

Mali: Coordinated Tuareg rebel and jihadist assaults push regime to the brink of collapse | Credendo

Event

On 25 April, coordinated assaults by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the armed Tuareg separatist group, the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), on several key cities and military bases across the country killed or injured senior junta officials and resulted in the death of the Minister of Defence. The complex coordination between JNIM and the FLA is unprecedented in Mali's history. Russia's paramilitary group, Africa Corps, which backs Malian forces, withdrew from several urban areas in the north, including the city of Kidal, leaving it under FLA control. The substantial territorial losses in the north and the ongoing 'economic jihad' against Bamako and mining sites have brought the regime closer to collapse.

Impact

Recent attacks confirm a serious escalation of the conflict in Mali and expose the ineffectiveness of the counterinsurgency led by Mali's military and Russia's Africa Corps. Security forces have lost full control over numerous regions across the country, including, most recently, the Kayes region near the Senegalese border. Since September 2025, JNIM has also been putting economic pressure on the junta by raiding mining sites and putting up a blockade of key logistical corridors around Bamako, which was only partially broken in the first quarter of 2026. A few days after the attacks, JNIM's spokesperson warned of further offensives and a full siege of Bamako. Food and fuel stocks in the capital are already reported to be minimal.

To address the territorial losses, negotiated concessions to jihadists and Tuareg rebels may be put on the table, although it will be exceptionally difficult for any government in Bamako to accept either the FLA's demands for independence for the Tuareg region of Azawad or JNIM's demands for a sharia-based government. This is especially true given that JNIM's ultimate long-term goal remains the establishment of a Salafi Islamist state across large parts of West Africa. Mali's junta is therefore more likely to launch a new military counteroffensive, at least to appease the population.

However, regional support from the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), including the junta-led governments of Burkina Faso and Niger, appears unlikely. Their silence in the aftermath of the attacks has all but ended belief in the so-called 'defence alliance' they claim to form. External intervention by Western states is also not likely following Mali's strategic realignment from France to Russia and the arrival of Wagner troops five years ago, rebranded as the Africa Corps in 2023. Another important issue is the Africa Corps' weak intelligence capacity, which is vital for fighting jihadist groups in the region, and which Mali lost when it expelled French, ECOWAS and UN support. Furthermore, Russia's humiliation in negotiating its withdrawal from Kidal, Aguelhok, Tessalit and Labbezanga, while abandoning its Malian counterparts, will damage its image and value as a security partner across Africa. Recent attacks have therefore exposed the weakness of the wider Sahelian security model and are also creating risks for neighbouring coastal states.

Under pressure from persistent destabilisation, a counter-coup to overthrow President (General) Goïta has become a plausible scenario in the coming weeks. To reconsolidate the junta's authority, a negotiated reshuffle of power and the re-engagement of the previously sidelined political class could serve as a counterstrategy, creating momentum for opposition figures such as Imam Dicko.

JNIM's near-term strategy remains unclear. The fall of Bamako to jihadist rebels does not appear imminent, as JNIM lacks the capacity, numbers and popular support required to hold, seize and govern the capital. It may seek to take control of several key areas across the country in order to force concessions on the implementation of sharia law or to trigger regime change, even though it would be unable to fill a nationwide power vacuum on its own. To do so, it would need to form strong alliances and gain popular support. That said, JNIM's near-term strategy is more likely to pursue significant influence over a new regime rather than to establish its own governance structures. Either way, there is a substantial risk of further state collapse in the coming weeks as the security situation continues to deteriorate. Credendo classifies Mali in the highest medium- to long-term political risk category, 7/7, and in category 6/7 for short-term political risk, which is currently under negative watch.

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