

Letter from the Observatory

JNIM IN KAYES

Economic Fragility and Cross-Border
Threats

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Introduction

Kayes, Mali's first administrative region created by Law No. 60-3-A.L.R.S of June 7, 1960, occupies a strategic position both geographically and socio-politically. Located in the far west of the country, it is bordered by Senegal to the west, Mauritania to the north, Guinea to the south, and the Koulikoro region to the east. This region remains a strategic economic hub, contributing the second largest share of Mali's GDP after Bamako[1]. Kayes is also a cultural and migratory crossroads in the Sahel sub-region and West Africa. This strategic position, reinforced by its proximity to neighboring countries and its role in cross-border migration dynamics, makes it a key area for Mali's stability and security in the West African region.

However, this position also exposes Kayes to complex challenges, marked by structural and cyclical conflicts that threaten social cohesion and security. These conflictual dynamics in the Kayes region are linked to historical, social, and economic factors, amplified by rapid contemporary developments. Among the structural conflicts, those related to descent-based slavery occupy a central place, particularly in municipalities such as Oussoubidiagna^[2]. The recurring tensions between the "lambé" (considered noble and believed to be the first settlers) and the Collectif des Sans-Papiers (CSP) reveal a social divide inherited from ancestral cultural practices and now exacerbated by modern influences, particularly through social media and community groups formed by diaspora communities.

These conflicts, sometimes marked by clashes, land expropriations, and a tendency to detain and use weapons^[1], illustrate the persistence and socio-political and cultural weight of rigid social hierarchies and their negative impact on community peace and cohesion. Furthermore, conflicts between farmers and herders, which are frequent during the rainy season, are exacerbated by demographic pressure, transhumance^[2], and increased competition for natural resources, particularly agricultural and pastoral land. These dynamics are complicated by circumstantial factors, such as the gradual spread of insecurity from northern and central Mali to the south, where the terrorist group JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin) could exploit local frustrations to recruit locally and intensify tensions.

This note analyzes how JNIM is (1) gradually weakening the resilience of a region that has long remained relatively outside its sphere of influence by waging a form of (2) economic "jihad" by targeting vital logistics routes (3) the stated intention to impose blockades while strengthening control over economic flows. Similarly, JNIM's strategy based on (4) a process of gradual destabilization and attacks on foreign economic interests will be reviewed. A final section will analyze (5) the immediate and medium-term implications and consequences of this JNIM offensive on the security of Mali's neighboring countries, mainly Mauritania and Senegal, as well as the threat it poses to regional stability.

[1] World Bank. (2015, April 23). Mali: Geography of Poverty in Mali (Report No. 88880-MI). Africa Region, PREM 4. Document of the World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/877031468299934506/pdf/Mali-Geography-of-Poverty-Final.pdf>.

[2] Studio Tamani. (2021, October 5). Bafoulabé: Kayes governor visits Oussoubidiagna to ease tensions surrounding slavery. <https://www.studiotamani.org/28290-bafoulabe-le-gouverneur-de-kayes-a-oussoubidiagna-pour-apaiser-la-tension-autour-de-l-esclavage>.

[3] OHCHR. (2021, October 29). Mali: It is high time to end impunity for barbaric attacks against "slaves" – UN experts. <https://www.ohchr.org/fr/press-releases/2021/11/mali-end-impunity-barbaric-attacks-slaves-long-overdue-un-experts>.

[4] International Organization for Migration (IOM). Environmental Displacement: Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) <https://dtm.iom.int/fr/report-theme/environmental-displacement>.

Resilience weakened by latent internal conflicts

Although local recruitment in the Kayes region currently appears to be more difficult than in other regions, grievances are multiplying and undermining social cohesion. There is certainly a degree of economic resilience due to the economic benefits of migration, but Kayes faces growing security challenges, particularly due to its cross-border location. The porous borders with Senegal and Mauritania, which constitute a decisive sociocultural continuum, as well as the circulation of weapons and the influence of regional conflict dynamics, exacerbate community tensions.

The race for knives and firearms, supported by transnational networks from different camps, increases the constant risk of escalating violence, while the ongoing exodus of internally displaced populations to urban centers such as Diéma and Mambri exacerbates economic and social precariousness. Despite these challenges, the region has endogenous mechanisms for conflict prevention and management, such as mediation by village chiefs, so-called neutral families, or young community volunteers active in mediation and awareness-raising. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is often compromised by the polarization of actors and growing mistrust between communities.

However, it seems that beyond its proven economic importance, the Kayes region is more of a major strategic target for the JNIM, for example, which considers it a vital area both for Mali's economy and security and for a possible position enabling it to carry out further attacks disrupting the country's supply chain. The recent attacks carried out by JNIM, affiliated with Al-Qaeda, in the Kayes region of Mali appear to be part of a deliberate strategy to destabilize or even suffocate the Malian economy. It would aim above all to isolate the capital, Bamako, while increasing its activity in this strategic region.

Such attacks, confirming a strategy aimed at establishing a stronger foothold and operating more regularly in western Mali, will not be without repercussions, at least for the economies of certain neighboring countries such as Senegal and Mauritania. JNIM has intensified its activities in the Kayes region, a strategic area on the border with Senegal and Mauritania, which is a key economic hub for Mali. An analysis of the strategy deployed by JNIM highlights the mechanisms of this dynamic in three main tactical areas.

Economic "jihad" and targeting of vital logistics routes

The JNIM has concentrated its attacks on the Kayes region, a strategic economic hub that represents the second largest contributor to Mali's GDP after Bamako. National Route 1 (RN1), connecting Bamako to Dakar via Kayes and Diboli, is a crucial trade route, handling around 30% of Mali's land imports, or 2.7 million tons of goods per year, including fuel, cereals, and other essential goods^[1]. The Bamako-Dakar corridor is recognized as a strategic pillar of West African trade, facilitating more than 70% of Malian imports transiting through regional ports, particularly Dakar^[2]. Recent incidents particularly illustrate this strategy.

On the one hand, there were the coordinated attacks on Kayes and Diboli on July 1, 2025^[3]. The JNIM launched simultaneous attacks on five military positions in the Kayes region, including the city of Kayes and Diboli, 1.3 km from the Senegalese border. In Diboli, the attack targeted security infrastructure, disrupting cross-border traffic. These assaults, carried out by Katiba Macina, currently the largest faction of JNIM, targeted checkpoints, barracks, and administrative buildings, demonstrating a desire to paralyze trade flows. JNIM temporarily took control of several positions without being able to maintain lasting control, demonstrating, however, its ability to challenge the authority of the Malian state.

In addition, there was the sabotage of National Route 1 (RN1) on August 31, 2025^[4]. This time, JNIM set fire to construction equipment on the RN1, which was being rehabilitated by the Chinese company COVEC, disrupting work on a road that is essential for trade in Mali and the subregion.

A curfew was imposed in Kayes until September 30, 2025^[2], limiting traffic to military vehicles and ambulances, which reduced cross-border trade. This sabotage aims to hinder infrastructure modernization, making Bamako more dependent on vulnerable roads.

For the time being, no large-scale recapture operation has been launched by the army, which has already been weakened by military losses in Boulikessi last June. Meanwhile, JNIM is strengthening its grip on the center of the country and constantly preparing new actions to better target strategic trade routes. With this in mind, on September 3, the group announced via an audio message in Fulani and Bambara, broadcast by a certain Abou Houzeifa Al-Bambari: 1) the establishment of a blockade on the routes leading to Kayes and Nioro-du-Sahel, crossroads to Senegal and Mauritania, 2) a ban on fuel shipments from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Conakry, Senegal, and Mauritania, 3) the suspension of the activities of the company Diarra Transport^[3].

These facts indicate that by targeting key supply routes, JNIM is disrupting Bamako's supply of essential fuel and food, causing price increases and increased food insecurity (1.52 million people affected in Ménaka and other regions^[1]). The call for a temporary suspension of travel by the Union of Road Transporters of Senegal (UTRS) on July 2^[2], in response to the blockade announced by JNIM, shows an exacerbation of this crisis. The group is thus seeking to suffocate Bamako by cutting off its logistical arteries, forcing increased dependence on secondary roads often under insurgent control.

^[1] Journal du Mali (2025, July 11). Terrorist attacks on the rise: Mali strangled on its roads. <https://www.journalumali.com/attaques-terroristes-en-hausse-le-mali-etrangle-sur-ses-voies/>

^[2] Mali Actu (2025, June 30). The collapse of the Bamako-Dakar road: a major economic threat for Mali. <https://maliactu.net/leffondrement-de-la-route-bamako-dakar-une-menace-economique-majore-pour-le-mali/>

^[3] The Conversation (2025, August 15). Coordinated attacks in western Mali: a new phase in the expansion of jihadism. <https://theconversation.com/attaques-coordonnees-dans-ouest-du-mali-une-nouvelle-phase-dans-lexpansion-du-djihadisme-261533>

^[4] DemState (2025, September 1). [Video] Al-Qaeda-linked JNIM sabotages key Bamako-Kayes road project. <https://demstate.com/watch/video-al-qaeda-linked-jnim-sabotage-key-bamako-kayes-road-project>

^[5] APA News (2025, August 31). Mali: curfew extended in Kayes. <https://frapnews.net/news/mali-reconstruction-du-couvre-feu-a-kayes/>

^[6] Journal du Mali (2025, July 11). Terrorist attacks on the rise. [op.cit.](https://www.journalumali.com/attaques-terroristes-en-hausse-le-mali-etrangle-sur-ses-voies/)

^[7] Le Soleil (July 2, 2025). Mali: Gora Khouma warns Senegalese transporters of risks after JNIM attack in Kayes. <https://lesoleil.sn/actualites/societe-fait-divers/mali-gora-khouma-alerte-les-transporteurs-senegalais-sur-les-risques-apres-une-attaque-du-jnim-a-kayes/>

Between announced blockades and control of economic flows

Still with the aim of consolidating its hold on the Kayes area and weakening the Malian state, JNIM is working to impose economic restrictions. On July 2, 2025, the group, through a statement by Abu Houzeifa Al-Bambari, announced a blockade on Kayes and Nioro du Sahel, banning fuel imports from Senegal, Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea, and suspending the operations of Diarra Transport, a major logistics company. This blockade aims to control cross-border flows and impose road taxes, a tactic already seen in other parts of the country such as Farabougou^[1].

^[2]On August 19, 2025, JNIM launched a coordinated offensive against Farabougou and Biriki-Were in the Ségou region. After several hours of fighting, the local military camp was taken, and the Malian armed forces withdrew. The town is now under jihadist control, while the civilian population has fled^[3], turning Farabougou into a ghost town. JNIM elements quickly imposed their authority: banning music, alcohol, and cigarettes, introducing zakat, and strict dress codes for women^[4].

This symbolic takeover marks the gradual relegation of the Malian state from certain rural areas. By September 5, JNIM had already begun to carry out its threats with the burning of a Diarra Transport bus near the Karangana factory (Koury–Koutiala axis) and the kidnapping of six Senegalese drivers between Kayes and Diboli, who were later released^[5].

Then, on the night of September 5 to 6, three tanker trucks were set on fire on the Bamako–Kayes road, with the wreckage discovered the next day^[6].

Finally, on September 6, JNIM jihadists posted a video in front of a Diarra Transport bus, in which they confirmed the continuation of the blockade^[1]. Then, in quick succession, videos posted online confirmed the burning of tanker trucks on the Sikasso–Bamako and Bamako–Ségou routes, targeting corridors that are essential for supplying the capital^[2]. The suspension of operations by Diarra Transport, one of the country's largest transport operators, could mark a turning point in the ongoing escalation. After several of its buses were set on fire and in the face of increasing targeted attacks^[3], the company decided to temporarily withdraw to "preserve the safety of passengers and staff^[4]." This decision follows an explicit warning from JNIM, which threatened and then attacked the transport company. This sequence illustrates not only the growing power of JNIM, which is capable of turning its threats into action, but also the difficulty military forces have in protecting vital infrastructure such as major roads.

^[1] DW (2025, August 29). In Mali, Farabougou is reportedly in the hands of JNIM jihadists. <https://www.dw.com/fr/sort-incertain-jnim-farabougou/a-73815838>.

^[2] Reuters (2025, August 20). Al Qaeda-linked group says 21 soldiers killed in large-scale attacks in Mali. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/al-qaeda-linked-group-says-21-soldiers-killed-widescale-attacks-mali-2025-08-20/>.

^[3] Africa Eye (2025, September 8). Mali: Civilians flee Farabougou after jihadist attack. <https://africa-eye.com/fr/2025/08/23/mali-des-civils-fuient-farabougou-apres-une-attaque-jihadiste/>.

^[4] DW (August 29, 2025). In Mali, Farabougou is reportedly in the hands of JNIM jihadists, op. cit.

^[5] Sud Quotidien (2025, September 7). Kidnapping of drivers on the Dakar-Bamako corridor: the truth from the president of Senegal's refrigerated truck drivers. <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/enlevement-des-chauffeurs-sur-le-corridor-dakar-bamako-les-verites-du-president-des-chauffeurs-routiers-frigorifiques-du-senegal/>.

^[6] Sahel Leaks. Mali: Three tanker trucks were set on fire last night on the Kayes-Bamako road. <https://s.com/SahelLeaks/status/1964398854599475508>.

^[7] IJL Africa. [Blockade] Mali: The terrorist group JNIM says it will maintain its blockade on the Kati–Kayes route. <https://s.com/IJLAfrica/status/1964389256094220441>.

^[8] The Global Eye. Al-Qaeda-linked JNIM militants have set fuel tankers ablaze on the Bamako-Sikasso and Bamako-Ségou roads, escalating their campaign to disrupt Mali's critical supply lines. <https://s.com/TGHEyeGlobalEye/status/1964605644088230224>.

^[9] We refer to the September 5 attack by JNIM on a Diarra Transport bus bound for Burkina Faso. <https://s.com/SahelLeaks/status/1964039497730949185>, as well as the JNIM attack on the night of September 5 to 6, which set fire to three tanker trucks in Sikasso. <https://s.com/SahelLeaks/status/1964398854599475508>.

^[10] Mali24 info. (2025, September 8). Mali: Diarra Transport suspends operations. <https://mali24.info/mali-la-compagnie-diarra-transport-suspend-ses-activites/>.

Gradually destabilizing by focusing on weakening the economy

By limiting access to fuel, which is essential for military and civilian operations, JNIM is exacerbating Mali's economic fragility, increasing the cost of transportation and basic necessities. The disruption of formal supply chains is pushing economic actors toward informal networks, which are often taxed by JNIM, thereby strengthening its financial grip. Furthermore, in July 2025, Katiba Macina—a faction of JNIM—targeted mining sites in Bafoulabé^[1], along National Route 22, a vital logistics corridor connecting Mali's interior to export routes to Senegal. Kayes, which accounts for approximately 80% of Mali's gold production, is a key economic center. By targeting mining (gold, lithium) and commercial activities, JNIM seeks to deprive Bamako of essential revenues, while financing its own operations through extortion and control of illicit markets (gold, livestock, timber).

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that JNIM attacks, which have increased exponentially (sevenfold between 2021 and 2024^[2]), aim to establish dominance over rural areas of Kayes, discrediting the state's authority and legitimacy.

By imposing rules on fuel and transport, JNIM is positioning itself as a de facto authority, eroding the legitimacy of the Malian government. Attacks on symbolic targets, such as the governor's residence in Kayes on July 1, are intended to demonstrate the state's difficulties in protecting its institutions. By targeting Kayes, a key transit hub, JNIM seeks to isolate Bamako from its critical supply routes.

In the medium term, this strategy could significantly weaken the capital's supply chains, increasing economic pressure on the Malian regime. The takeover of peripheral checkpoints and attacks on military positions indicate a desire to limit the mobility of Malian forces, making Bamako more vulnerable. Thus, in three weeks, the JNIM has rolled out its encirclement strategy, demonstrating its ability to combine territorial occupation (Farabougou), blockades (Kayes, Nioro, Diafarabé, Léré), and targeted attacks (tankers and buses on major roads).

^[1] Africa Defense Forum (2025, August 29). GSIM seeks to assert its dominance by intensifying its attacks in the Sahel. ^[2] Africa Defense Forum (2025, 29 août). Le GSIM cherche à affirmer sa dominance en intensifiant ses attaques au Sahel. <https://adf-magazine.com/fr/2025/08/le-gsim-cherche-a-affirmer-sa-dominance-en-intensifiant-ses-attaques-au-sahel/>.

^[3] Timbuktu Institute (2025, 27 avril). RAPPORT : La menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie et du Sénégal. <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/1189-rapport-la-menace-du-jnim-dans-la-zone-des-trois-frontieres-du-mali-de-la-mauritanie-et-du-senegal>.

^[4] Timbuktu Institute (2025, April 27). REPORT: The JNIM threat in the tri-border area of Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. ^[5] Africa Defense Forum (2025, 29 août). Le GSIM cherche à affirmer sa dominance en intensifiant ses attaques au Sahel. <https://adf-magazine.com/fr/2025/08/le-gsim-cherche-a-affirmer-sa-dominance-en-intensifiant-ses-attaques-au-sahel/>.

^[6] Timbuktu Institute (2025, 27 avril). RAPPORT : La menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie et du Sénégal. <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/1189-rapport-la-menace-du-jnim-dans-la-zone-des-trois-frontieres-du-mali-de-la-mauritanie-et-du-senegal>.

Attacks against foreign economic interests

The JNIM's strategy is also evident in its targeting of foreign companies, particularly Chinese ones, in order to undermine the confidence of Mali's economic partners. During July and August 2025, several attacks on sites were recorded. The group attacked seven foreign industrial sites in the Kayes region, including the Diamond Cement Factory, kidnapping three Indians^[1]. Such attacks are not motivated by grievances against China as such, but aim to weaken the Malian economy and state. These raids are intended to discourage foreign investment, particularly from China, which invested \$2.5 billion in Mali between 2000 and 2020, according to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). By targeting and striking strategic sites such as gold mines and factories, JNIM seeks to weaken the Malian economy, which is heavily dependent on the export of such resources.

These attacks threaten economic relations between Mali and its partners, particularly China, a key player in the extractive industries. By undermining the legitimacy of the Malian government, accused of being unable to secure investments, the JNIM reinforces its narrative of a failing state, further isolating Bamako on the international stage.

Furthermore, on the military front, it appears that the simultaneous attacks in Kayes and Ségou (July 1, 2025) are aimed at dispersing the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), weakening their ability to protect Bamako. By establishing bases in the Kayes region, such as the camp destroyed by the FAMA in the Gal-Gal forest on July 13,^[1] the JNIM is consolidating its presence to coordinate future attacks. This dispersion of Malian military efforts, combined with the disruption of supplies, isolates Bamako and limits its ability to respond to internal and external threats. However, for its part, the Malian army categorically denies the existence of a blockade in Kayes and Nioro, arguing that it is an "information war" waged by foreign media^[2]. In its official statement, the army merely referred to an "intensification" of "terrorist operations" in Kayes, describing them as "the last gasps of a desperate enemy" and "in retreat."

^[1] APA News, (2025, July 3). Mali: Three Indians kidnapped in Kayes in simultaneous attacks.^[2] Africa Defense Forum (2025, August 29). GSIM seeks to assert its dominance by intensifying its attacks in the Sahel. ^[3] Africa Defense Forum (2025, 29 août). Le GSIM cherche à affirmer sa dominance en intensifiant ses attaques au Sahel. <https://adf-magazine.com/fr/2025/08/le-gsim-cherche-a-affirmer-sa-dominance-en-intensifiant-ses-attaques-au-sahel/>.

^[2] Timbuktu Institute (2025, 27 avril). RAPPORT : La menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie et du Sénégal. <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/1189-rapport-la-menace-du-jnim-dans-la-zone-des-trois-frontieres-du-mali-de-la-mauritanie-et-du-senegal>.

^[3] Timbuktu Institute (2025, April 27). REPORT: The JNIM threat in the tri-border area of Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. ^[4] Africa Defense Forum (2025, 29 août). Le GSIM cherche à affirmer sa dominance en intensifiant ses attaques au Sahel. <https://adf-magazine.com/fr/2025/08/le-gsim-cherche-a-affirmer-sa-dominance-en-intensifiant-ses-attaques-au-sahel/>.

^[4] Timbuktu Institute (2025, 27 avril). RAPPORT : La menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie et du Sénégal. <https://timbuktu-institute.org/index.php/toutes-l-actualites/item/1189-rapport-la-menace-du-jnim-dans-la-zone-des-trois-frontieres-du-mali-de-la-mauritanie-et-du-senegal>.

^[5] Bamada.net (2025, July 15). Surgical strikes carried out with professionalism: FAMA intensifies its fight against terrorist sanctuaries in the Kayes and Nara regions. <https://bamada.net/des-frappes-chirurgicales-menees-avec-professionnalisme-les-fama-intensifient-leur-lutte-contre-les-sanctuaires-terroristes-dans-les-regions-de-kayes-et-de-nara>.

^[6] APA News (2025, September 9). Mali: Army denies "false blockade" and reaffirms its position. <https://fr.apeanews.net/news/mali/larmee-dement-un-faux-blocus-et-reaffirme-sa-position-de-force/>.

Security pressure on Kayes and consequences for neighboring countries

The intensification of JNIM activities in the Kayes region could have direct repercussions on neighboring countries such as Senegal, due to the porous border and economic interdependence between the two countries. This results in a number of major risks: increased pressure on Nioro and its implications for Mauritania, disruption of cross-border trade, the risk of security destabilization, pressure on Senegalese security resources, and the risk of regional contagion.

- Increased pressure on Nioro and various implications for Mauritania: As part of its strategy to suffocate Bamako, JNIM is no longer hesitating to put pressure on Nioro, thus breaking with the idea of the inviolability of this city, whose unique feature is that it is home to the influential Chérif Bouyé Haïdara. The terrorist group also seems to be taking advantage of the "divisions" within the regime's military leadership and the unrest noted recently in the barracks. According to some witnesses, Nioro and certain surrounding localities are already under heavy pressure, although the authorities reject the idea of a blockade. Mauritania, which is also experiencing an influx of refugees in the border regions with Mali, seems to be seeing its public space shaken by increasingly strong reactions from the Moorish communities.
- Such a situation could gradually lead officials into a latent crisis with the JNIM. In fact, the Sharif of Nioro still enjoys great respect in Mauritania, including among senior civil and military authorities and senior government officials. Furthermore, the influence of the Sharif of

Nioro should not be overlooked, as the JNIM now appears to be targeting him, particularly in the Hodhs and Assaba regions of Mauritania.

- Following threats against the religious leader and his safety, there has even been a mobilization of internet users calling on the state to "intervene militarily to protect him." This would mean that if the security pressure in the Kayes region continued, the implications of such a situation would extend beyond the borders of this region of Mali and affect neighboring countries, given the transnational nature of affiliations and the complexity of both community and religious allegiances.
- Disruption of cross-border trade with Senegal: Senegal is a major export route for Mali, particularly via the port of Dakar. The disruption of trade routes in Kayes, such as the blockade imposed by JNIM, threatens Malian exports (gold, livestock, timber) that transit through Senegal. This could lead to higher transport costs and prices for certain essential goods in Senegal, where formal trade networks are affected by the growing dependence on informal routes controlled by JNIM.
- Immediate security risks for neighboring countries: JNIM is seeking to infiltrate border areas, including eastern Senegal, as evidenced by the increasing number of security incidents near its border, such as in Melgué and, most recently, Diboli. The porosity of the border, combined with vulnerabilities such as low security awareness and the spread of Salafism,

exposes the country to the risk of attacks or the establishment of rear bases by JNIM. The attacks on July 1, 2025, in the Kayes region, close to the border, have reignited security concerns in Senegal. In response to the threat, Senegal has strengthened its border security, notably through the deployment of the Rapid Surveillance and Intervention Action Group (Garsi) in Goudiri, supported by the European Union. However, the escalation of JNIM activities could require increased mobilization of resources, diverting attention from domestic priorities such as socio-economic challenges. In addition, certain shortcomings in social intelligence in the approaches advocated thus far raise questions about adequate strategic , which should incorporate more politically acceptable preventive initiatives.

- Increased risks of regional contagion: Disruption to trade and rising insecurity in Kayes could encourage corruption, illicit trafficking (including dual-use goods) and smuggling networks, gradually affecting regional stability. Senegal, as Mali's key economic partner, risks seeing cross-border criminal networks grow stronger, with the potential to affect various sectors, as is already the case in the transport sector. This economic dimension of the JNIM's strategy, which exacerbates already worrying vulnerabilities, risks further complicating the fight against terrorism and the management of security emergencies.

Conclusion

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is deploying a sophisticated strategy combining economic blockades, targeted attacks on strategic infrastructure, and coercion to stifle the Malian economy and gradually isolate the capital, Bamako. By targeting the Kayes region, a vital economic hub accounting for around 80% of Mali's gold production and a key node in the Bamako-Dakar trade corridor, JNIM seeks to disrupt essential trade flows that account for a significant share of Mali's land imports. This strategy was illustrated by the coordinated attacks on July 1, 2025, on Kayes and Diboli, the sabotage of National Route 1 (RN1) on August 31, 2025, and the establishment of a blockade on the main roads leading to Kayes and Nioro-du-Sahel, aims to deprive Bamako of vital resources, potentially causing increased food insecurity and higher prices for basic necessities. By imposing restrictions on fuel imports and targeting transport companies, JNIM seeks to establish parallel economic control, strengthening its financial grip through extortion and taxes even on informal networks.

In addition, JNIM exploits the social and economic fragilities of Kayes, including structural conflicts related to descent-based slavery and tensions between farmers and herders, to amplify community divisions and facilitate local recruitment, although this remains limited by economic resilience linked to migration. Attacks on foreign economic interests, such as mining sites in Bafoulabé and the kidnapping of foreigners working for international companies, aim to discourage foreign investment, particularly from China, thereby weakening state finances.

By targeting symbols of state authority and imposing strict rules in areas such as Farabougou, JNIM seeks to erode the legitimacy of the state, potentially positioning itself as an alternative form of governance, while avoiding the tactical mistakes of other terrorist groups, such as prolonged occupation without local support. For Senegal, the consequences of this strategy are manifold: the disruption of cross-border trade via the port of Dakar threatens Malian exports (gold, livestock, timber), increasing the costs of transport and essential goods. Porous borders increase the risk of JNIM infiltration in eastern Senegal, as evidenced by incidents in Diboli and Melgué, while pressure on Nioro-du-Sahel, an influential city for Mauritania due to the figure of Chérif Bouyé Haïdara, could poison cross-border community relations.

These dynamics are likely to encourage illicit trafficking and regional contagion with continued insecurity, potentially putting pressure on Senegal's security capabilities. Without enhanced regional cooperation between Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania, focused on intelligence sharing, securing economic corridors, and integrating preventive approaches that take into account local social dynamics, the region risks an escalation of violence that could lead to instability. An effective response would also require strengthening endogenous mediation mechanisms in Kayes, such as those led by village chiefs and neutral families, to ease community tensions and counter the JNIM's exploitation of social divisions and socio-religious and economic grievances. In the absence of such measures, growing insecurity and economic fragility could not only isolate Bamako, but also threaten the stability of the entire West African sub-region.

An aerial photograph of the Great Mosque of Timbuktu in Mali, showing its massive mud-brick walls and numerous minarets. The mosque is surrounded by a dense urban area with similar traditional architecture.

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