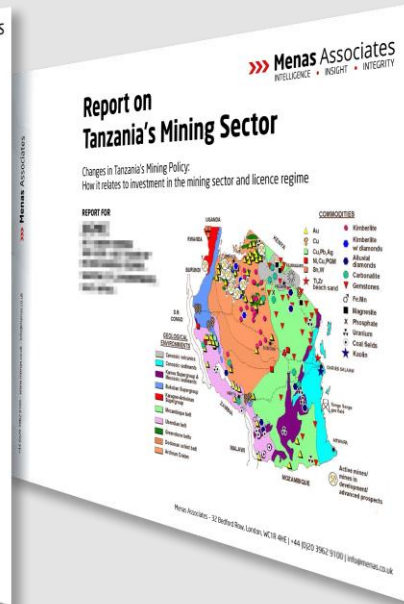


COULD THE SAHEL'S ESCALATING TERRORISM CRISIS SPREAD TO COASTAL WEST AFRICA?

Prof. Jeremy Keenan

17 September 2025

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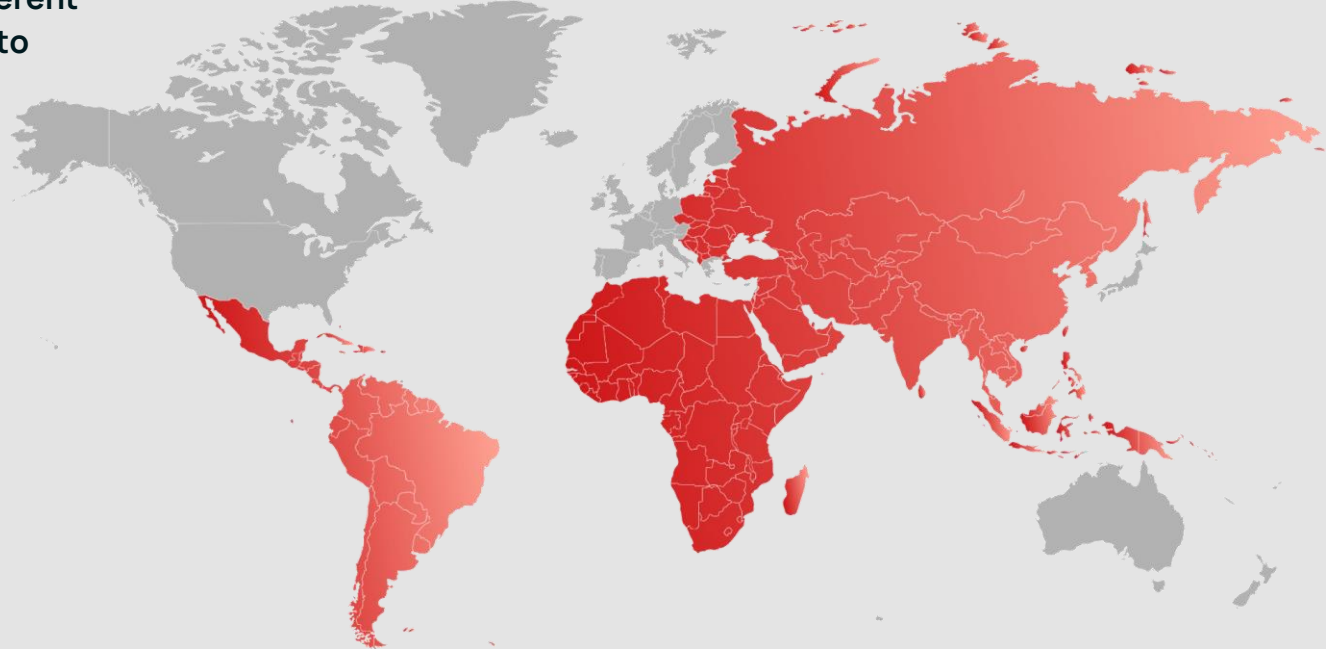


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Speaker

Prof Jeremy Keenan is a professional anthropologist and currently Visiting Professor in the Law School at Queen Mary University London (QMUL).

He has worked in and on the Sahara-Sahel since 1964. With over 300 books and academic publications to his name, he is the most published current scholar on the region.

He is best known for his studies of the Tuareg and his analysis of the US' global war on terror (GWOT) and its implications on the people and countries of the Sahara-Sahel.

His latest publication Mali's Genocide will be launched in London on 14 October.

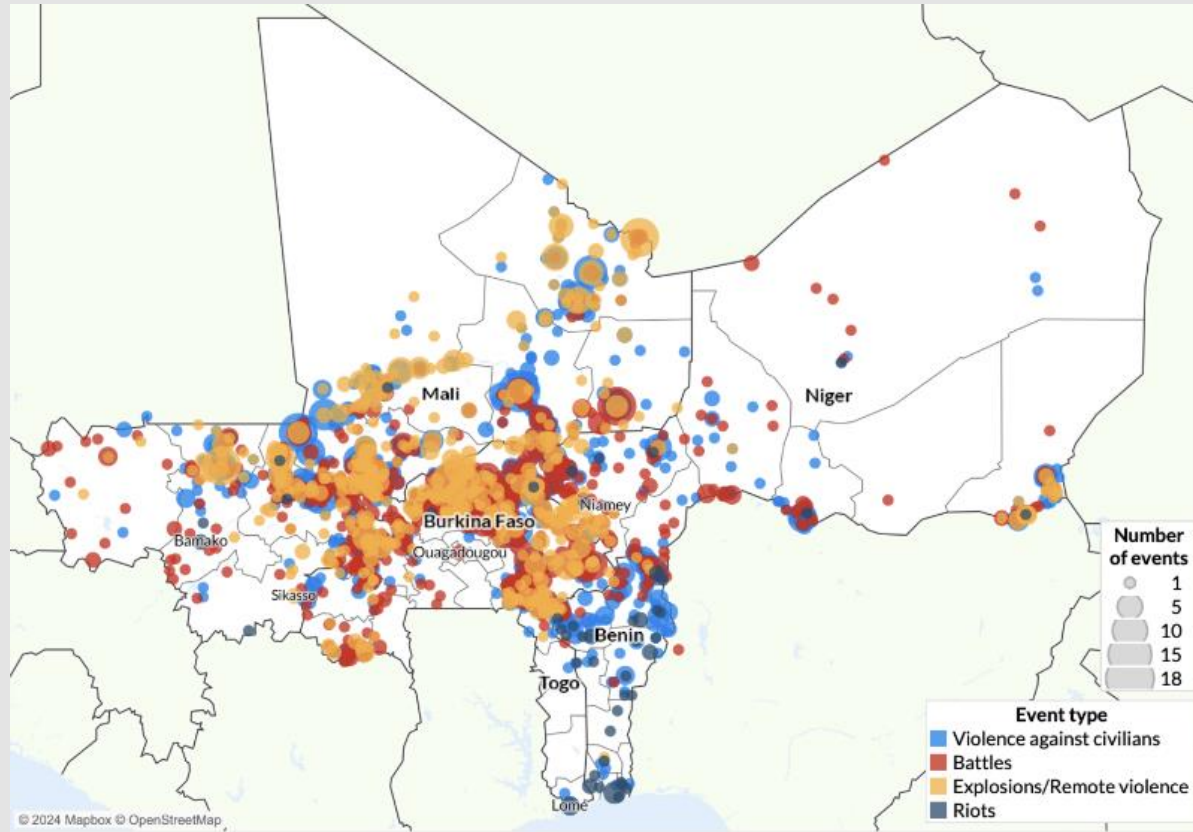
He has advised numerous international organisations (UN, EU, etc), governments and multinational companies on political and security issues in the Sahara-Sahel regions.

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Political violence in West Africa

1 January - 29 November 2024



Geographical location of Sahel's terrorists

2 Axes:

Nigeria:

- Boko Haram;
- Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP); and more recently
- the al-Qaida affiliated Ansaru

Alliance des États du Sahel (AES, i.e. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso):

- Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM);
- État islamique dans le Grand Sahara (EIGS)

Terrorists originated from Algeria

- Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)
- Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO)
- Ansar al Dine
- Al-Mourabitoune

Fall of Libya's Muammar Qadhafi in October 2011

Prior to 2011:

- Global War of Terrorism (GWOT);
- Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger
- After Qadhafi's fall Tuareg fighters return from Libya to Mali and Niger

Niger had a strategy of integration

Mali (Bamako was not interested) – Outcome: merger of Libyan Tuareg fighters with Malian rebels to create the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA)

Azawad – Tuareg name for northern Mali:

5 Provinces of: Ménaka, Gao, Timbuktu, Kidal and Taoudéni

Threat to Algeria

MNLA irredentism posed a threat to Algeria and could ignite Tuareg rebellion.

Algeria's strategy:

- Mobilise AQIM by sending it south into Mali; and create:
- Ansar al-Dine (Nov. 2011) (led by Iyad ag Ghali – a DRS agent), and
- Mouvement pour l'Unification et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO)
- Send all 3 groups into northern Mali's Kidal region

The BIG PICTURE – Algeria moving 'terrorism' South

Islamist incursion into Mali was controlled by Algeria's *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS)*

Strategy: to merge with and then undermine MNLA

Timeline 2011-2012

- November/December 2011: Create Ansar Dine (Iyad ag Ghali) and MUJAO
- January: Incursion of AQIM, Ansar Dine and MUJAO into Mali
- January: MNLA began its rebellion against Mali's government
- February: Aguelhok massacre (c.90 Malian soldiers killed) led to coup d'état
- April 5: Tuareg declaration of Azawad's Independence
- May 26: Declaration of Islamic state. Hijack of MNLA rebellion
- End-May: Battle of Gao; desecration of Timbuktu; Islamic sharia law
- End-2012: Islamist threat to Bamako

Vive La France!

- Throughout 2012, the situation in Mali rapidly deteriorated.
- Militant groups consolidated control over Azawad, with alliances shifting and local populations subjected to harsh rule under evolving forms of Islamic governance.
- International alarm grew as key heritage sites were threatened, humanitarian crises deepened, and the Malian state's authority eroded.
- This culminated in the intensification of regional instability and mounting appeals for external assistance.

France's military intervention (January 2013).

- Opération Serval (c.1,500 troops) and Opération Barkhane (c.3,000)
- Mission multidimensionnelle intégrée des Nations Unies pour la stabilisation au Mali, (MINUSMA), (c.15,000)

Why French military intervention failed

- Failure of military intelligence
- Use of military counter-terrorism strategy
- Algerian support for '*terrorists*' (e.g. President Macron's May 2017 visit to Sahel; 14.02.18 French strike kills 20 JNIM between Tin Zaouatene and Boughessa (sheltering in Algeria))
- Failure of the G5S
- Armies out of control – Nigerien and Malian armies massacring civilians

Creation of JNIM

- March 2017: - AQIM, Ansar al-Dine, MUJAO, Al-Mourabitoune, and Macina Liberation Front (MLF led by Amadou Koufa) – merged into Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM) under the overall command of Iyad ag Ghali.
- Led to two main *terrorist* groups:
 - JNIM (affiliated to Al Qaida) and
 - EIGS (affiliated to Islamic State)

Coups in Mali, (2020, 2021), Niger (2023) and Burkina Faso (2022)

- Assimi Goïta (Mali),
 - Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani (Niger) and
 - Capt. Ibrahim Traoré (Burkina Faso)
-
- Rising anti-French feelings (especially in Bamako) - anti-West and anti-colonial
 - Russia's Wagner Group (led by Yevgeny Prigozhin who died in 2023), propaganda
 - Departure of French (August 2022) and MINUSMA (August 2023)

Wagner arrives in Mali in Dec 2021 with Algeria's assistance

Official reason for their presence: training + take over security from French

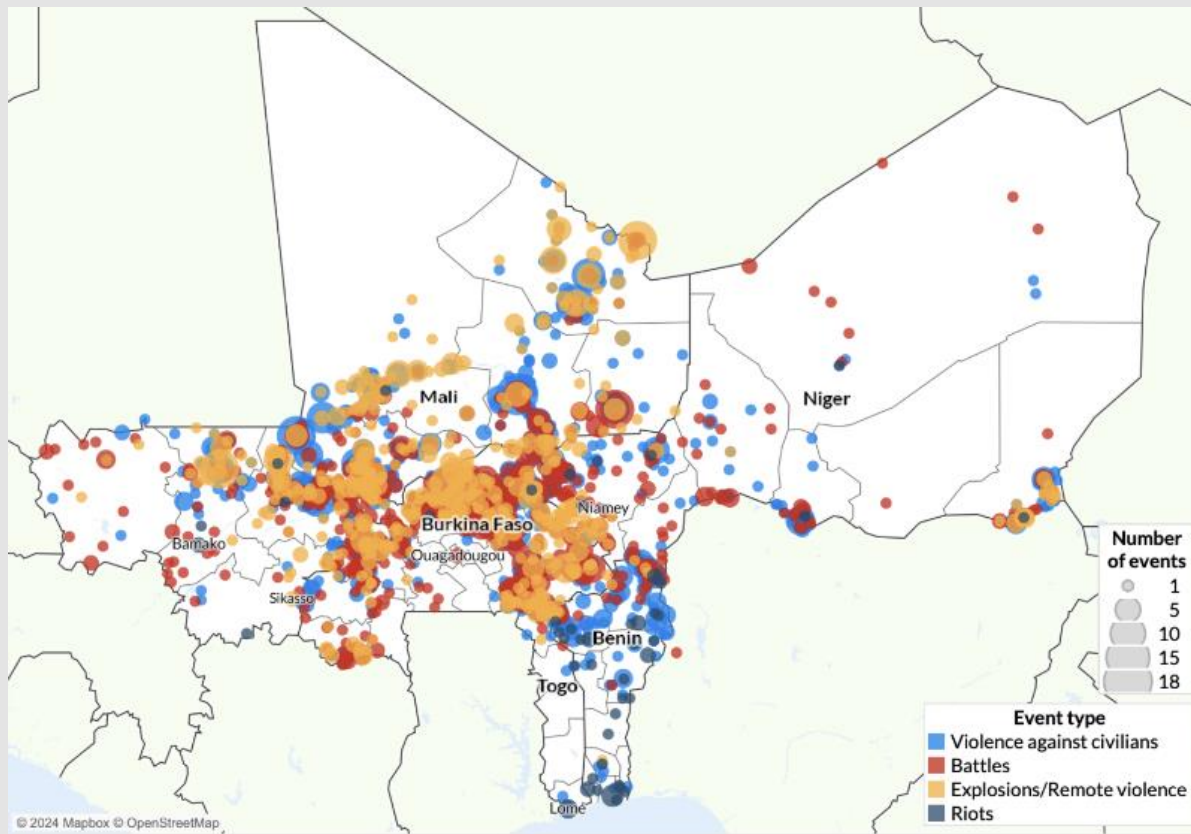
In practice – what did Wagner do?

- Civilian Massacres/Genocide.
- Moura (27-31 March 2022) >500 civilians killed
- Kidal genocide (Nov 2023) Started as MINUSMA withdrew
- Not much military action against jihadists

Since France's departure terrorist actions have increased

Since Wagner's arrival it has increased even further.

Same pattern of security decline in both Niger and Burkina Faso (>40% is now beyond state control)



Political violence in West Africa

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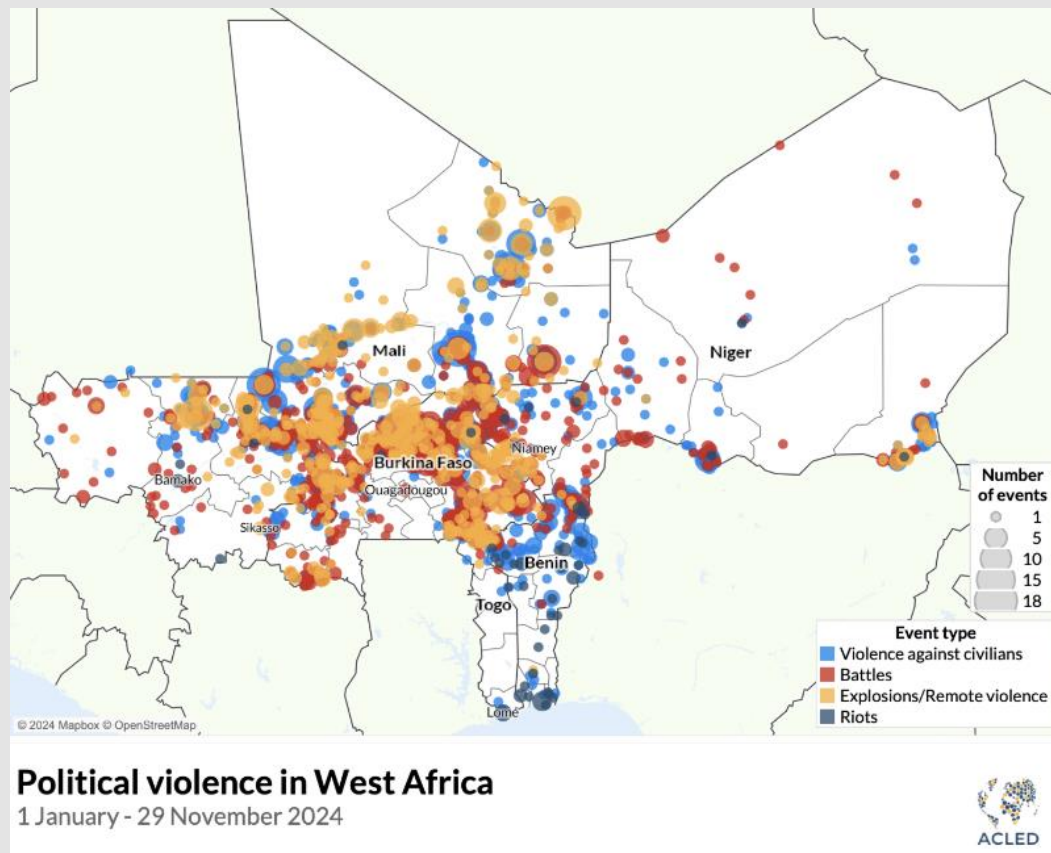


Today. Sahel is global capital of terrorism

Three borders region

UN 2024 estimate:

- JNIM has 5,000-6,000 fighters;
- EIGS has 2,000-3000 fighters.
- i.e. Total of around 10,000



Terrorist threats to Coastal West African States

First big strikes into West Africa were a wake-up call:

- 20 Nov 2015 Islamist militants took 170 hostages and killed 20 of them in attack on Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako
- 15 Jan 2016 Gunmen attack Cappuccino restaurant and Splendid Hotel in Ouagadougou. At least 30 killed and 56 wounded.
- 13 March 2016, gunmen opened fire at Grand Bassam beach resort in Côte d'Ivoire. At least 19 dead and 33 wounded.

Current attacks and threats – West Africa

Côte d'Ivoire

- Grand Bassam (2016)
- Kafolo 2020 (14 soldiers killed) (Security increased thereafter)
- Kafolo 2021 (3 soldiers killed)
- Attacks then stopped, but recruitment continuing and there has been growing instability on the Burkina Faso side of the border.
- Big military push into the north has contained terrorist attacks but this could be temporary

Ghana

- Deteriorating security in Burkina Faso, especially since 2023, has led to curfews in 12 northern Ghana regions.
- Several incidents along its northern border with Burkina Faso.

Current attacks and threats – West Africa

Togo

- Togo recorded 10 attacks resulting and 52 deaths in 2024.
- JNIM claimed responsibility for four of these which accounted for 41 fatalities
- 12 deaths in 2023.

Benin

- JNIM claimed 3 attacks in 2023
- January 2025: 28 soldiers killed in attacks on army posts in W National Park.
- February 2025: 4 Park rangers and 2 drivers killed in W National Park
- April 2025, 54 soldiers killed in an attack on military posts in W National Park.

Senegal

- Recent increase in security threats from JNIM in northern and eastern border regions.
- JNIM very active along Mali's western border.
- JNIM's current blockade around Kayes, trying to cut fuel supplies into Mali.

Breaking News

- On Sunday 14 Sept. JNIM attacked fuel convey between Kayes and Bamako. Destroyed at least 40 Tankers (JNIM claims 80). The Malian army escort is reported to have fled, or been destroyed.
- Some reports say convoy was from Côte d'Ivoire and attacked near Sikasso. Most reports say convoy was from Senegal and attack took place east of Kayes.
- Bamako reportedly maintains about 2 weeks of fuel stocks.
- Reports from BBC, Reuters, et al.

Current attacks and threats – West Africa

Nigeria

- Boko Haram – insurgency began in 2002, mainly in Northeast (but also in Lake Chad basin which includes part of Chad and northern Cameroon)
- Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) which was a Boko Haram faction (active in Northeast and Northwest);
- Ansaru is a more recent al-Qaida affiliate, mainly in northern Benin border
- Terrorism is spreading to Middle Belt cities (e.g. Abuja – suicide bombings; IEDs)
- Plus. major banditry problem (pastoralists vs farmers); and kidnap for ransom criminals. Particularly in the Northwest but is it spreading south; country's main north-south roads are no longer safe; hundreds have been snatched from trains.
- Huge internal displacement; breadbasket of the country taken over by terrorists; pay zakat or they are killed; millions are hungry; rising food prices; social unrest
- >200,000 strong army overstretched & unable to stop insurgency in >20 years
- State police forces being established by governors because Federal Police cannot cope

JNIM's change in strategy

- Sept 2024 JNIM surprise attack on Bamako's airport and army barracks.
- Nov 2024 JNIM leadership said its campaign would target urban areas
- May-July 2025 JNIM attacks in W. Ségou and Kayes (re Senegal), Timbuktu, Sikasso, etc.
- Also targeted Niono and Nioro du Sahel near the Mauritanian border, + 4 smaller towns, two of which are border posts with Mauritania and Senegal.
- JNIM and army - conflicting claims.
- Kayes region, previously insulated from JNIM, is important for gold operations
- Testing government's ability to defend urban areas – encouraging collapse of regime from within.

What next?

- Russia unhappy with fighting Tuareg in north (Ukraine weapons via Algeria)
- JNIM & Tuareg are encouraging Malians to mobilise against Junta and Russians
- Threat to Assimi Goïta from his own military and civilians. Coup very likely
- Niger and Burkina Faso both politically very unstable (security declining in both)

Where does this leave threat to coastal states? Three factors to consider:

- Why is Russia engaged in ethnic cleansing and not fighting JNIM? Because it wants to leave JNIM strong enough to destabilise Coastal States (i.e. the West)
- JNIM current strategy in attacking Mali's urban areas may take pressure off Coastal states (except Senegal?)
- Role of US. Currently supporting Tuareg to fight Russians. (Re. meetings of Maj. Gen Mostefa Smaili (No. 2 in Algeria) with new AFRICOM commander Gen. Anderson in Stuttgart (15.08.25) and with US Commander of Special Operations Command Africa, Major Gen Claude Tudor in Algiers (14.09.25).

Q&A

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