in Mali. It has established itself as a key player in this lucrative sector, which means that much of the trade benefits it through its intermediaries. The situation is similar in the timber sector; JNIM allows logging companies to operate in areas under its influence in exchange for a share of the revenues.

By determining the conditions for the safe passage of timber, JNIM influences national economic activity and cross-border trade. Although JNIM has not yet substantially exploited the gold mines of Kayes or the Kédougou and Tambacounda regions of Senegal, its extortion of gold mines in northern Mali and Burkina Faso indicates that it would not rule out profiting from them in the near future. More than its security and territorial governance activities, JNIM economic activity furthered its influence in Mauritania and Senegal. Certain merchants in these countries are now forced to collaborate indirectly with it, including by providing intelligence and supplying its networks.

JNIM's Expansion and Infiltration Strategies

JNIM has a two-pronged strategy in tri-border area to encircle Bamako and extend its area of operations to parts of Mauritania and Senegal. JNIM is following the same pattern it used in the Malian regions of Koulikoro and Mopti, as well as in northern Burkina Faso: avoid large-scale battles for control of urban areas, and instead limit the movements of security forces outside these zones by multiplying gaps and areas of insecurity. The multiplication of attacks on main roads and in small towns demoralizes and disperses the efforts of security forces. It undermines the government as the security guarantor for the local population. Security forces, civil servants and economic entities cannot carry out their mission, which enables JNIM to control territory or at least contest strategic areas essential to the movement of people and goods. This control is expressed through preaching, collecting taxes, setting up administrative structures and enforcing laws imposed by JNIM. The expansion of this activity from Koulikoro to the Kayes region is part of the strategy of encircling Bamako with territory favorable to JNIM. This would allow JNIM to conduct more attacks in Bamako to delegitimize the state, such as the September 2024 attack on security force bases in the city. JNIM's objective is to influence enough local populations of local populations around Bamako and throughout Mali to pressure the state into disintegration.

Despite logistical difficulties and cultural and ideological resistance, JNIM is using its footholds in the Kayes region to prepare to penetrate Mauritania and Senegal. JNIM is likely looking to increase its involvement in economic sectors—particularly livestock, smuggling, timber and gold mining—that cross into Mauritania and Senegal.

Its pre-existing involvement in these sectors is the main source of funding for its terrorist activities. It also makes JNIM an essential player in the socio-economic life of cross-border communities, making it more difficult for authorities to combat. JNIM is positioned to use its growing economic networks to foster the cross-border connections that it will need when it increases its infiltration efforts. These networks are already facilitating the recruitment and cross-border transport of people and affiliated resources, in particular weapons and various explosives. The ethnic and kinship ties shared by cross-border communities are likely to contribute to the intensification of such efforts. Katiba Macina has recently targeted specific Senegalese communities. It has even sent people into Senegal to establish links, despite the fact that communities there do not have the same history or grievances as in Mali and Burkina Faso. These attempts underscore JNIM's desire to expand its area of influence so that it can continue to intensify its operations. In Mauritania and Senegal, its short-term ambition is to pursue its economic and recruitment objectives to fuel its insurgency in other Sahelian countries. In the long-term, its objective is likely to expand territorially by destabilizing Mauritania and Senegal. JNIM appears to be avoiding a direct confrontation with Senegalese security forces for the time being. Doing so would prevent it from experiencing the difficulties of fighting on two fronts, especially against a military with 30 years of counter-insurgency experience in Casamance. Similarly, JNIM seems to have learned from the difficulties of other terrorist groups who struggled to consolidate existing territorial control while expanding further.

Vulnerability Factors to JNIM Expansion

Although Senegal has not experienced the same level of radicalization as other Sahelian countries, there are risk factors that could make it vulnerable to JNIM's expansion strategy.

Porous Borders

The absence of an attack is not an absolute indicator of invulnerability; a terrorist attack is often the of a long financial and recruitment process. Porous national boundaries in the tri-border area are allowing JNIM to infiltrate economies, which is one of the most urgent security issues for Mauritania and Senegal. From the most desolate parts of the Mauritanian border to the most forested areas of the Senegalese border, many areas remain difficult to secure. JNIM already uses the desert areas of Mauritania to trade with communities and organize assembly points. In addition, Mauritania is hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso on its border with Mali, following the continuing deterioration of the security situation in the SSA (Alliance of Sahel States) countries. This increases the risk of JNIM gaining a foothold through the presence of potential fighters among the refugee population. As for Senegal, it is becoming difficult to secure the areas near the Falémé River, despite the intensification of patrols during the Niokolo and Nawetan operations at the end of 2024. Acknowledging the urgency of these measures to reinforce security in the area, the official website of the Senegalese Ministry of the Armed Forces reported : "Planned by Military Zone N°4, this operation is part of the FDS's ongoing activities to prevent infiltration by armed gangs operating beyond our borders, support the populations of the most isolated villages and ensure compliance with the decree on the protection of the Falémé (river)".

Border insecurity has contributed to the development of illicit activities, particularly in gold mining areas. According to one source, "The circulation of arms and armed men to and from Mali and Guinea is difficult to control." According to a resident of Saraya in the Kédougou region, "There is trafficking of all kinds. There are also hold-ups, notably by unidentified individuals who enter Senegal via Bambou, on the border with Mali. The assailants commit their acts and return to Mali.

Cross-border cattle rustling is becoming so organized via the Falémé bypass roads and pirogues that local populations are calling for new camps to deter the criminals."

Some local sources suspect that herders from Mali and Fouta-Djallon are making incursions via entry points that are poorly guarded. Illegal activities in Mali have had repercussions on Senegalese border communities. Senegalese radio station Sud FM reports that "The village of Farading (Commune de Missirah Sirimana), in the Saraya department (Kédougou region), was in the grip of panic on Sunday, February 9. Armed bandits burst into the neighboring Malian village of Makofé to hold up a Chinese company, spreading terror among the inhabitants. Faced with this sudden threat, some villagers fled into the forest before the police intervened". Insecure borders have helped JNIM integrate into cross-border economic networks and could enable it to physically exploit gold mines in Senegal.

This is likely a primary long-term objective for JNIM, as it would allow them to begin a new phase of activity, attacking security forces and state symbols such as customs posts.

Porous borders could also facilitate arms smuggling, helping to turn low-intensity inter-community rivalries violent. JNIM has exploited inter-community strife to improve its recruiting across the region. As has happened elsewhere in the Sahel, porous borders and illicit activities could enable JNIM to take advantage of its experience, networks, and kinetic capabilities. It will likely use any physical presence in Mauritania and Senegal to become key local player that the population cannot ignore and expand its area of operations.

Lack of Awareness of the Threat Among Local Populations

Vulnerability at the borders could be exacerbated by the fact that the Senegalese population is not sufficiently aware of the threat posed by JNIM. Around half the inhabitants of the Kédougou region are unaware of JNIM activities in Mali. According to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey conducted in 2024, a third of people in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions are not aware of the threat posed by potential radicalization in Senegal. This means that people are unaware of how JNIM expansion in Mauritania and Senegal would impact their daily lives.

As a result, JNIM may be filtering its message to tri-border communities to influence their perceptions favorably. Rather than propagating its radical ideological convictions, which are not very popular in Senegal, JNIM will likely try to present itself as the protector of marginalized groups. The lack of awareness among the population is due to years of political denial of the threat, which has negatively affected intensified security and counter-radicalization efforts since 2015.

Persistent Socio-Economic Challenges

One source of marginalization is high unemployment, particularly among young people. The concentration of economic opportunity in urban areas and foreign exploitation of gold resources has created a precarious situation in border areas. This has encouraged the growth of alternative, often illicit, cross-border economic activities. There is widespread trafficking in arms, fuel and livestock. JNIM thrives in illicit activities thanks to its experience, networks and armed capabilities. Consequently, JNIM could make further inroads in Mauritania and Senegal by recruiting from the large youth population disillusioned by their economic situation if remedying steps are not taken. According to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey carried out in 2024, 85% of people living in the regions of Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda cite unemployment as the reason why someone would join a violent extremist group. This makes it by far the most common reason, far ahead of ideology and criminality, highlighting the importance of the gold mining industry in regions like Kédougou.

However, much of the local population views the industry as exploitative due to the influence of foreign companies.

As one Saraya resident explains, "The gold miners dig everywhere to find gold and then leave the land as it is, without any redevelopment. Farmers have almost no space left to cultivate". Mining companies receive preferential treatment for land access, which pits the local population against them, explains one resident, "Spaces are reserved or sold to mining companies, which frustrates farmers. Farmers have difficulty obtaining access to land from local authorities. People have the impression that their land is now being allocated to foreigners for mining, to the detriment of their farming activities". Suspicions of collusion between local elected officials, Chinese companies, other players involved in Kédougou's semi-industrial gold mining in the Kédougou region "are rekindling tensions between young people and mining companies, and turning them against the local authorities", says a young man from the Kharakhéna area. JNIM has exploited similar situations in Mali and Burkina Faso, offering young people the opportunity to earn a living illicitly while fighting against unpopular foreign entities. Due to its ability to tailor its message to appeal to community grievances, whether they are religious or socioeconomic, JNIM is likely looking to do the same in Senegal.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Grievances

Another grievance could come from the unwillingness of traditional elites, including some Sufi and other religious leaders, to address a centuries-old caste system in the Matam and Tambacounda regions. This practice is particularly pronounced in Bakel, on the border with near Mali. The caste or descent-based slavery system consists to determining people's social position according to their family of origin or ancestry. As a result, people considered as belonging to a "lower class" are denied access to economic, religious, and even political responsibilities.

The situation is even more acute in Mauritania, where certain members of the Beydān (white Moors) group, who are essentially Arab – or claim a certain Arabness – own other members of the Haratine group, who are darker-skinned. While the caste system is an ancient practice, it is a recurrent form of socio-economic discrimination. Around a fifth of people in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions cite marginalization or social exclusion as a reason for joining a violent extremist group, according to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey conducted in 2024. In addition, some formerly stigmatized individuals under the caste system who migrated to Europe, especially France, have improved their economic status and developed contacts within French Salafist networks. They have built Wahhabi mosques in their hometowns in eastern Senegal. Their embrace of a Salafist ideology that claims to be "egalitarian" is a response to a lack of action by traditional Islamic leaders in dismantling the caste system.

While traditional leaders advocate for more moderate Islamic beliefs than JNIM's Salafist ideology, their inaction regarding the caste system could enable JNIM to delegitimize their authority among the classes considered "inferior."

This has already occurred in the Kayes region. Sources report that Salafist networks have already penetrated the Bakel area by seizing on this issue. They succeed in presenting Salafism as more egalitarian and as a "liberation theology", in contrast to traditional Islam, which has not sufficiently condemned the caste system. JNIM has already successfully adopted this approach in Burkina Faso, encouraging lower-class communities to turn against their elites. This approach has been successful in galvanizing recruits in other parts of the Sahel. The tri-border region faces the same socio-economic and socio-religious challenges, which merit greater attention. It is becoming more urgent as a transnational anti-slavery movement called "Gambana" (we're the same, in Soninké) is gaining momentum and mobilizing in Mauritania, Senegal and the Kayes region, where over 800,000 people continue to be socially considered as slaves.

The Spread of Salafism

Without over-generalizing or systematically equating Salafism with jihadism, this ideology is claimed by most current movements using violence for supposedly religious motivations. In the past, the Sahel has witnessed violence based on Sufism, among other things. While Salafist ideology is far from being predominant in Senegal, it poses a specific challenge, as its political-religious positions denigrate Sufis and other groups as heterodox Islam. Stimulated by transnational funding from foreign individuals and organizations, it has become more widespread through a preaching offensive in mosques, daaras and online platforms, in particular. Salafi preachers use online communication and accessible teachings to directly and indirectly oppose traditional Sufi leaders. This has enabled them to reach young people disillusioned by their socio-economic situation, particularly in the suburbs of Dakar and major urban centers such as Thiès and Louga.

Although religious moderation, not Salafism, is still the norm in Senegal's border regions, there are signs of the spread of Salafism. Compared to the central regions of Senegal, Sufi brotherhoods are not as influential in the Kédougou and Tambacounda regions. As a result, one of the key factors of ideological resilience to Salafism – the brotherhoods – is not sufficiently present in some of the regions most vulnerable to JNIM expansion. Sources familiar with the Khossanto and Mamakhono areas in the Kédougou region report that former students returning from the Middle East are constantly questioning traditional Islamic leaders and their legitimacy to manage worship. Local and foreign radical preachers are setting up their own mosques and denigrating more moderate religious leaders. These include preachers from Kéniéba, Mali and the broader Kayes region.

Tensions between certain socio-cultural groups are appearing simultaneously in this area. Just recently, "a group of pastoralists wanted to create their own village and have a chief from their own ethnic group, they no longer felt comfortable with a village chief from another ethnic group", says a local contact. Groups who have yet to be identified are siding with the nomadic pastoralists in these conflicts. Various sources in Khossanto and Mamakhono report the presence of a group known to the local population as Ansar al Islam. Unless this is a case of confusion, it raises questions about possible alliances between the violent Salafist group of the same name operating mainly in Burkina Faso and the Katiba Macina, both of which share similar demographics.

Despite what one local source describes as a "lack of resources and logistics" on the part of security forces, their efforts to establish a collaborative relationship with the local population seem to be bearing fruit; there has been no widespread radicalization and, people seem open to reporting suspicious situations along the border. However, there are social and religious grievances linked to marginalization and traditional Islamic practices. Salafism could spread in response to these grievances. Although it does not intrinsically endorse violence, it may create a more favorable image of violent Salafist groups such as JNIM. JNIM is capable of channeling discontent on a variety of issues, eventually moving towards a narrative more conducive to the use of violence.

Resilience Factors to JNIM Expansion

Senegal has cultural, ideological and institutional resilience to the ideological expansion of JNIM. This seems to be what sets it apart from the surrounding countries.

Prevalence of Social Cohesion Over Violence

The most important factor is that the majority of the population, including young people, does not support violence motivated by religion or ethnicity because of the relative cohesion of society. In the Kédougou region, the majority of the population believes that this type of violence will not occur in Senegal; 75% attribute the country's social peace to cultural traditions. Despite the existence of numerous ethnic and religious groups, only 13% of people in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions believe that inter-community tensions could incite someone to join a violent extremist group, according to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey carried out in 2024. Mixed marriages and respect for other communities' traditions are common. For example, cohesion between the Bassari, Bédik and Peul ethnic groups provides a cultural shield against "divisive ideologies". Consequently, part of the Kédougou region is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized as a model of rich cultural diversity and peaceful coexistence.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, "JNIM has exploited tensions between herders and more sedentary groups to recruit large numbers of herders. It was able to exploit the discrimination by certain communities, which it eventually attracted into its ranks.

By presenting itself as their protector, JNIM has successfully recruited from marginalized communities. It would be difficult for it to do the same in Senegal, as these grievances are not widespread and the history of the same communities is different than those of other countries in the Sahel. According to an internal survey conducted by the Timbuktu Institute in 2024, no one in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions believes that violent extremism could lead to ethnic targeting in order to achieve mass recruitment. In fact, the Katiba Macina's efforts to recruit by targeting members of certain communities have generally failed to mobilize militants. According to some sources, there have been warnings of reprisals on social media and in WhatsApp groups following the Senegalese military's recent engagement with its Malian counterpart, according to some sources. -However, the evidence points to a certain community resilience in the Senegal in the face of JNIM's usual strategy of establishing itself in border regions.

Widespread Religious Moderation

Despite the spread of Salafism, most Senegalese in the border regions and throughout the country continue to adhere to the moderate teachings of local religious leaders and traditional Islam. These teachings often focus on community and self-improvement rather than divisive ideological orientations. In addition, the leaders of the various Sufi brotherhoods and religious groups collaborate with each other, government representatives and each other community leaders to promote cohesion.

As a result, residents of the Matam and Tambacounda regions consider religious leaders to be the second-most important actor, after the government, in the prevention of violent extremism. The messages of these leaders seem to have a positive influence on the local population, including young people, even though they could be transmitted by more modern means to better resist the Salafist ideological offensive.

While the suburbs of Dakar seem to have seen a rise in Salafist influence, only 4% of residents in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions say they know someone who shares the same ideology as violent extremist groups, according to a 2024 internal survey by the Timbuktu Institute. Similarly, only 7% of people in the Tambacounda region and 3% in the Matam region claim to know someone likely be involved in terrorist activities. A contact in the Kidira area of the Tambacounda region emphasizes the low penetration of radical, divisive ideologies, declaring, "There are many religious currents that cohabit without any problem. I think the problems between the currents are more visible in Bakel.

I think the problems between the currents are more visible in Bakel". The influence of moderate religious leaders, such as those in the religious city of Woudou Thierno, contributes to stability in Kidira, Diyalougou and elsewhere in the border regions. Even in Bakel, in the Tambacounda region, radicalization is not considered a substantial issue, according to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey conducted in 2024. There is a general increase in Salafist preachers and mosques, but previous figures suggest resistance to these ideologies that could encourage violence.

Competent and Professional Security Forces

Compared with other Sahelian states, Senegal's security forces are better sized, trained and equipped to prevent the expansion of groups like JNIM. Despite protecting a smaller population and an even smaller territory than in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, Senegal's security forces are roughly the same size as those in Mali and Niger, and larger than those in Burkina Faso. They have a reputation for professionalism and non-interference in political affairs, a fixed ratio of officers to enlisted soldiers, and specialized training by profession. The security forces also have counterinsurgency experience, whether from the Casamance conflict or UN peacekeeping missions in countries such as Mali. Senegal is one of the world's biggest contributors to these missions.

This positive reputation has cultivated healthy relations between civilians and the military. Populations in eastern border areas describe the security forces as "helpful" and "reassuring"; 55% would first share information with the security forces about a person's membership in a violent extremist group. Poor civil-military relations in other Sahelian states have fostered a "positive" perception of JNIM among local populations. For example on March 13, Malian security forces and Russian Africa Corps mercenaries reportedly razed an entire area inhabited by a community suspected of having links with JNIM near Nampala, on Mali's border with Mauritania. This approach has turned many communities against the Malian security forces, underlining the importance of the relatively positive civil-military relations in Senegal.

As security forces struggle to secure the border areas with Mali and Mauritania, they have stepped up their presence and proximity to the population, according to a Goudiry resident. -Security forces have enhanced their permanent presence since 2022, notably with a new camp in Goudiry, which is in the Tambacounda region. Integrated patrols and intelligence-sharing have occurred between different units of the security forces, in addition to the presence of the gendarmerie's rapid response unit, GAR-SI.

This strengthened presence extends to cross-border cooperation initiatives with Mali and Mauritania. In February 2025, General Birame Diop, Senegalese Minister of the Armed Forces, and his Malian counterpart "signed" military cooperation agreements in areas such as training, the implementation of operational activities to jointly combat cross-border threats, intelligence, according to the official website of the Ministry of Armed Forces. The Senegalese Armed Forces' Department of Information and Public Relations (DIRPA) also reports cooperation with Mauritania through river patrols in February 2025, stating that, "Joint river patrols between Senegalese and Mauritanian defense and security forces were carried out from February 18 to 20. More than 12 localities on both of the border were visited. An opportunity to distribute vests to people living along the river". While Senegal is vulnerable to the spread of JNIM due to its vulnerability factors, its security forces have recognized the problem. They are taking action to remedy situation and have more resources at their disposal than other Sahelian states.

Recommendations

In light of the analysis above, the Senegalese government should adopt the following measures to reduce Senegal's vulnerability to the expansion of JNIM. These policies will reinforce the effectiveness of security forces, promote greater awareness of the threat, and reduce socio-economic marginalization among certain groups, particularly young people. They will reinforce both territorial security and community resilience.

Increase the Presence of Security Forces in Border Regions

The state should build more bases around the Falémé River and major cross-border routes, including near Bakel and Saraya, in the Kédougou, Matam and Tambacounda regions. At present, the security forces have a permanent base at Goudiry. However, the government is aware of the persistent and intensifying threat. During the 2024 legislative campaign, Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko even declared: "You know the situation in the sub-region. Today, the priority is the east of Senegal". A more consistent presence of security forces will further strengthen border security by enabling rapid deployment of specialized units. These units should focus on the fight against smuggling and the criminal economy, which are among JNIM's main sources of funding in region.

A stronger presence will also improve relations with the local population, enabling more effective intelligence-gathering.

Although the local population generally appreciates the security forces, the majority report no significant improvement in their security situation following temporary operations like Niokolo and Nawetan, according to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey conducted in 2024. A greater permanent presence will enable security forces to integrate real-time human intelligence into regular patrolling and surveillance. A majority of the local population would not hesitate to get involved, according to a 2024 internal survey by the Timbuktu Institute. For example, several residents of Guémédié, in the Saraya department, said they were in contact with people who could inform them of possible infiltrations from neighboring border localities. This is an opportunity for security forces to take advantage of a reinforced presence to establish more regular contacts and react accordingly. Joint efforts by security forces and communities will limit JNIM's opportunities for infiltration, thus contributing to lasting territorial security.

Strengthen Cross-Border Cooperation with Mali and Mauritania

Senegal should build on current efforts to further institutionalize and strengthen cooperation with Malian and Mauritanian security forces. Despite existing cooperation, security forces continue to struggle to secure border routes and road networks, particularly those shared with Mali. Local sources indicate that JNIM has logistical bases in the Kayes region. The existence of unofficial border crossings over the Falémé River into the Saraya area of Senegal increases the likelihood that JNIM will be able to link its Kayes bases to sites in Senegal. Therefore, it is imperative that Senegal reinforces strategic planning, intelligence sharing and joint patrols with Mali and Mauritania.

Strategic planning should include greater commitment at all levels, from political decision-makers to military and mid-level security policy managers. High-level decision-makers allocate the necessary resources to joint initiatives, while mid-level decision-makers coordinate the implementation of initiatives. Frequent face-to-face engagements at each level are necessary, following the example of the February 2025 meeting between the Malian and Senegalese army chiefs. The creation and implementation of binational and trilateral joint task forces should be a strategic planning priority. Given that JNIM has illicitly penetrated the economic sectors of all three countries, it makes sense for them to directly synchronize their counter-JNIM efforts. Specialized task forces should be used to focus on different functions, including interdiction, river security and emergency response.

They should integrate the capabilities of each country's army, police and intelligence services. By sharing responsibilities and pooling resources, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal will be able to provide a cross-border response to a multi-dimensional cross-border problem.

In addition, the three countries should designate points of contact within their intelligence agencies to institutionalize intelligence-sharing. These points of contact will collaborate with each other, creating processes to ensure a cross-border flow of intelligence. These processes will include the timely reporting of suspicious movements to the relevant border authorities in the affected country. The institutionalization of intelligence sharing will enable the three countries to gather information from a variety of sources and produce accurate and timely analyses to inform policy. In addition, they should build on existing patrol efforts and improved strategic planning to carry out more joint patrols by land and sea. They should be to target JNIM supply points and transport networks to prevent them from finding safe havens. Security forces must maintain a constant presence on cross-border land and river routes to deny JNIM safe havens. To ensure that JNIM operations are disrupted and eventually suppressed in the tri-border area, Senegal should institutionalize cooperation with Malian and Mauritanian security forces in the political, operational and intelligence realms.

Conduct Awareness Campaigns with Community Leaders

The government should rely more religious leaders, traditional chiefs and local authorities to raise awareness of the threat posed by JNIM. At present, the local population would find it difficult to organize a collective response to the spread of JNIM, as a third of people in the eastern regions are unaware of the threat, according to the internal 2024 Timbuktu Institute survey. Awareness campaigns should explain to people how JNIM seeks to undermine social cohesion, focusing on its violence, instrumentalization of social cleavages and intolerance of ideological differences. They should directly contrast JNIM's radical tendencies with the more tolerant values of Senegalese society. By co-opting respected leaders and training them in communications, the government will strengthen its legitimacy with the population and reach a greater number of people.

Local religious leaders will be important in this process, but other actors will be essential in regions where Sufism is not so predominant. For example, traditional chiefs have more influence in rural parts of Kédougou and Tambacounda, while reformist actors could support awareness-raising work in the vicinity of Bakel and certain urban areas of the Tambacounda region. For the local population to proactively combat the expansion of JNIM, they need to be more aware of the threat this group represents to national security and social cohesion.

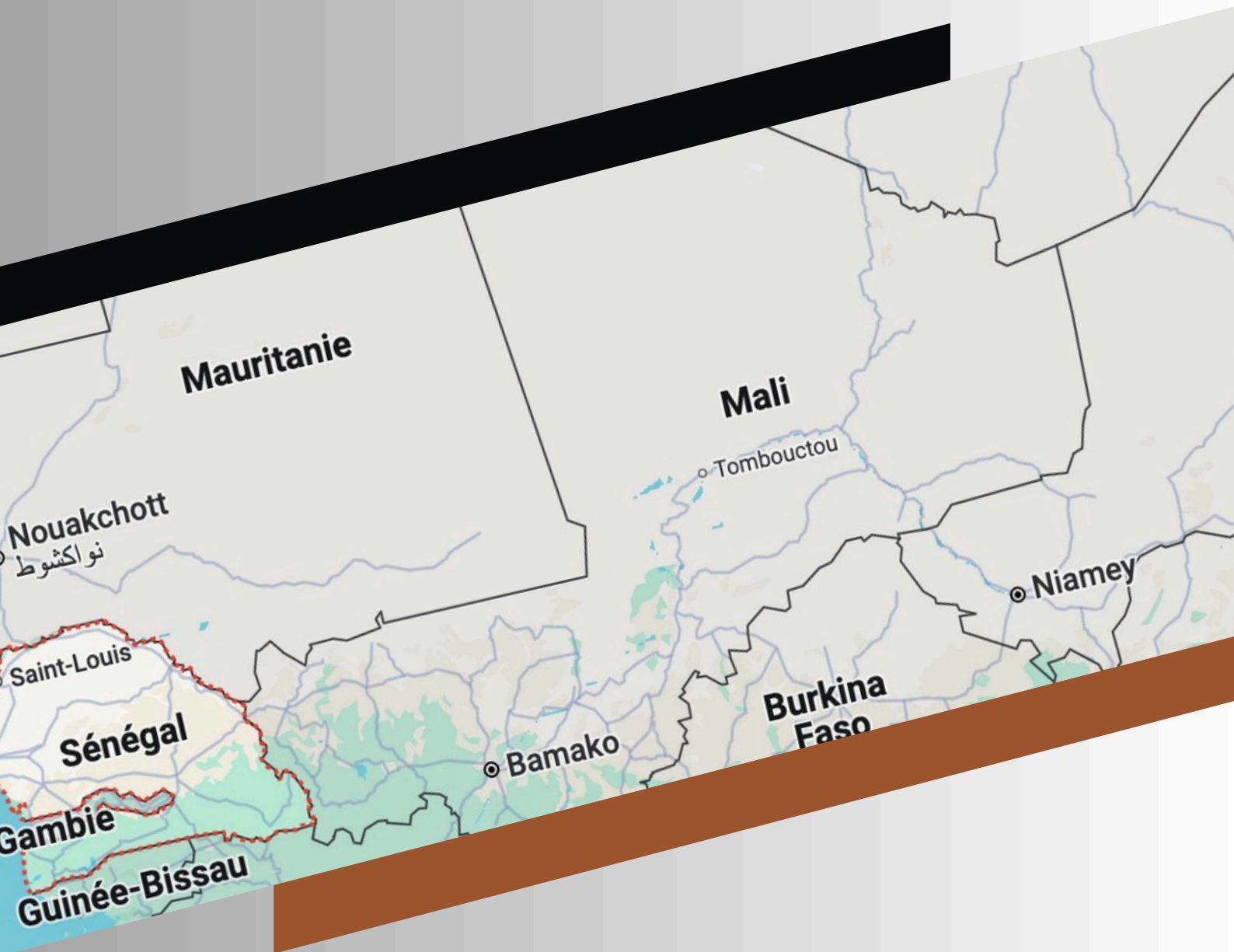
Strengthen Programs for Vulnerable Socio-Economic Groups

The government should do more to improve access opportunities for vulnerable socio-economic groups' access to opportunities. According to an internal Timbuktu Institute survey conducted in 2024, unemployment and marginalization are the two main risk factors for radicalization. Both problems are acute in the tri-border region, and the government should take a holistic approach to tackling them. One measure is to improve the existing road infrastructure to better link the Kédougou and Tambacounda regions, thereby reducing geographical isolation. A great deal of work had already been done in this direction with programs such as PUMA and Emergency Community Development Program (PUDC), which should be reinforced as part of the development of the announced territorial poles.

Another measure is to improve access vocational training in sustainable agriculture. This measure is community-centric, self-sustaining, and empowers women and young people. Agriculture is still one most important sectors off the economies of border regions. Similarly, the government should further sponsor micro-

credits to support local entrepreneurship, including in the agricultural sector, using existing mechanisms such as the Délégation générale à l'Entreprenariat Rapide (DER). The government could align this program with priorities such as millet production in the East.

Finally, the government could regulate the mining sector more equitably in order to address, with sustainable responses, the discontent aroused by the perception of foreign companies in this sector. Better regulation should create greater opportunities for the local population to get involved and benefit from their region's resources. Targeted and holistic measures will reduce the likelihood of individuals becoming involved in the illicit networks in which JNIM thrives. They will mitigate the risk posed by local perception that a young community activist from the Kédougou region describes as, "persisting in poverty while living in a region teeming with wealth."



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