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Mali's Fracture Will be Felt in West Africa and Beyond

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Al Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate JNIM is on the brink of taking over northern Mali and toppling the Malian junta, and while it is unlikely to directly seize power across Mali, Mali's fracturing will have seismic consequences in West Africa and beyond. The group launched its [most coordinated and significant offensive across Mali](#) since at least 2012 on April 25 in conjunction with its Tuareg rebel partners in the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA). The result has been chaos in Bamako and the [collapse of Malian positions](#) across northern Mali in scenes reminiscent of the last major jihadist-Tuareg advance in 2012 and 2013, which was only halted with French intervention.

JNIM is now working alongside the FLA to consolidate control over northern Mali—one of the main goals of its offensive. The April 25 attacks were concentrated in northern Mali, while attacks in the central and southern parts of the country decapitated the Malian military leadership, weakened Malian air capabilities, and degraded lines of communication to the north to disrupt any response. The FLA-JNIM coalition has since secured the surrender of Malian forces and their Russian partners in at least [six towns](#) and has encircled most other bases. Of northern Mali's four regional capitals, the coalition controls [Kidal](#) city, has encircled security forces in their base in Gao city, and are [advancing toward Timbuktu city](#) from multiple directions, while IS Sahel Province (ISSP) capitalized on the chaos [to temporarily seize Menaka city](#).

JNIM is simultaneously heightening pressure on the Malian junta in southern Mali to topple the regime—its other main objective. JNIM severely wounded Malian intelligence chief Modibo Koné, killed Defense Minister Sadio Camara, and targeted junta leader Assimi Goita in a [series of commando-style suicide assaults](#) during the initial attacks on April 25. The fall of Kidal and

targeting of leading junta officials severely undermines the Malian junta's entire narrative and *raison d'être*, which are premised on the "growing strength" of Malian state. JNIM has since [declared](#) a total blockade of Bamako and [established several roadblocks](#) 50 miles from the capital, threatening fuel shortages and resulting blackouts and inflation, all of which will be exacerbated by the global impact of the Iran war.

It may seem that Mali is the next Afghanistan or Syria, but this is unlikely. JNIM is not Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), and Mali is not Syria. JNIM's governing capacity challenges become acutely evident when comparing HTS and JNIM to the population and territory they seek to govern. JNIM's estimated 6,000 fighters have [fighter-to-civilian and fighter-to-land ratios](#) that are roughly ten and 25 times worse, respectively, across Burkina Faso and Mali than HTS faced in Syria. Probable undercounts of JNIM's strength and the FLA alliance do little to help. And force is important, as JNIM lacks the legitimacy to rule urban centers and most of southern Mali by consent given its background as a predominantly ethnic minority-based Salafi-jihadi movement.

JNIM knows all of this, which is why the group wants new national authorities in Bamako that it can work with to expand its influence across Mali. JNIM has long pressured local leaders to accept [agreements](#) that institute various elements of indirect shadow governance, including some shari'a precepts. The same [arrangement](#) is set to play out in northern Mali with the FLA, and JNIM wants to do the same with new authorities in Bamako.

For now, this means Mali will likely resemble something closer to Somalia than Afghanistan or Syria, a scenario that still portends dire consequences for the region and beyond. In Somalia, al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab fully [governs](#) an entire region and either effectively controls or heavily contests most of southern Somalia outside of several government-controlled towns, which are still regularly attacked and penetrated by the [group's networks](#). This scenario coming to pass in Mali would allow the group to channel growing resources on bringing an already-fragile Burkina Faso to its knees.

Mali's trajectory puts the entire West Africa region at risk. JNIM's franchise model naturally leads its subgroups to adopt the aims of its local support base. This reality makes the group's expanding support networks among border communities a natural driver of expansionism,

regardless of any reservations the group's top leaders may have. This phenomenon played out as the insurgency spread from Fulani communities in central Mali across the border to Burkina Faso and is [playing a role](#) in JNIM's expansion into northern Benin, northwestern Nigeria, and northern Togo. Somalia's neighbors have had thousands of soldiers deployed near their borders with Somalia for more than a decade to contain al Shabaab, something the small coastal states are ill-prepared to sustain with JNIM.

ISSP also stands to benefit from the collapse of the Malian state in northern Mali, which is bad news for North Africa and Europe. ISSP has its own sphere of influence in northern Mali near the Niger border and has seized a [town](#) that security forces abandoned in addition to briefly seizing Menaka. ISSP has already become an increasingly prominent hub for global IS activity in recent years, including attracting foreign fighters and cultivating links with IS [cells](#) in [Spain](#) and [Morocco](#). The [FLA](#) and [JNIM](#) have no desire to see ISSP expand, but the West will again be uncomfortably relying on al Qaeda-linked actors to handle IS-related counterterrorism.

Russia is also a major loser of the current catastrophe, as the Kremlin now finds its influence in Mali and the wider region under threat. Russian forces negotiated their withdrawal from several positions across northern Mali after the [FLA](#) and [JNIM](#) directly appealed to Russian forces to cut their losses. Russia has insisted it will stand by Mali, and Goita has since praised Russian assistance, but Malian officials have privately [grumbled](#) that Russian forces betrayed Mali by withdrawing from their positions. The late Defense Minister [Camara](#) was also a staunch pro-Russian advocate and was the architect of the initial Wagner Group deployment to Mali.

Russian failure in Mali would be a huge blow to Russia's international image and influence in Africa. Mali is one of the Kremlin's primary African partners and serves as a model of the defense partnership and "[regime security package](#)" that Russia offers prospective allies across the continent. Mali is also the senior partner of the Alliance of Sahel States—the pro-Russian bloc of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. This bloc supports the Kremlin's goals to erode Western influence in Africa and multilateral institutions, create opportunities to mitigate Western sanctions, and draw more neighboring countries closer to Russia.

For the United States, Russia's failure is an opportunity, but not one without significant risk. The United States had already been trying to reengage Bamako since 2025, and the offensive

has shown that the United States needs a presence in the Sahel more than ever to protect US civilians and business interests. The United States may have a [window](#) to address these counterterrorism concerns and more, including [mining](#) cooperation displacing Russia, in one fell swoop should the Malian junta seek new partners. However, things are unlikely to be this simple. No degree of outside support the United States is likely willing to offer will save Mali or the other juntas from their own terminally flawed counterinsurgency strategies. This reality means that the United States must also guard against rushing to deep into an unsustainable partnership with vulnerable actors, as the political tumult in the Sahel in recent years has shown all too well how detrimental it can be to put all of the proverbial eggs in the basket of a regime that gets deposed.

Mali is unlikely to completely collapse, but it is quickly heading toward a Somalia-like fragmented state scenario. The same Somalia that remains a hub of regional and [international](#) violence despite billions of dollars and thousands of lives lost over the last two decades. Russia has proven woefully unable to stop the slide in Mali. While this reality will bring the decline of destabilizing Russian influence in the region, the international community—especially Europe—must start preparing now to help the region pick up the pieces. Failure to do so means losing vital economic partners to a growing vacuum of jihadist chaos that threatens to unleash refugees and violence far beyond Mali.

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