



Landscape of the Sahel region near Gorom Gorom, Burkina Faso. November 2009.
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ISLAMIC STATE IN THE SAHEL: AN EVOLVING JIHADIST INSURGENCY

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On 25 May 2025 a Nigerien army camp located in Eknewane – an area near the town of Tillia in the Tahoua region, in central-western Niger close to the Malian border – was the target of a complex attack carried out by members of the jihadist group now known as the Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP). According to various international media outlets, at least 58 Nigerien soldiers were killed in the attack, including the camp commander (RFI 2025). These figures make the Eknewane assault one of the deadliest ever suffered by the Nigerien military.

Far from an isolated incident, the attack is part of a broader and more intense offensive launched by ISSP in the border region between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, roughly corresponding to the areas of Tahoua, Tillabéri, Ménaka, Gao, Dori and Gorom-Gorom. Just days later, on 4 June, a Malian army camp in Tessit was attacked, resulting in the deaths of at least 40 soldiers and more than 50 civilians. During yet another assault on 20 June by hundreds of Islamic State fighters, on the Nigerien side of the border, in the Bani Bangou area near Inates, 34 Nigerien soldiers were killed. On the 8th of August, a clash occurred between ISSP fighters and members of al-Qaeda's affiliated group JNIM (Jama'at Nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn) near Diori in northeast Burkina Faso. On all these occasions the militants demonstrated a high level of firepower and an intimate knowledge of the terrain.

The operations in Eknewane, Tessit and Bani Bangou are showcased in the documentary *The Lions of the Sahel*, released by the group via its online propaganda channels at the end of 2025. The production of this documentary and, more significantly, the sharp military escalation by ISSP in the tri-border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, offer key insights into the transformations currently reshaping the landscape of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel and beyond.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this book, within the broader reconfiguration of what is commonly referred to as 'Global Jihad', over the past decade Africa has become, according to many analysts, the new epicentre of Islamist-inspired armed transnational insurgencies, with the central Sahel occupying a particularly prominent position. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Mali in 2011–2012, and even more significantly since 2015–2016, the area encompassing Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has become a base of operations and expansion for groups affiliated with both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Over the past ten years, amid escalating violence and political instability – which, among other consequences, has led to a series of military coups in all three countries – the Sahel has emerged as a central hub for transnational jihadist militancy. According to the Global Terrorism Index (IEP 2025), more than half of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide in the last two years occurred in this region.

This trend has been also fuelled by the intensifying competition between the local franchises of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, which reached a breaking point around 2019. Since 2017 the main factions that declared allegiance to al-Qaeda have been grouped under JNIM (Jama'at Nuṣrat al-Islām wa-l-Muslimīn), led by Malian figure Iyad ag Ghali. JNIM is the key actor driving the expansion of jihadist insurgency from the Sahel toward West Africa's coastal states and is now imposing an economic and

political blockade on Mali's capital Bamako, which is threatening the very survival of the Malian regime. In armed competition with JNIM is the group now known as ISSP – the most recent iteration of Islamic State affiliates in the region, which is currently redefining its presence and strategies in the area.

Given these premises, this essay aims at reconstructing the development of the Islamic State's presence and consolidation in the Sahel, in order to shed light on the different and somehow contradictory factors that are constantly redefining the complex 'insurgency ecology' (Anaele 2014) of the area.

The traditional debate which has long divided experts and policymakers working on jihadist insurgencies (not only in Africa) is the 'Local vs. Global' one. On one side are those who view the continent as encompassed by a single, continent-wide 'arc of instability'; on the other side are those who emphasise the essentially local nature of each jihadist insurgency. While the centrality of local sociopolitical, historical, identity-based and religious dynamics is undeniably key to understanding jihadist phenomena, some aspects of global terrorism and counterterrorism must also be addressed.

On the one hand the American-led Global War on Terror has created a discursive and operational framework appropriated by both international actors and local states to develop new forms of political and security control. These frameworks have often further destabilised already fragile institutional and social balances (Smith 2010). On the other hand, insurgent actors have embraced this narrative, using it to legitimise their struggle in the eyes of local populations and to access both symbolic and material resources that would otherwise remain out of reach (Pérouse de Montclos 2018).

Within this externally framed context, local dynamics – some recent, others more deeply rooted – must also be considered as integral to any broader analytical approach. Specifically, the tri-border area between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso has a complex history of political and intercommunal relations and is now marked by the presence of 'fragile' states, unable to fully exercise sovereign authority across their territories, at odds with classic Weberian or Westphalian models.

Given this context, the Liptako-Gourma region – shared among the three aforementioned states – constitutes the physical epicentre of insecurity, where cross-border mobility, issues of land and resource access, and tensions between historically marginalised communities and central governments have shaped local economies and social systems. The actions of the Islamic State and the various al-Qaeda-aligned groups in the area cannot be understood without acknowledging the

enduring divisions between nomadic and transnational groups like the Tuareg and Fulani and their respective central governments, as well as the tensions between pastoralist communities and those primarily engaged in agriculture or fishing.

Jihadist groups – both those affiliated with al-Qaeda and, later on, those aligned with the Islamic State – have been able to intercept, manipulate and exacerbate pre-existing grievances in the region, successfully building solid constituencies within the most marginalised communities or those targeted by state violence, ultimately generating unprecedented dynamics of violent conflict in the area. Unsurprisingly, the event that marked the beginning of the Sahelian crisis – the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali – saw the then AQIM (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) first ally with, and then take over, the demands of Tuareg populations, who had historically resisted integration into the framework proposed by the Malian state (Harmon 2016).

Subsequently, the expansion of the crisis toward the Liptako-Gourma region was made possible, above all, by the violent activation of the grievances of Fulani populations – pastoral and nomadic communities present across West Africa, but who, in all the states of the region, constitute a marginalised minority and are frequent targets of repression by central authorities (van Dijk & de Bruijn 2022). The widening of the crisis to the three borders area, where pastoral and farming communities have historically coexisted but not without tensions over access to and use of land and natural resources, led several observers to describe the Sahelian civil conflict as having evolved into a farmer–herder conflict (Benjaminsen & Ba 2021). Others, however, have noted that even within pastoral communities themselves (both Fulani and Tuareg), the contestation of hierarchical relations and pre-existing social orders has constituted an additional source of violence – one that jihadist groups have been able to exploit successfully, being influenced by it in their turn (Jourde et al. 2019).

More generally, while the ideological dimension cannot be separated from the material aspects of the conflict – particularly in understanding the competitive dynamics and the differing appeal exerted by JNIM and ISSP on the various communities and populations involved in the current cycle of violence (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba 2025) – the key element in explaining the development of armed violence in the region remains the political one. This refers to the breakdown of the relationship between increasingly repressive state and security institutions and populations subjected to a system of governance perceived as unjust and immutable – except through armed struggle (Raineri 2022).

In this sense, to fully grasp the Islamic State's current structure and strategy in the Sahel, one must consider the local and global dimensions of jihadist insurgencies

as interconnected and mutually influential, moving beyond the often superficial analytical (and political) binary between the Local and the Global. While new categories pointing to the 'glocal' nature of these insurgencies are finding ground in the debate (Bencherif 2021), this essay builds on the concepts of fluidity and unity, and rigidity and pragmatism as exposed in the introduction of this book by Sheikh and Cold-Ravnkilde. In this sense, this essay suggests that jihadist insurgencies in Africa and beyond should be mainly seen as original and contingent syntheses and combinations of global imaginaries, local dynamics, and transnational structures. This perspective is further explored below, where the three phases which have structured the Islamic State's evolution in the Sahel are presented and discussed.

THREE PHASES OF THE ISLAMIC STATE'S DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAHEL

The Islamic State made its first appearance in the Sahel in 2015 as a maverick group that left al-Qaeda's linked formations. Initially named Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the group was born out of doctrinal, strategic, personal, social and communal ruptures among key figures in the Sahelian insurgency, and it has passed through two different phases. The first (2015–19) is characterised by the attempt to establish itself in the area while being recognised as a credible counterpart by Islamic State's central leadership; the second (2019–2022) saw the group under the sphere of influence of ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province)¹² while conducting an open and violent struggle with both local security forces and al-Qaeda's competitors (Nsaibia 2023). Since 2022 the group has seemingly developed into its third phase, defined by a new centrality – and autonomy – obtained within the Islamic State's 'global galaxy', and by an unprecedented attempt to establish territorial control and build a 'caliphate' in the tri-border region between Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Following its designation as the autonomous 'Sahel Province' of the Islamic State in March 2022, in fact, ISSP has shifted from mass violence toward more structured governance and the consolidation of territorial control, especially in Mali's Menaka and Gao regions – even if as pointed out by Stoddard, Berlingozzi and Raineri, the group remains more violent and less territorially structured if compared to ISWAP. This transition has exposed the group to increased military pressure, including airstrikes and targeted operations that have eliminated senior figures. Since the death of founder Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in August 2021, ISSP has restructured its leadership, integrating both local and foreign commanders from diverse ethnic backgrounds – Fulani, Arab, Tuareg, Dawsahak, Songhai, and Djerma – under a Shura council led by Abu al-Bara al-Sahrawi.

ISSP's new governance strategy combines coercion and selective accommodation. The group enforces Sharia law through Islamic courts, imposes trade embargoes, and regulates markets to sustain supply lines in towns like Anderamboukane (the de facto 'administrative capital' of ISSP), Inchinane and Tamalat. Punishments for violations are severe, including executions and mutilations, alongside bans on contraband and enforced gender segregation. Moreover, since capturing Tidarmene near Ménaka in April 2023, ISSP has expanded dawa (religious outreach) to reinforce local support, allowing some armed groups to operate under its protection (Nsaibia 2024).

Given this situation, ISSP's current strategy apparently favours territorial consolidation over overextension. Despite its ambitions, ISSP has failed to establish a significant foothold in central Mali, most of Burkina Faso, and the coastal states, largely due to resistance from rival JNIM. At the same time, in Mali, ISSP may expand north toward Kidal or deepen its presence in the Gao region, where it has started collecting zakat. In Niger, eastward expansion toward Nigeria appears increasingly important, with areas like Tassara emerging as new strongholds. These moves suggest a recalibration toward entrenched, sustainable bases rather than rapid geographic expansion. These latest developments mark the effective nature, strategy and agenda of jihadist groups, elsewhere as well as in Africa. Indeed, ISSP appears simultaneously as a link in a transnational chain of global uprising as well as a local organisation whose grievances and objectives are based on local issues and expectations.

Origins of IS in the Sahel (2015–2019)

Three pivotal events have marked the birth and ascent of the then Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) – now ISSP. The first unfolded in two stages, between May and December 2015. The organisation that would come to be known as ISGS made its initial appearance on the complex Sahelian chessboard in May 2015 when its self-proclaimed leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi – nom de guerre of Lehibb Ould Ali Ould Said Ould Yumani, a Sahrawi militant who had previously been a member of the Polisario Front (Guichaoua & Lebovich 2017)¹³ – publicly pledged allegiance (bay'a) to Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi through a video delivered to a Mauritanian news agency.

Although part of a broader dynamic of internal competition fragmenting the global jihadist front in multiple regions, al-Sahrawi's initiative took both international observers and his fellow militants by surprise. At the time of his pro-Baghdadi declaration, al-Sahrawi was the spokesperson for al-Murabitun, a jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda and itself a splinter faction of MUJAO (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in

West Africa), one of the Salafi jihadist groups involved in the 2012 conquest of northern Mali. Rather than being founded on a doctrinal basis, within the complex mosaic of jihadist groups present in or formed in Mali in the years following the 2012 insurgency, al-Murabitun distinguished itself from its allies by being composed of – and aiming to represent – the interests primarily of certain Tuareg and Arab communities (and entrepreneurs, including criminal ones) from the country's north. In this sense, the background of the Wilaya leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a jihadist figure involved in various illegal economic activities – including cigarette smuggling – has led some observers to suggest that MUJAO, and later al-Murabitun, were among the groups that best embodied, both in their actions and composition, the alleged fusion between jihadist and criminal networks in the region (Raineri & Strazzari 2015).

Nevertheless, al-Sahrawi's oath of allegiance led to an internal rupture within al-Murabitun, confirmed by the response of Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who hastily reaffirmed his group's loyalty to al-Qaeda. Within this context, ISGS did not manage to establish itself as an autonomous and self-sufficient organisation, distinct from its former al-Qaeda-aligned comrades, until December of that same year (Le Roux 2019). It was only in October 2016 that al-Baghdadi – then under increasing pressure in Iraq and Syria – issued a formal endorsement of the new mujahideen operating in the Sahara–Sahel.

If 2015 thus marks the founding year of ISGS, two subsequent events illustrate the rapid development of the group's tactical and strategic capabilities, which would soon make it one of the leading actors in the region's jihadist insurgency.

The first occurred on 4 October 2017 near Tongo Tongo, a village located on the Malian border in Niger's Tillabéri region. On that day, a column of around 100 ISGS fighters ambushed a joint patrol of thirty-five Nigerien soldiers and approximately ten members of the US Special Forces. The ensuing clash left four American soldiers, five Nigerien soldiers, and twenty-one insurgents dead – one of the deadliest incidents for US troops in Africa in the past thirty years. The Tongo Tongo ambush may be considered ISGS's first major show of force: a young group, but already lethal and able to operate with ease in the borderlands between Mali and Niger.

While the Tongo Tongo attacks were ISGS's first significant action against international actors, the attack in Inates, Niger, on 10 December 2019 marked the group's transition to an entirely new level – in both strike capability and ambition. At least seventy soldiers were killed in what remains the deadliest terrorist attack in the history of the Nigerien army. The Islamic State demonstrated its superiority over

what is still considered one of the more capable militaries in the region, along with a high degree of coordination and mobilisation.

The Inates operation appears to have been a joint action in which ISGS fighters were joined by members of ISWAP, suggesting a growing desire for integration among different Islamic State affiliates in the region. In this regard, the Inates attack revealed two particularly significant developments. On the one hand, like other jihadist groups active in the region, the Islamic State in West Africa showed itself to possess offensive and military capabilities that could, in the long run, allow it to emulate the actions carried out by its parent organisation in Syria and Iraq. On the other hand, the persistent and increasingly ambitious attacks launched in both Niger and Mali in the following months – targeting not only security forces but also local leaders and community heads – demonstrated that ISGS was no longer content merely to operate in these territories. Rather, its ambition had become one of control, and in a certain sense, of ‘governance’.

ISSP as part of the Islamic State’s ‘global galaxy’ (2019–2022)

Since its inception, ISGS has been forging increasingly strong ties with transborder communities – particularly Tuareg, Daosahak and Fulani groups – that have historically been marginalised, if not directly exploited, by local states. The support of these communities is proving to be a decisive factor in the success of ISGS’s strategy of territorial penetration, and a key to understanding the evolution of the ISGS/JNIM relationship – from latent cooperation to open conflict.

From March 2019 to March 2022 – the ‘second phase’ of the Islamic State in the Sahel – ISGS focused less on building a territorial caliphate and more on gaining recognition as a full member of the Islamic State network (Nsaibia 2024). During this period ISGS operated as the Greater Sahara faction of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the group that emerged from Boko Haram and is mainly active in northeastern Nigeria, before being reclassified as the independent ‘Islamic State in the Sahel Province’. During this second phase, it emerged as the second-most active armed group in the Sahel after JNIM. Operating primarily from its stronghold in the Mali–Niger border zone, the group managed to exert significant control across parts of Mali’s Gao and Menaka regions, Burkina Faso’s Oudalan and Seno provinces, and Niger’s Tillaberi and Tahoua regions.

While ISGS’s links to the Islamic State global central command were weak before 2019 – reflected in its absence from IS propaganda – the group’s operational brutality aligned with IS strategic goals. Its formal integration into ISWAP coincided with a

surge in militant activity across the Sahel: between May 2019 and May 2020, ISSP launched an intense campaign in the Liptako-Gourma area, overrunning multiple military posts and killing over 400 soldiers from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In this sense, the December 2019 attack on Inates marks the integration of ISGS into the ISWAP sphere of influence.

A similar violent escalation took place between ISGS and JNIM. Putting an end to the 'Sahelian exception',¹⁴ from mid-2019 the two groups started clashing in different areas of the Sahel (Baldaro & Diall 2020). First, ISGS made an initial attempt to gain ground in central Mali and the inner Niger Delta at the expense of the JNIM-affiliated Katiba Macina. While the penetration in central Mali had essentially failed by the end of 2020, the rivalry extended into other areas in the tri-border region. Between 2019 and 2023, the conflict between the two jihadist franchises resulted in nearly 200 clashes and the death of more than 1,100 combatants. After losing ground in 2020, ISSP regained momentum in late 2022, pushing back JNIM forces in key areas of Gao, Menaka and the Burkina Faso–Mali border.

In the meantime, ISGS's extremely violent tactics against international and local security forces, as well as civilians made the group the main target of international counterterrorism efforts. French-led counterterrorism operations between early 2020 and mid-2021 inflicted heavy losses on ISSP, including the death of its founder Abu Walid al-Sahrawi in August 2021. Notwithstanding the various defeats suffered during this period, the group managed to survive and continue its expansion in the region.

Beyond its core territory, between 2019 and 2022 ISSP also engaged in sporadic operations in Algeria, Benin and Nigeria. Its activity in Algeria (2019–2020) reflected attempts to re-establish a presence in areas once held by MUJAO and to coordinate with Libyan militants. In northwestern Nigeria, fighters used the Sanam–Dogondoutchi–Sokoto corridor as a supply route, leveraging kinship ties to mobilise against local banditry, and recruiting new members.

The group's presence in Benin, publicly acknowledged in July 2022 through claimed attacks in Alibori department, is likely part of a longer, covert expansion into West African coastal states. However, ISSP has generally struggled to consolidate gains in newly entered territories, as seen in Burkina Faso's east and centre-north regions and central Mali. For now, its dominance remains strongest in its traditional strongholds, though the trajectory of its operations in Benin remains uncertain (Nsaibia 2024).

CONCLUSION: ISSP'S CONSOLIDATION IN A COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

The most recent developments unfolding in the Sahel and West Africa show that the most structured, powerful, and expanding jihadist group at present is clearly JNIM, the al-Qaeda affiliate. Since September of 2025, al-Qaeda-linked armed groups have effectively imposed a blockade around Mali's capital, Bamako, while at the same time economically strangling the country's main productive areas, extending their reach beyond the capital itself. JNIM currently holds a position of strength in both Mali and Burkina Faso, where it controls large portions of national territory. The prospect of the group achieving at least part of its political agenda in the region – if not through outright conquest, then via negotiations or the collapse of local regimes – appears increasingly plausible.

At the same time, JNIM has been the main driver of the southward expansion of the Sahelian crisis, which now directly affects several coastal states bordering the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Guinea like Togo, Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mauritania and Senegal. The most recent reports even point to an incursion of JNIM affiliates into Nigeria, a country historically affected by the insurgency of Boko Haram and later ISWAP. It is precisely ISWAP – which until 2022 acted as the senior partner and umbrella organisation encompassing ISGS (later renamed ISSP) – that now finds itself in difficulty in the Lake Chad region, due not only to state repression by Nigeria but also to increasingly violent clashes with the heirs of Boko Haram (now known as JAS – Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li al-Da'wa wa al-Jihad), from which ISWAP itself split in recent years.

Given this context ISSP has managed to survive and grow in a highly competitive environment. While it is not currently perceived as the main jihadist threat to either coastal states or Sahelian capitals – Niger's capital Niamey stands out as a notable exception, having already been targeted by ISSP operations – ISSP is successfully implementing a strategy that bridges global dynamics and local conflicts. The Mali–Niger border zone – particularly between Ménaka, Gao, Tillabery and Tahoua – is increasingly becoming a bastion of the Islamic State, where the group is shaping a caliphate on African soil in accordance with the directives from the organisation's central command. The group's growing prominence in Islamic State propaganda, coupled with its deepening cooperation with (a declining?) ISWAP, positions its fighters as a central link in the Islamic State-led transnational insurgency. Its proven ability to integrate into the region's social and conflict dynamics makes it an increasingly entrenched actor in both the conflict and political systems of the central Sahel. As a result, for the foreseeable future, the region appears destined to host two of the most structured and resilient expressions of global jihadism.

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