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Organizations and Networks in Conflict

ONC-007 - Islamic State in the Sahel

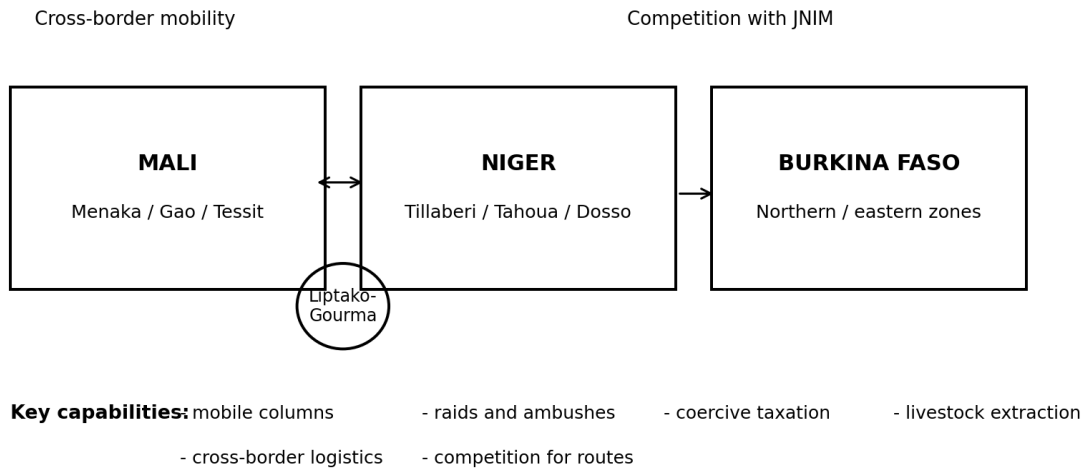
Primary Names: Islamic State in the Sahel Province (ISSP); Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS); Islamic State of the Greater Sahel

Primary Area: Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, especially the Liptako-Gourma tri-border zone and western Niger

Updated: 1 October 2026

ATLAS profiles in this series are living intelligence documents. Facts, reported claims, and assessments are separated where possible; the concluding assessment states the analytic judgment and confidence.

ONC-007 - Islamic State in the Sahel Primary operating environment



Schematic analytic map - not a tactical-control graphic.

Figure 1. Schematic locator map showing the principal operating environment of Islamic State in the Sahel. It is not a tactical-control map.

ENTITY

Islamic State in the Sahel is the Islamic State affiliate operating principally across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. It evolved from Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which was founded in 2015 by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui after a split from Al-Mourabitoun and was formally recognized by Islamic State in 2016.

United Nations sanctions material continues to list Islamic State in the Greater Sahara as an Islamic State-associated entity and identifies Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso as its principal historic operating area.

The organization is analytically distinct from Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Although both belong to the wider Islamic State network, ISIS-Sahel operates in a different geographic, ethnic, political, and insurgent environment and has increasingly developed its own territorial, logistical, and command structures.

In 2026 the organization remains active across the central Sahel and is engaged simultaneously against state security forces, local armed groups, and the al-Qaida-aligned Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

ACTIONS

Islamic State in the Sahel conducts raids, ambushes, attacks on military positions, village assaults, kidnappings, intimidation, extortion, and attacks intended to displace populations from contested rural zones.

United Nations reporting in early 2026 identified sustained Islamic State activity in Niger's Tillaberi, Tahoua, and Dosso regions and attacks in Mali around Menaka and Tessit.

In January 2026, Islamic State claimed responsibility for a coordinated attack on the airport in Niamey, Niger. Nigerien authorities said the attackers were repelled after inflicting material damage, including damage to ammunition stores and civilian aircraft.

In April 2026, fighting between ISIS-Sahel and JNIM spilled into Niger. Reuters reported that Islamic State fighters attacked a JNIM position in Tillaberi, killing dozens and seizing weapons and motorcycles. This marked an important expansion of direct inter-jihadist competition inside Niger.

In Mali, Islamic State-linked forces have continued to contest territory around Menaka and the eastern borderlands. In April 2026, fighters withdrew from Menaka as Malian forces attempted to reassert control, illustrating the fluid nature of territorial influence.

WHERE

Niger. Western Niger, especially Tillaberi, is one of the organization's most important operating environments. Tahoua and Dosso have also experienced sustained activity. The region's proximity to Mali and Burkina Faso gives the group access to cross-border routes, rural sanctuary, livestock markets, and dispersed communities.

Mali. Menaka, Gao, Tessit, and adjoining border areas remain important for movement, recruitment, logistics, and competition with JNIM and local armed actors.

Burkina Faso. Northern and eastern Burkina Faso form part of the wider operating environment. State control outside major towns is uneven, and armed groups exploit rural insecurity and contested transport routes.

Liptako-Gourma. The tri-border zone linking Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso remains strategically important because no single government can easily control the full cross-border battlespace.

ACTORS

Senior leadership. Current top leadership is difficult to verify reliably in open sources. Since the death of founder Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui in 2021, succession reporting has been fragmented and frequently dependent on intelligence claims that are difficult to corroborate publicly.

ATLAS therefore emphasizes organizational structure and demonstrated command behavior rather than assigning high confidence to an individual current leader.

Regional commanders. The organization relies on geographically dispersed commanders responsible for mobile fighting units, local taxation, logistics, intelligence, recruitment, and relations with communities.

Islamic State network links. ISIS-Sahel remains part of the broader Islamic State structure and receives ideological legitimacy, branding, media support, and at least some financial or organizational connectivity through that network.

CAPABILITIES

Mobile ground forces. Fighters use motorcycles, pickup trucks, captured military equipment, small arms, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and improvised explosives to move rapidly across large rural areas.

Raids and ambushes. The organization can mass fighters temporarily for attacks on outposts, convoys, villages, and rival armed groups, then disperse before sustained counterattack.

Cross-border logistics. Porous frontiers allow movement of fighters, weapons, fuel, livestock, and supplies across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Local revenue. The group extracts resources through taxation, livestock seizure, market control, extortion, kidnapping, and coercive regulation of local economic activity.

Population coercion. Village intimidation, forced displacement, assassination, and selective violence allow the organization to reshape local demographics and reduce resistance.

Network connectivity. Links to the wider Islamic State system provide propaganda support, legitimacy, external contacts, and potential financial connectivity even when local operations are largely autonomous.

GOALS

Expand territorial influence. ISIS-Sahel seeks to weaken state authority and create zones in which its fighters can move, tax, recruit, and enforce rules with limited interference.

Dominate insurgent space. Competition with JNIM is not only ideological; it is also a struggle over routes, recruits, communities, revenue, and local authority.

Exploit state weakness. Military coups, fragmented security institutions, strained regional cooperation, and civilian distrust create opportunities for expansion.

Preserve Islamic State relevance in Africa. The group contributes to the broader Islamic State effort to shift operational momentum toward African theaters.

ATLAS ASSESSMENT

Islamic State in the Sahel in October 2026 is a persistent and geographically mobile insurgent organization whose strength comes less from fixed territorial administration than from its ability to exploit weak state presence across borders.

ATLAS assesses that its principal advantage is **operational mobility across fragmented political space**.

Unlike ISWAP, which has developed deeper taxation and administrative structures around the Lake Chad Basin, ISIS-Sahel remains more dependent on mobile forces, coercive influence, rural sanctuary, and the ability to shift pressure between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

The organization nevertheless shows signs of territorial ambition. Repeated attacks around Menaka, Tillaberi, Tessit, and the tri-border zone indicate an effort to shape who can move, govern, trade, and remain in contested rural areas.

The rivalry with JNIM is strategically important. In areas where state authority is weak, the principal contest may increasingly be between two insurgent systems rather than between insurgents and the state alone.

The April 2026 expansion of direct fighting between ISIS-Sahel and JNIM into Niger demonstrates that this competition is becoming more geographically extensive.

State instability is another force multiplier. Political upheaval, military discontent, and strained cross-border cooperation can divert government attention and weaken intelligence-sharing. These conditions increase the value of ISIS-Sahel's mobility.

The principal warning indicator is whether the organization begins moving from **mobile coercive presence toward durable control of population centers, markets, or transport corridors**.

A second indicator is whether rivalry with JNIM produces consolidation rather than attrition. If one organization consistently displaces the other from key routes and communities, the balance of power in the central Sahel could shift quickly.

A third indicator is whether ISIS-Sahel develops more durable taxation and administrative systems resembling ISWAP. That would indicate movement from mobile insurgency toward a more institutionalized territorial model.

ATLAS therefore assesses ISIS-Sahel as a **cross-border mobile insurgent network with growing territorial potential, but not yet the same level of administrative depth demonstrated by ISWAP**.

CONFIDENCE

OVERALL CONFIDENCE: HIGH

High confidence that Islamic State in the Sahel remains active across Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

High confidence that western Niger and the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area remain central operating environments.

High confidence that direct competition with JNIM intensified during 2026.

Moderate-to-high confidence that the group retains substantial mobile fighting capability and access to cross-border logistics.

Moderate confidence regarding current fighter strength and leadership composition.

Moderate confidence regarding the durability of territorial influence because control can change rapidly and may differ between villages, roads, and surrounding rural areas.

Collection Priorities

- Verified current senior leadership and succession structure.
- Fighter strength by country and operating sector.
- Territorial influence in Tillaberi, Menaka, Tessit, and the wider Liptako-Gourma zone.
- Direct clashes and local agreements with JNIM.
- Motorcycle, vehicle, fuel, and weapons logistics networks.
- Taxation, livestock, market, and kidnapping revenue.

- Cross-border movement between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.
- Recruitment among local communities and displaced populations.
- Relationships with Islamic State central structures and other African affiliates.
- Evidence of permanent training camps or administrative centers.
- Control of markets, transport routes, and population movement.
- Use of captured military equipment and locally sourced weapons.
- Impact of political instability and military mutinies on state counterinsurgency capacity.
- Civilian displacement patterns caused by ISIS-Sahel pressure.
- Indicators that the organization is developing more durable administrative institutions.

SELECTED OPEN-SOURCE REFERENCES

1. United Nations Security Council, Monitoring Team Thirty-eighth report, S/2026/651, 10 August 2026.
2. United Nations reporting on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh), including central Sahel activity, 2026.
3. United Nations Security Council sanctions narrative for Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).
4. Reuters, 30 January 2026, Islamic State claim of attack on Niamey airport.
5. Reuters, 9 April 2026, fighting between Islamic State Sahel Province and JNIM spills into Niger.
6. Reuters, 29 April 2026, Islamic State-linked fighters withdraw from Menaka as Malian forces reassert control.
7. Reuters, 29 August 2026, instability and mutiny in Niger amid continuing jihadist pressure.

Analytic note: ATLAS uses open-source information only. Where evidence is incomplete, contested, or rapidly changing, the profile distinguishes reported information from ATLAS assessment and states the level of confidence.