



Exploiting a “Vast Jihad Arena”

The Islamic State Takes Territory in Mali

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Soldiers of the “caliphate” in the tri-border region encompassing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger give *baya* (a religious oath of allegiance) to global IS caliph Sheikh Abu Hafs al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, August 2023.

Since the Islamic State lost its last territorial enclave in Baghuz, Syria, in March 2019, many have wondered where and when the group might hold territory again. An answer actually emerged with little international fanfare on April 10, 2023, when the group’s Wilayat Sahil (Sahel “province”) seized all the villages surrounding the growing Malian population center of Menaka, which falls within the tri-border region encompassing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.¹ On May 11, 2023, IS officially claimed control over the villages and boasted about its defeat of al-Qaeda’s Sahel branch, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), along with two local Tuareg militias—the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA) and Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA)—all of which had waged a “massive military campaign” to remove the Islamic State from northern Mali.²

By May 2023, a minimum of 150,000 individuals in the Gao, Kidal, Menaka, and Timbuktu regions in northern Mali had been displaced due to the violence, according to El Ghassim Wane, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Mali and head of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).³ (See map 1 for the contours of the broader region.)

Claiming to “comb and purify” areas populated by al-Qaeda-linked fighters, the Islamic State in Mali (IS-M) documented its early outreach efforts to local populations and efforts to “secure” the area by setting up checkpoints between Menaka and Gao, a small city serving as capital of the eponymous region. IS territorial control has also spread westward, with initial reports from October 2022 indicating such control in the Ansongo area, south of Gao.⁴ In July 2023, Human Rights Watch published reports from locals indicating IS-M targeted killings, kidnappings for ransom, and looting in Ansongo-area villages.⁵ According to the late August 2023 UN report on IS, “In less than a year,

[the] Islamic State in [Mali] has almost doubled its areas of control” in rural eastern Menaka and large parts of the Ansongo area in southern Gao.⁶ Moreover, with the official withdrawal of MINUSMA forces from their Menaka camp on August 25, 2023, internally displaced persons will not only be without the aid provided by UN troops, but also will be much more vulnerable to an IS-M takeover of the city.⁷ Strikingly, within the month since MINUSMA’s withdrawal from northern Mali, the prevalence of violence has doubled, portending a situation wherein IS-M and other nonstate actors can exploit a growing vacuum unfilled by either the Malian military or Wagner.⁸

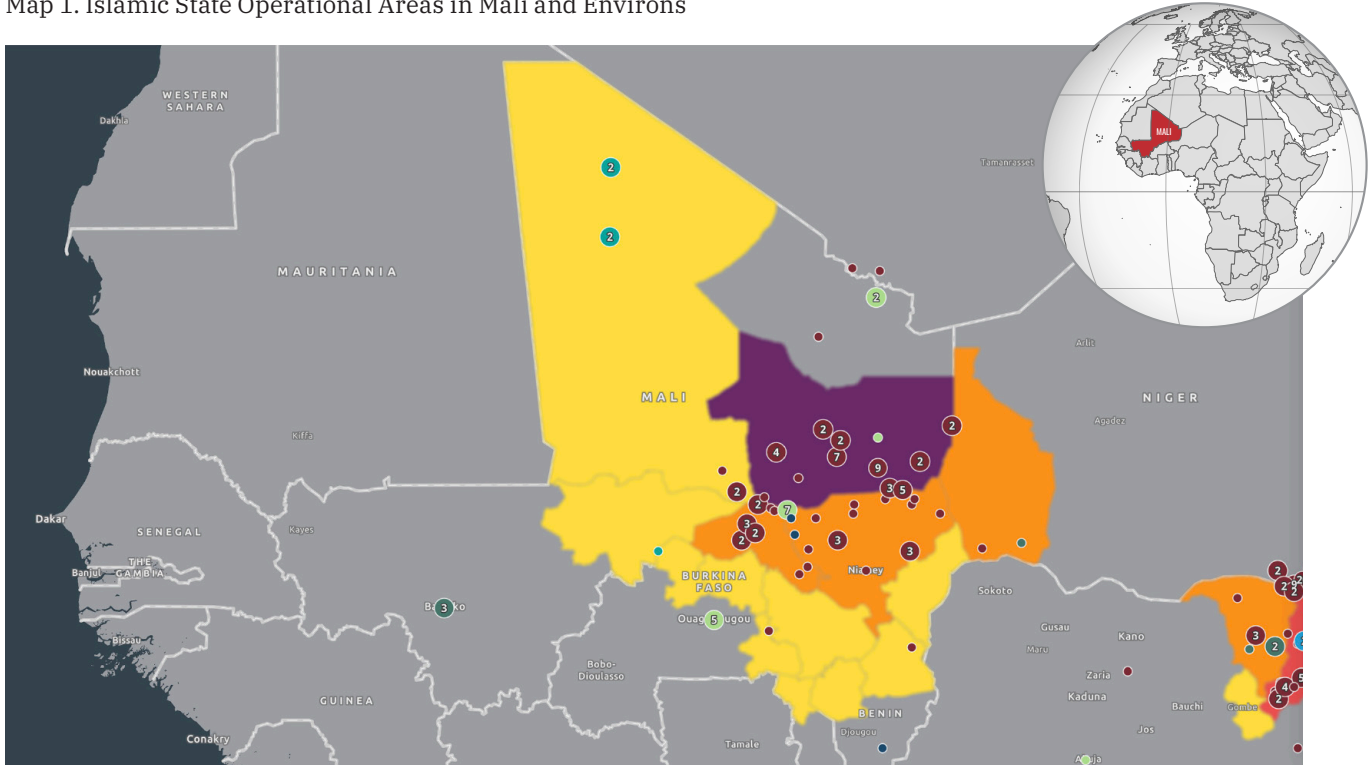
The rise of IS in Mali can be directly linked to the August 2022 withdrawal of French forces operating under the Operation Barkhane counterinsurgency mission. At the time of the French departure, the Mali insurgency had not been deterred or defeated, but it has undoubtedly worsened since. This suggests France at the very least was managing the situation in hopes that a future easing of the political tempest would facilitate a more sustainable resolution. As for the French, they withdrew at the request of the government of interim Malian president Assimi Goita, who seized power after a May 2021 coup and expressed his preference for the Russian-sponsored Wagner Group as a partner.

The Malian people today have little protection against IS-M fighters, given that the national military and Wagner—both housed at a Menaka base—not only refuse to protect them but also have reportedly engaged in mass atrocities against civilians.⁹ According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, or ACLED, 60 percent of Wagner’s violent engagements in Mali have targeted civilian noncombatants, as compared to 37 percent of Malian army actions.¹⁰ Furthermore, each Wagner attack—a category that includes kidnapping, sexual violence, and torture—kills an average of seven noncombatants, twice the average caused by Malian army attacks.¹¹ Rights groups argue that such Wagner actions unintentionally drive support for IS-M, which capitalizes on grievances against local governments for recruitment purposes.¹² Likewise,

Abbreviations

AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GATIA	Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies
IS-M	Islamic State in Mali
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JNIM	Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
JTWJ-GI	Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya
MINUSMA	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad

Map 1. Islamic State Operational Areas in Mali and Environs



For a link to this map, see <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/#country/137>.

on June 30, 2023, the UN Security Council voted to end the MINUSMA mandate, raising the likelihood of greater impunity for all sides. The July 2023 coup in Niger has stoked fears further, possibly exposing the neighboring country to similarly worrying dynamics.¹³

Overview of U.S.-Mali Relations

The United States has maintained diplomatic relations with Mali since the country gained independence from France in 1960. The vast majority of U.S. assistance to the African country has covered development and humanitarian needs; for example, in 2021, the United States provided \$223 million to Mali in health, agricultural, education, and peacebuilding aid. Since the May 2021 coup, the United States has suspended direct

military assistance to the Malian government,¹⁴ but in October 2022 it signed an agreement with Mali to provide \$148.5 million in humanitarian and development assistance.¹⁵

The United States likewise supported the MINUSMA peacekeeping operation, established in 2013 following an uprising against the Malian government by Tuareg rebels—mainly members of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, from which the earlier-noted MSA emerged as a splinter—until its dissolution in June 2023.¹⁶ The mission was created as a 13,000-member force tasked with supporting local Malian authorities, rebuilding the Malian security sector, facilitating a national political dialogue and elections, and protecting civilians and their human rights. Its personnel were also involved in counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda and later IS-linked groups.¹⁷ In 2020, 2021, and 2022, the United States funded the UN mission at just over \$350 million annually, around 30 percent of the total cost to conduct it.¹⁸

The Biden administration initially reaffirmed U.S. support for MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—which led counterterrorism efforts in the region with French support. Furthermore, prior to France’s withdrawal in August 2022, Washington provided French forces with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) support for counterterrorism operations against JNIM and IS-M.¹⁹ Amid continued Malian government resistance to UN security involvement following the 2021 coup, however, the U.S. government told Mali that continuing MINUSMA operations would be “irresponsible” given restrictions on ISR efforts in the country.²⁰ Washington blamed the Wagner Group for helping orchestrate the dynamic, but did not indicate any U.S. strategy to mitigate its effects.²¹

Meanwhile, on July 21, 2023, President Biden extended the national emergency designation first assigned to Mali on July 26, 2019, through Executive Order 13882, allowing the U.S. Department of the Treasury to block Malian officials involved in the conflict from possessing U.S.-associated property, prohibit any U.S.-origin financial transactions

involving these figures, and bar their potential future travel to America.²² Therefore, today, as IS-M and JNIM exploit Mali’s security vacuum, Washington lacks space to productively intervene given its soured relationship with Bamako and the military regime’s preference for working with Wagner. Unfortunately, the current trajectory will only benefit the jihadists the Malian government claims it wants to defeat.

Background on Jihadism In Mali

The Islamic State’s presence in Mali can be traced to an unrelated, decades-old insurgency in the north focused on Tuareg rights that was exploited by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its local allies in 2011–12. AQIM, which benefited from the Libyan weapons bazaar that flourished after the 2011 fall of Muammar Qadhafi, seized territory in spring 2012 in a region of northern Mali referred to locally as Azawad. Even as France’s Operation Serval



The Mali-based jihadist Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, who died in 2021, pledges allegiance to then IS “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

dismantled this statelet in January 2013, the AQIM-led insurgency continued, prompting an expansion of the jihadist campaign to neighboring countries, especially Burkina Faso. Within Mali, the AQIM-led jihadist alliance included more localized groups like Ansar al-Din and Katibat al-Macina, alongside AQIM splinter groups more regionalized in scope including Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad fi Gharb Ifriqiya (JTWJ-GI) and Katibat al-Mulathamini.

AQIM’s monopoly on the Malian “jihadosphere,” however, was interrupted by the *baya* (allegiance pledge) given by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi to then IS “caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on May 13, 2015, which the group accepted on October 31, 2016.²³ Sahrawi, who became the first leader of IS-M, had previously cofounded JTWJ-GI and served on its shura council. This group, founded in October 2011, merged in August 2013 with Katibat al-Mulathamini, led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, to form al-Murabitun, for which Sahrawi also served as a senior leader.²⁴ Remnants of al-Murabitun eventually merged back into AQIM in December 2015, possibly in response to Sahrawi’s announcement, which Belmokhtar rejected.²⁵ Likewise, the remaining pro-AQIM groups—Ansar al-Din and Katibat al-Macina—publicly formalized ties with the al-Qaeda branch on March 2, 2017, adopting the name Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin.²⁶ In light of this historical context, IS-M’s push to take territory in the Menaka region may well be related to JTWJ-GI networks linked to Sahrawi since JTWJ-GI previously captured Menaka in 2012.²⁷

Background on the Islamic State in Mali

The Islamic State in Mali has followed an idiosyncratic path. Although existing as a discrete IS “province” between October 2016 and April 2019, it identified unofficially as “IS in the Greater Sahara,” and the IS central media administration did not claim attacks on the regional group’s behalf, as it

does with its other official provinces. Yet attacks by IS-M began in earnest in fall 2016, according to data shared with the authors by Menastream, a risk consultancy led by researcher Hény Nsaibia. From April 2019 through March 2022, IS-M operations were subsumed under IS’s Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya (West Africa “province”), which is headquartered in Nigeria. And since March 2022, it has fallen under the Sahel province, which thus far encompasses Burkina Faso and Niger as well. IS has described the Sahel as a “vast jihad arena against the crusaders and apostates.”²⁸

Compared with attacks claimed by other IS “provinces,” the IS-M numbers appear paltry: three in 2016; eight in 2017; ten in 2018; sixteen in 2019; thirty-five in 2020; fourteen in 2021; twenty-nine in 2022; and fifteen as of September 2023. Of course, before April 2019, the IS media office simply did not claim Mali-based attacks, and it may have purposefully limited its claims since. This approach would cohere with IS practices elsewhere, particularly in Syria, where leaked documents show that military commanders intentionally prevent publication of claims owing to a lack of technology/internet access, security concerns, or mere indifference.²⁹ Moreover, in a recent issue of the Islamic State’s Pashto-language *Voice of Khurasan* magazine, the Khurasan “province” notes that the seeming decline in Afghanistan-based operations can be attributed to a policy of silence, similar to that employed in Syria.³⁰

During the first few years when IS-M and JNIM operated simultaneously in Mali, the “Sahel exception” prevailed, as described by French journalist Wassim Nasr. According to this arrangement, the two groups implicitly agreed not to fight each other directly—a contrast with the situation in places like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.³¹ But in early 2020, this tacit agreement collapsed, and the two groups have engaged in bloody if select clashes since due to JNIM’s fears of fighter defections to IS-M.³² Setting aside these clashes, IS and JNIM mostly operate in separate regions of Mali. According to JNIM’s claims of responsibility in the country, the group has operated mostly in the southeastern,

central, and far northern regions of Mopti, Timbuktu, Koulikoro, Kayes, Segou, and Sikasso, while IS-M—as of September 2023—has remained in the far eastern regions of Gao and Menaka. According to a recent UN report on the security dynamics in Mali, JNIM also controls several gold mining sites across northern Mali and villages in at least the Mopti region (see map 2).³³

According to data collected from the Islamic State’s weekly newsletter *al-Naba*, the group has claimed

responsibility for twenty-six attacks in Mali since the withdrawal of French troops in August 2022 (see map 3).³⁴ The Menaka and Gao-based attacks have targeted rival JNIM fighters, members of the MSA- and GATIA-aligned Tuareg political entities and armed groups, and Malian government soldiers. According to civilians interviewed by Human Rights Watch, assault rifle-wielding IS-M fighters typically storm villages on motorbikes and pickup trucks, sometimes hoisting the black IS flag.³⁵ The fighters then destroy property and warn the population to leave the area or else face

Map 2. IS-M and JNIM Operational Areas in Mali



Map 3. Locales in Menaka/Gao Where IS Has Claimed Attacks Since the August 2022 French Withdrawal



death. They have also demanded that families give them their daughters for marriage.³⁶ Kidnapping for ransom, rape, and assassination of so-called spies for the Malian military are also common IS-M practices in the Gao/Menaka area.³⁷

Most recently, in July–August 2023, IS increased its claims of responsibility for larger-scale attacks in Mali, including a July 25, 2023, clash with JNIM members in N’Tillit that evidently caused heavy casualties.³⁸ On August 3, 2023, IS-M targeted a Malian military convoy protecting trucks heading toward Niger,³⁹ which has authorized Malian forces to enter the country in the event of foreign military action against the new ruling junta.⁴⁰ Furthermore, IS-M has claimed responsibility for killing several Wagner Group “spies” as well as a member of GATIA, indicating the organization’s continued efforts to degrade rivals beyond al-Qaeda.⁴¹ Notably, IS-M also claimed responsibility for kidnapping and killing an individual working for the German military,

which had committed a thousand troops to the country—mostly to provide reconnaissance support to MINUSMA—but now plans to withdraw its forces well before their scheduled May 2024 departure amid the closure of MINUSMA.⁴²

IS Governance in Menaka Region

Just as Islamic State branches previously carried out governance functions in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, IS-M has begun doing so in the Menaka region,⁴³ dating to before the April 2023 takeover. In October 2022, for example, IS-M members distributed medicines in multiple localities to “the citizens of the Islamic State free of charge,” according to *al-Naba*.⁴⁴ Moreover, according to Malian officials, IS-M members are “distributing Qurans to the population” and have informed residents that they will soon be expected

attempts to increase local support for its activities. In Menaka alone, the violence displaced 89,200 people between March 2022 and May 2023, easing the path to IS-M control. Additionally, locals have joined IS both to insulate themselves from the threat of violence and because they lack work opportunities.⁵² According to local reports, civilians must “collaborate in one way or another” in IS-held areas in order to survive.⁵³

Financial Opportunity

For IS-M, the benefits of taking territory in the Menaka region include access to illicit revenue streams, including from raiding cattle,⁵⁴ taxing the transport of gold from illegal mines,⁵⁵ and facilitating weapons trafficking.⁵⁶ According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, the village of Agazragane, near Menaka, is the single largest Sahelian locale for trafficking Libyan weapons.⁵⁷ In exploiting this trade, IS-M can force smugglers to pay taxes, a common method used by IS militants where they operate in safe havens.⁵⁸

According to a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, IS-M is the main perpetrator of cattle (and camel) rustling in Menaka. Such thefts are often preceded by the murder of the owners, with proceeds from the animals’ sale going to purchase weapons and vehicles.⁵⁹ Menaka-area residents reported the highest-ever frequency of cattle rustling in 2022, and according to Human Rights Watch, the trend has continued throughout 2023.⁶⁰ Associated revenue may also be directed to benefit the core organization in Syria and Iraq, although IS in Nigeria—probably the strongest Africa “province”—would likely mediate such activity.

A strategic base in Menaka may provide IS-M with increased access to communication lines and smuggling routes connecting Wilayat Sahil with parts of Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya in eastern Niger and northwest Nigeria. This is especially pertinent in

view of the Niger coup, which could transform the country’s limited jihadist theater into an insurgency on the scale of nearby Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria—should the Nigerien leadership fail to calm the political situation. To help ensure stability, the U.S. Department of the Treasury should consider expanding its sanctions regime targeting IS-M leaders, as will be elucidated in the next section.

What Comes Next?

In Mali and the broader Sahel, security dynamics involving local, regional, and global actors have produced a fluid geopolitical situation that benefits the local Islamic State “province” as well as JNIM and other nonstate actors. IS-M has shown it can thrive amid any security vacuum that emerges. Today’s reality, of course, does great damage to the Sahelian population.

For the Islamic State and its global “provinces,” IS-M territorial control—however limited the scope or remote the location—breathes life into the dream of a world “caliphate” based on the group’s stringent interpretation of Islamic law. This is true even though no large- or even medium-scale foreign fighter mobilization like that for Syria or Libya has accompanied the Mali jihad—despite IS calling for *hijra* (migration) to sub-Saharan fronts⁶¹—even as a cohort of regional foreign fighters mainly from surrounding countries has appeared in IS-M ranks.

One reason for low fighter migration to sub-Saharan Africa is the area’s lack of religious-historical resonance for Muslims relative to the Levant and Arabian Peninsula. More practically, transit to Mali is arduous, whereas Turkey—a global travel hub—provides an easy gateway to Syria. Yet the Mali situation bears watching all the same. Even if IS-M poses a comparatively low risk to conduct external operations, history dictates that the longer the group possesses a safe haven and the opportunity to expand its rule, the more capable it will be of planning operations, whether directed, guided, or

inspired—as previously observed in Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan.⁶²

The Islamic State’s success in Mali may likewise prompt forays into nearby regions. One possibility is that the infusion of resources will be reinvested into faltering operations in North Africa⁶³—especially Libya,⁶⁴ where IS territorial control and governance came closest to that in Iraq and Syria in 2014–16; and Tunisia,⁶⁵ known for its large-scale foreign fighter cohort and the terrorism campaign jihadists carried out on domestic soil from 2014 to 2019.⁶⁶ Such a trend would mark an effective reversal of the southward flow of arms, money, and militancy from North Africa following the 2011 revolutions. Alternatively, IS might try to extend farther south into the Gulf of Guinea countries like Benin and Togo, where it has grown slowly in recent years, or even push into newer countries such as Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire, or Guinea.⁶⁷

Internally, worsening security dynamics across Mali will continue to open operating space for JNIM and IS-M, particularly in light of recent reports of conflict between the aligned Wagner Group and Malian military and the formerly pro-government Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA),⁶⁸ a coalition of Tuareg militant factions separate from the MSA and GATIA.⁶⁹ Despite the signing of the 2015 Algiers peace agreement between the CMA and the Malian government, tensions between the two continue to escalate, fracturing the forces meant to fight jihadist insurgents across the country.⁷⁰ Local reports also suggest that the “Sahel exception” between IS-M and JNIM might be restored, allowing the groups to exploit these changing dynamics and deal with each other in the future. But additional publicly available information and time are needed to assess the reality of this potential change in the relationship.⁷¹ Various Tuareg militants may also choose to align with one of the jihadist factions (JNIM or IS-M), even though no evidence suggests this has happened yet.⁷²

Moreover, on September 16, Mali signed a mutual defense treaty, officially named the Alliance of Sahel States, with Burkina Faso and Niger—an alternative

and competitor to the French-led G5 Sahel alliance, one of the main bulwarks against IS-M and JNIM in the region.⁷³ The new agreement would force Malian troops to aid Niger militarily if other West African states—namely Nigeria and other members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)—choose to overthrow Niger’s new ruling junta as threatened. This change would further pull forces away from the fight against jihadist groups, even though the Malian forces have defended the country poorly against these actors.⁷⁴ Either way, IS-M will continue to exploit existing local vacuums in an attempt to expand its territorial control and broader creed.⁷⁵

Moreover, the current Malian preference for Wagner, which effectively blocks Western nations from the theater, limits U.S. options for meaningfully shaping dynamics on the ground. Even if the United States or its French or other allies were more inclined to assert themselves, broader geostrategic concerns could hinder their appetite for a counterterrorism turf war with Russia. Tenuous U.S. ties with the current Nigerien leadership further complicate the situation and may hinder the effectiveness of the local U.S. drone base, which has been used against both IS and JNIM militants over the years. Washington should therefore prepare for the possibility that Niger could ask the United States to leave, as Mali recently did with France. Contingency planning for a drone base could include engaging countries like Ghana or Senegal, allowing for a backup plan amid the current trajectory.

As suggested earlier, the U.S. Treasury Department should consider applying broader sanctions against IS-M financial networks. To date, only two senior figures have been designated: former “province” leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, who was killed in September 2021, and his close associate Ousmane Illiassou Djibo.⁷⁶ Broader targeting could potentially limit IS-M’s ability to move money across borders. However, clear insight into the deep bench of IS-M’s leadership or financiers is unavailable in the open source. Therefore, the State and Treasury Departments should use classified information and draw from the intelligence community to shed light

on these figures, in turn denying them opportunities to help IS-M and establishing consequences when they do.

On the strategic side, further security deterioration in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger might prompt these governments to rethink their approach to the jihadist movement, possibly offering space for U.S. reengagement. This tri-state region could

conceivably emerge as a space for shared U.S.-Russia interests, rare these days, although mutual distrust and the consequences of the Ukraine invasion would most likely limit cooperation there. Only a major event with reverberating impacts—such as a terrorist attack on a Western nation’s homeland—would likely draw sufficient outside interest to potentially halt Mali’s slide toward ever greater insecurity. ❖

NOTES

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