# Coordinated U.S. Foreign Assistance and Effective Counterterrorism in Africa: Considering the Efficacy of U.S. and Partner Engagement against Al Qaeda's Civilian Engagement Strategy in West Africa[1]

Tammy Lynn Palacios[2]

**Abstract:**

The international community can better partner with African countries and more effectively counter and prevent terrorism in Africa by implementing two changes to U.S. strategy. First, by crafting strategies that counter the kinetic and non-kinetic operations of al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated groups that allow for their territorial expansion and control. Second, by better coordinating U.S. foreign aid/development with security assistance and security cooperation efforts and conducting them with the partner country in a way that supports partner civilian and military institutions. At current, U.S. security assistance efforts better connect to and strengthen the military/security apparatus than U.S. development assistance efforts do - this is due to risk averse bureaucracy that ultimately erodes democratic structures and processes rather than strengthening them. Additionally, U.S. tendencies to work directly with civil society organizations may not strengthen civil society pathways to ministries or the relevant offices at the district or national levels. U.S. and other international partners should work through and support a hub where local civil society and local level authorities can engage with and work with the district and national level governments. This strategy will strengthen good governance and democratic institutions. Additionally, terrorism prevention and counterterrorism strategies that directly address and are formed in response to both active kinetic and non-kinetic operations of (al Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated) terrorist groups will better protect civilians as well as implementers of development and security assistance.

[2]Senior Analyst, Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism, New Lines Institute; ORCID: 0009-0007-5827-8012; tpalacios@newlinesinstitute.org.

## Introduction

West Africa has become one of the most active terrorist hot zones in the world. Though, Africa is no stranger to al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated terrorist groups - al Shabaab has long taken root in Somalia, and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram have been staple terrorist groups in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin for almost 15-years. The dominant terrorist actor in West Africa for the past few years, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) was borne from (and has ultimately surpassed in activity) al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa. The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) has also peppered across Africa, with affiliates operating in conflict and terrorist group ecosystems in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mozambique, Yemen, Nigeria, the Sahel, and in East Africa and South Africa.

Security and governance in West Africa have been topics of concern and international attention for the past few years. The Sahel has risen as one of the most active terrorist zones in the world and West Africa has seen repeated coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and most recently - Niger. The Global Terrorism Index published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace reported that the Sahel was responsible for 43% of global terrorism deaths in 2023, a 7% increase from the year previous and surpassing terrorism deaths in the MENA region (Pandit, 2023). The world watched as France withdrew its troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger after nearly a decade of leading counterterrorism operations and an international coalition with the objectives of eradicating the growing terrorist threat and stabilizing the region. The United Nations also recently withdrew its peace and stabilization mission in Mali (UN News, 2023). And the United States completed its withdrawal from Niger almost four months early, initially charted for December of 2024 (Reuters, 2024).

The United States (U.S.) withdrew from Niger, following Niger being the location of the latest coup in West Africa. The U.S. must follow laws, including Section 7008 which prohibits U.S. foreign assistance be provided to militarily overthrown governments (SAMM). It should be noted that the U.S. has actively supported African countries diplomatically and economically for years, and that real impact and progress has been seen over the course of this foreign assistance. The United States Department of State (DoS), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and United States Department of Defence (DoD) have and continue to deploy foreign assistance and aid/development programs as well as security assistance and security cooperation in the region and across the continent. U.S. military basing lost in Niger is charted to move into Côte d'Ivoire (also known as the Ivory Coast) and possibly Benin (Jeune Afrique, 2024). These two countries bookend Ghana, the United States' primary partner in Coastal West Africa (CWA). Ghana has become an increasingly important partner to the United States. Also in West Africa, the United States has also experienced significant connection and long-standing relations with Nigeria, warmly referred to as 'Big Brother' to many African countries.

If the United States has been actively working to support civil society with the like of United States Agency for International Development Office of Transition Initiatives

(USAID-OTI) programming, including in the northern regions of CWA, and delivering security assistance and training across West Africa – why is West Africa home to one of the most active terrorist hot zones in the world? And why has the region experienced further democratic backsliding?

This paper will explore why U.S. foreign aid/development and security assistance, and security cooperation has not effectively countered al Qaeda and ISIS in West Africa and why the region continues to experience coup d'etats as recently as last year. Additionally, how U.S. foreign aid/development and security assistance and security cooperation may be adjusted to more effectively prevent and counter al Qaeda and ISIS in the region, support democratic values and governance, and increase the stability and growth of the Sahel and West Africa as a whole – and U.S. partnerships with our African partners.

## U.S. Foreign Assistance in West Africa

Over the past two years, Africa has experienced a steady stream of visits from U.S. Representatives; notably, General Langley of United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee. Assistant Secretary Phee spoke of this deepened collaboration with Coastal West Africa and Nigeria in her remarks to Congress in the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Hearing "FY 2025 Budget Request for Africa" in May of 2024. This and recent adjustments in additional foreign aid and humanitarian assistance to sub-Saharan Africa indicate increased U.S. interest in reaffirming U.S. commitment with our African partners (USAID, The United States Announces Nearly $176 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for West Africa, 2024; USAID, United States Announces More Than $64 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2024; USAID, United States Announces Nearly $536 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Sub-Saharan Africa, 2024).

A message that has been impressed multiple times to Congress, including by General Langley, Commander of AFRICOM in his testimony and statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee March 21, 2024. Gen. Langley framed the threat and outlined the whole-of-government approach necessary to address the threats and challenges in Africa, "Threats from within the continent are transforming into threats to America's interests and allies. Terrorism, poverty, food and water insecurity, protracted conflict, climate change, and mass human migration disproportionately shatter African lives. Solutions to these colossal problems must be a shared burden, with African nations at the helm of concerted international efforts and a U.S. whole of nation contribution that produces sustainable outcomes." (Langley, 2024). Steps must be taken to allow for whole-of-government approaches to be implemented.

This increase in political participation and representation follows the publication of the inter-agency implementation plans for the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) this Spring (Department of State, United States Agency of International Development, Department of Defence, Department of Treasury, U.S.

Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, 2024). SPCPS is intimately connected to and supports the Global Fragility Act (GFA) a bipartisan policy passed in 2019 that focuses on soft power and prevention. The GFA is being piloted in Haiti, Libya, Mozambique, Papa New Guinea, and the sub-region of Coastal West Africa, which includes Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo. In considering these policy and political moves, in addition to relevant hearings on the Hill during this period of time, represents Washington D.C.'s acknowledgement of the seriousness of stability in West Africa, supporting democratic institutions and values, and countering of terrorist groups affiliated with al Qaeda and ISIS.

The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) is especially well suited and situated to support stability and to help strengthen West African states and communities to be less susceptible to engaging in violent extremism and with terrorist groups in West Africa. The inter-agency Secretariat is a formal mechanism that has been created to not just support and encourage inter-agency collaboration and communication – but serves as a platform that demands it. This Secretariat is comprised of DoS, USAID, and DoD and is staffed by experienced and hard-working representatives from each agency eager to affect positive change and who are motivated by outcomes. While well situated, the GFA Secretariat needs to be better supported at the highest levels as the inter-agency mechanism does still face bureaucratic hurdles and red tape. This bureaucracy and incomplete commitment to supporting this mechanism frustrates timeliness and detracts from the support needed for SPCPS to reach its full potential and to be fully effective in preventing conflict and promoting stability in West Africa. The GFA Secretariat should be emulated and greatly supported in recognition of its representation of the re-structuring necessary to see greater inter-agency and whole-of-government support.

The United States has enjoyed decades of relationships and support or assistance programming and missions to West Africa. This connection is represented in over two decades of State Partnership Programs (SPP) featuring the United States National Guard units, joint exercises such as Flintlock, civilian affairs and special forces DoD missions, and millions in aid implemented by USAID and DoS as well as international non-governmental organization implementers and infrastructure compacts implemented by U.S.-associated entities such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). Flintlock 24 saw over 1,300 participants from 15 NATO Allies and partners and international forces – a huge success for AFRICOM partnership efforts in North and West Africa (NATO, 2024).

## The Terrorism Threat

## Method

The author re-collated the ACLED data from the "notes" column to represent "who", "where", and "tags". Author parsed out any and all qualitative and descriptive notes

on who was the target or victim of the attack for each row, such as gender, age, title or position, and/or association. An example of "who" is "employee of the mayor's office" and "girl" or "pastor". The author added column "where" re-collated the descriptive markers of where in the town or village or road that an attack took place, parsed from the ACLED "notes" column. Common markers of "where" include "market", "road", and "home". The author added "tags" column represents author trends analysis and represented a row-by-row calculated research method and approach to analysing the activity of the actors over time, allowing for more specific and data supported analysis. The author re-collating allowed for unique analysis to be formulated on who was being targeted, at what times of day and where in the town or village they were being targeted (who was often targeted in night raids, for example – key person abductions and off-duty soldiers and volunteer fighters at their homes) – with the intent of parsing the possible trends and reasons why the perpetrator group was acting in these ways. The author reviewed their re-collating and row-by-row analysis ten times to ensure accuracy, due to the large nature of the dataset.

## Al Qaeda and ISIS – the Global Terrorism Landscape

Al Qaeda and ISIS as global networks are now better described as movements, following the great decapitation and unravelling of al Qaeda Central and ISIS-Central – due to the success and leadership of the United States' counterterrorism efforts since 9/11. The productivity and growth of al Qaeda and ISIS as global movements, and thus the success of their respective associated groups, has been affected by the perceived strength and sustainability of each respective movement. The movement (al Qaeda or ISIS) that postures to be more capable and more likely to succeed receives a greater amount of support in recruits, donors (state and individual), and likely greater supportive readership of propaganda.

Al Qaeda is predictable in its unpredictability. Al Qaeda's current capabilities and structures are not what make it dangerous; history has shown it is more dangerous to underestimate the future implications of al Qaeda's current actions. Though, in the case of the Sahel sub-region of West Africa – JNIM has proven that its capabilities and strategies do make it dangerous as it has been dangerous and successful in its territorial expansion since late 2019. So, in the case of assessing the threat of al Qaeda globally and/or the threat of JNIM – both are slated to be of concern in the future, and JNIM has proven to be of concern (threat) today. In the case of prioritization, the United States for example has prioritized other geopolitical events and conflicts over the rise of al Qaeda in the Sahel, and over countering terrorism in general. Unfortunately, the emergence of a more dominant threat does not dissipate the long-term threat of al Qaeda's re-emergence – and rather, it can be expected for that threat to increase in danger the longer it is ignored or de-prioritized.

While it may not be conducive for the U.S. to physically implement themselves, better understanding the implications of al Qaeda's local operations is integral for sustainable counterterrorism policy. Al Qaeda must be examined as a network and movement, as

well as by its parts. Sustainable counterterrorism solutions lie in a reconceptualised understanding of al Qaeda's motivational drivers for its operational strategies, and their implications. As militant jihadist terrorist groups co-opt local conflicts and root themselves into local communities, they extend the life of the jihadist movement. Al Qaeda's local efforts will root and spread as the future of the Salafi-jihadi movement - unless the international counterterrorism community better understand al Qaeda's local strategies and work to more intentionally mitigate and counteract them.

The relevance of al Qaeda-affiliate JNIM's continued growth and expansion, and the vibrant activity and nature of the al Qaeda and ISIS-affiliated landscape in West Africa, especially the Sahel sub-region – is in its relevance to the global terrorism landscape.

JNIM has implemented guidance received from a veteran member of al Qaeda leadership to refrain from conducting extreme attacks against civilians in Mali (Lister, What has happened to al-Qaeda?, 2016). JNIM's following of this guidance is indicative of the local-cognition and local operational strategies common to al Qaeda affiliates, especially those closer connected or who have received guidance from al Qaeda veteran era members.

## The Strength of One Supports the Strength of Any

Many of al Qaeda and ISIS's affiliated groups pursue local agendas and objectives and their membership is native to the locale in which they operate. While this is true, a number of affiliated groups were borne from veteran era strong groups and have received guidance and leadership (whether long-standing or visits here and there) from al Qaeda or ISIS individuals respectively who are key members of each global network/movement. While the global movements/networks are no longer as hierarchical as one global network/organization, and that hierarchy and organizational structure is now more localized – the key members of the international networks/movements still exert great influence and guide the strategies and operations of the individual groups. The effect this veteran connection and guidance has on the local group differs depending on their parent global network (whether they are affiliated with al Qaeda or ISIS).

While neither JNIM nor ISGS groups or fighters currently hold external targets, even the perceived success and growth of these groups against any national or international people and governmental or security entities, including Wagner (rebranded as Africa Corps) allows for growth of the global terrorism landscape. The success and strength of any increases the strength of both, and thus either al Qaeda or ISIS respectively.

## Al Qaeda-affiliate JNIM's Operations

JNIM is currently one of the fastest growing terrorist groups around the world and is responsible for about 80% of the terrorist activity in the Sahel sub-region of West Africa, according to author analysis of author re-collated data exported from ACLED in 2023 and 2024 of conflict data collected on al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated group perpetrated

activity from January 1, 2022, to July 20, 2024 (ACLED, 2022-2024). Author analysis was done with a focus on violence perpetrated by these groups unto civilians. Violence against civilians does not include activity perpetrated by civilians, activity perpetrated by al Qaeda or ISIS-affiliated groups unto fighters while they were off-duty, or activity of these groups amongst or to each other nor against or between these groups and local militias or groups, state, international or volunteer fighters' forces.

Al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated groups in the Sahel sub-region of West Africa have updated their strategies and modus operandi faster than the U.S. and the broader terrorism analysis community have tracked it. Counterterrorism operations have not adjusted or updated at the rate that the groups have adjusted and updated their strategy.

There are three reasons that contribute to the overall ineffectiveness of counterterrorism operations up until this point. First, the sheer broadness of the geography, when coupled with disparate state and national security presence in entire regions of Sahelian countries, has allowed for al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates to be swept around rather than fully impacted or pressured by counterterrorism operations.

Second, not involving all actors who provide governance, justice, law, security and other services. The farther one gets from the capital cities – the more these actors look like institutions, entities or individuals who are not connected to or sent down from the national government. Many analysts refer to a power vacuum formed by instability and lack of national government and security presence, but there are additional reasons that there is disconnect between the actions of al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated groups in the Sahel and the counterterrorism strategies and operations as they have been enacted over the past decade.

Third, the terrorist groups' operations that have allowed for their growth in capabilities and territorial expansion. The al Qaeda-affiliate, JNIM, has pursued an intentionally low-kinetic "abduction & release strategy" (Palacios, 2024) that encourages civilians from communicating with and supporting counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies of any kind. JNIM's civilian engagement strategy further ostracizes civilians, especially in the rural parts of the countries already disconnected from the capital cities and national institutions.

The complexity of the landscape and lack of a comprehensive counterterrorism approach when met with a terrorist group's operational strategy that is nuanced and is being updated – results in ineffective counterterrorism.

## JNIM vs ISGS Civilian Engagement

The al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in the Sahel have distinct operational strategies. Overall, JNIM works with and leverages civilian direction and influence, while ISGS pursues a stereotypically brash ISIS-style civilian engagement strategy. JNIM, in their territorial expansion and population control efforts – had offered a less kinetic opportunity to civilians (especially key individuals of influence, such as pastors, imams, mayors, and chiefs) if they were to comply with their demands and pay ransom to be released. This less kinetic opportunity is becoming more lethal as the terrorism landscape is shifting,

and in reaction to the counterterrorism strategies of Burkina Faso leadership in particular, which includes Russian mercenaries. Formerly known as Wagner, the group has rebranded as Africa Corps and now officially and legally falls beneath the Russian Ministry of Defence.

As the author shared in her remarks at the Wilson Center as a complement to Ansoumane Samassy Souare, Program Officer at West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) – 'just as we understand PMCs and state actors and juntas to be multi-dimensional, there is a need to consider the terrorist groups as multi-dimensional as well' (Palacios, The Changing Nature of Security Threats in the Central Sahel Region: The Rise of Self-Defense Groups, 2024). The author encourages other academics and researchers to further explore this multi-dimensionality and publish information to the information space that supports conflict and terrorism prevention strategies that engage terrorist actors in their non-kinetic operations, past no-fly-lists and finance blocking.

As mentioned, JNIM and ISGS pursue unique civilian engagement strategies. ISGS has been far more lethal and their operations less intentional and systematic in non-kinetic activity and restricting of access and movement, as JNIM was in 2022 and 2023 especially. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) perpetrated 20-35% of the attacks against civilians in 2022-2023 but was exceptionally more lethal in their activity against civilians at this time than JNIM was, according to author analysis of author re-collated data publicly available and exported from ACLED that represented ACLED-collected data that occurred between January 1, 2022, and January 1, 2023. Author terrorism analysis on JNIM and ISGS activity in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, and Coastal West Africa revealed this difference in preferred lethality against civilians. While ISIS affiliates have been responsible for most of the attacks against civilians, JNIM has also attacked civilians – their engagement with civilians is representative of an operational strategy.

JNIM's civilian engagement strategy is best explained by their "abduction & release" of key civilians – persons of influence. This strategy is unique to JNIM as it is intimately connected to and largely explains the success of the groups' territorial expansion (Palacios, 2024). West Africa is familiar to kidnapping, banditry, and the concept of kidnapping or abducting an individual or group of individuals for ransom is unfortunately quite common. This strategy is known to be signature to Boko Haram and is utilized by even criminal entities and individuals seeking profit by illicit means – it has become popular by terrorist groups and criminals across West Africa. JNIM's "abduction & release" strategy is unique in its intention and selection as the al Qaeda-affiliate targets persons for reasons of information, message delivery and demands to control the movements of a town or village (in addition to being a form of profit). The figure below breaks down the total "abduction & release" events perpetrated by all al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated actors in the Sahel and Coastal West Africa by actor. JNIM dramatically leads in "abduction & release" events the group is analyzed to have perpetrated. There is of course the possibility that some of these events were perpetrated by other actors, as is the risk of human information collection – but the slide

is rather significant that the author is comfortable saying this is a JNIM strategy. In addition, the number of "abduction & release events" seen in the right of Figure 1 match the timeline of JNIM's territorial expansion, and the geographic overlay is depicted in Figure 2.
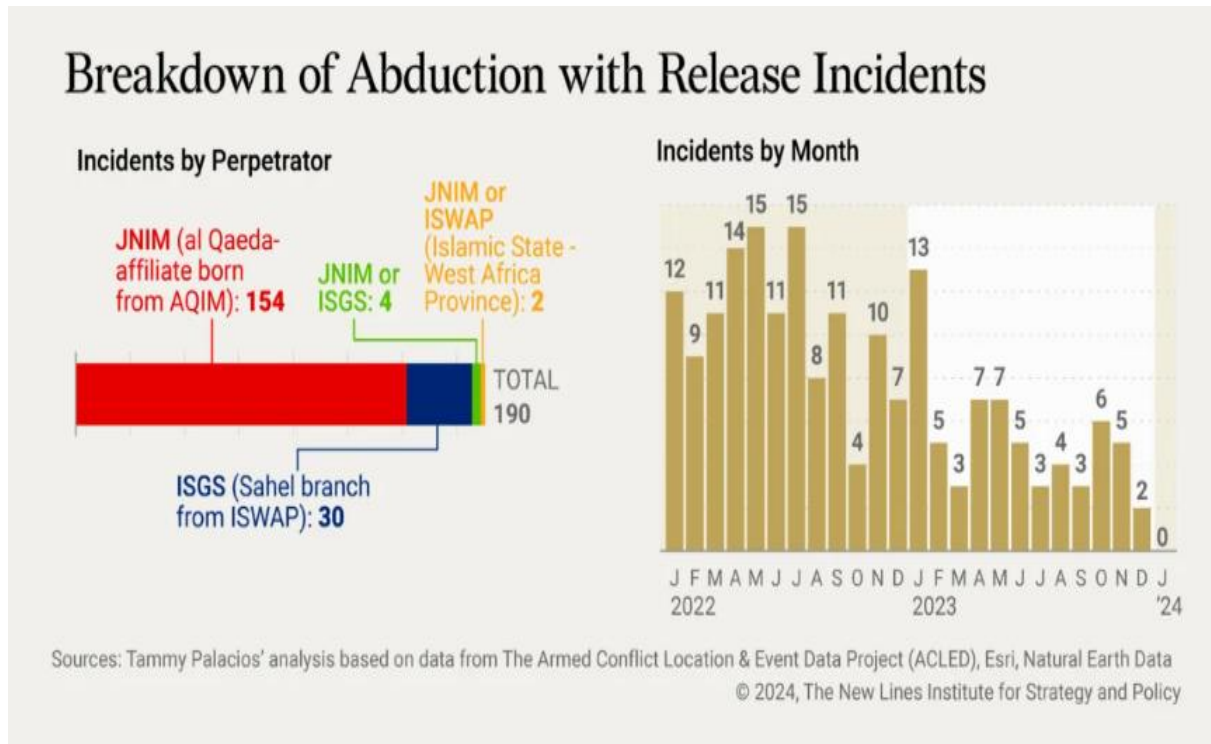


*Figure 1: Preventing Another al Qaeda-Affiliated Quasi-State: Countering JNIM's Strategic Civilian Engagement in the Sahel, 2024. Source: Author's resources.*

Aspects of this analysis from data representing JNIM and ISGS activity between 2022 and 2023 was presented by the author at the United States Military Academy at West Point in the Security Seminar this February 7th and 8th as a panellist of the Irregular Warfare and Counterterrorism working group. The author has updated this analysis of JNIM and ISGS activity from January 1, 2024 until July 20, 2024 – and notes that the main update is that the data shows increased lethality against civilians (compared to the same activity for the two years previous). This analysis was updated using the same download parameters from the ACLED export tool, which is free for public download.
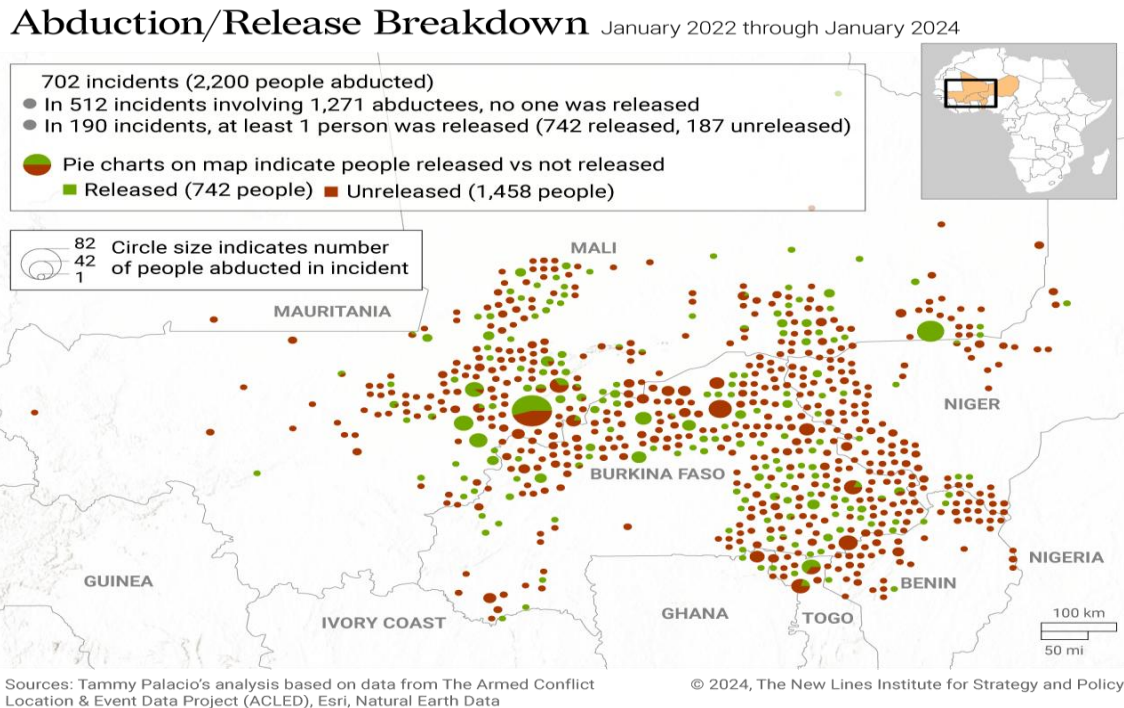
*Figure 2: Preventing Another al Qaeda-Affiliated Quasi-State: Countering JNIM's Strategic Civilian Engagement in the Sahel, 2024. Source: Author's resources.*

It is the author's concern that the window of opportunity to mitigate this low-kinetic civilian engagement strategy is rapidly closing, as JNIM's lethality against civilians appears to be rising in 2024. Analysis of the operations of terrorist groups must be quickly and steadfastly matched with counterstrategy or the analysis is no good to countering the future activity or threat of the terrorist groups. At this rate and considering the rapid deterioration of U.S. counterterrorism policy – al Qaeda and ISIS can be expected to grow in threat faster than that threat is mitigated. There is still a window of opportunity, albeit it shrinking – to better support civilian government structures of our African host nations and connect these state services and institutions with local institutions (including civil society and traditional authorities).

## Recommendations

### Geopolitics and African Partnership

International relations expert Ted Dagne published on the state of U.S. foreign assistance to Africa in a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report almost two decades ago. Right at the top of the report Dagne reflects on the peak of U.S. aid to Africa at that point as 1985 and how "[a]s the Cold War eased, security assistance levels for Africa began to drop" (Dagne, 2006).

Perhaps the inconsistencies that the U.S. sees in results or efficacy of U.S. foreign assistance are partially explained by the political rubber-banding that has happened,

when conflict prevention, localization, and stabilization missions are made synonymous with, or only important when framed with their connection to greater geopolitics with Russia and China. U.S. development and security assistance are meant to be direct support and partnership with African countries. In definition these missions have not to do with U.S.-Russia-China relations.

U.S. foreign assistance of course supports American influence and interests, but our African partners will not trust the United States is acting as a well-intentioned partner if American politics and interactions with Africa continue to be referred to in the same sentence as great power competition or U.S.-Russia or U.S.-China relations. This is due to the reason that the African nations and diplomats will not feel prioritized; but also, because many African nations experience and are privy to relations with Russia and China that are not tainted or negative in their eyes.

In fact, China and Russia may even appear to be more willing and consistent partners than the United States in a number of areas, including military equipment and military training assistance and trade relations or foreign assistance. It is known that Russian and Chinese support and engagement meddles not with the style of governance of the African nation, while U.S. support comes laden with guarantees of abiding by international human rights and humanitarian law and refraining from hard security to control civilian unrest and/or government control of the information space.

## Foreign Assistance – Development/Aid vs Security

As noted in this paper, there have been noted opportunities where U.S. development/foreign assistance and security assistance/cooperation could have built upon successful moments in programming and missions, such as building on positive moments in communication, building upon established relationships, or presenting a more supportive and well-intentioned front to our partners. A more coordinated front may come across as more supportive. Where the U.S. presents a more comprehensive strategy.

Due to restrictions and lower policy priority, intermittent engagement or engagement with restrictions may appear incomplete or appear as if the U.S. is not prepared to engage fully – as shared by our partners in Niger. Having the ability to call other missions and programs to answer to and build upon those openings and opportunities is one way this could be accomplished.  Lack of communication and/or collaboration have also contradicted each other at other points, as seen in West Africa.

Foreign assistance requires a more nuanced understanding and application. U.S. Air Force Duty Officer and Assistant Professor of Military and Strategic Studies at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Jahara "Franky" Matisek analysed civil-military relations and security assistance in Africa. Matisek shared that security force assistance "[is] often overly technical and rarely address the political and institutional problems that create insecurity and the fragmented security organizations of that state (e.g. police, military, intelligence, etc.)." (p. 103, Matisek, 2020). This sentiment was shared by others in discussion and interviews on foreign assistance in West Africa.

## Mechanisms that Support Whole-of-Government Implementation

Numerous high-level U.S. doctrine and instruction speak to the priority of importance of multinational cooperation, inter-organisational cooperation, and whole-of-government in security cooperation and planning and delivery of foreign assistance (Joint Publication 3-08; FM 3-22; Joint Publication 3-16; DoD Instruction 5111.20). The reality is that the structure and process of that foreign assistance and security cooperation is not as friendly to the implementation of that written instruction and guidance, and these missed opportunities are clear in the delivery of assistance in West Africa (according to author unstructured interviews with USAID, State Department and DoD mission participants).

U.S. civilian affairs missions and security assistance missions in West Africa have built positive relationships and have seen intermittent successes that were not then built on – meaning lack of inter-agency coordination on the ground got in the way of U.S. foreign assistance living up to its fullest potential. Positive moments and connections could have been better built out with stronger coordination across U.S. foreign assistance programs and missions. Not building out on positive moments and lack of intelligence sharing is responsible for the like of losing the U.S. relationship with Niger and may have allowed for the conditions that surmounted in the coup d'etat in Niger.

Failure to coalesce U.S. efforts and foreign assistance and security cooperation in West Africa will have drastic consequences for the decline of U.S. influence and democracy in the region and across the African continent. Additionally, continued low inter-agency coordination and collaboration across agency missions and programming in Coastal West Africa especially will likely result in the successful spread and growth of al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated terrorist groups and activity further into the Coastal West African states. This would have global ramifications as the continued growth and success of JNIM especially can be expected to reinvigorate the global terrorist landscape and increase the threat of other al Qaeda and ISIS affiliated groups from experiencing increased recruitment and support. This would in turn raise the threat level and likelihood of lone wolf terrorist attacks which could target the United States and Europe.

## Intentionally Connecting Agency Missions

U.S. programs and missions should be closer coordinated so that their individual successes may contribute to broader U.S. foreign assistance impact in West Africa. USAID-OTI quick response initiatives should intentionally ramp into longer response foreign assistance efforts. Foreign assistance is defined in this paper as all U.S. development, stabilization and security assistance efforts implemented by all U.S. agencies and funded by U.S. grants. This recommendation refers to all U.S. foreign assistance geographically located in the vicinity of said USAID-OTI initiative.

USG connection efforts should be led by DoS and DoD missions and according to proximity in a locale. USG connection efforts should not exacerbate or add to the

responsibilities of USAID-OTI or other offices leading conflict or terrorism prevention efforts but should be a top-down assignment that brings in more USG personnel and priority from higher levels. OTI, and similar offices are already fulfilling a significant task in a shorter time period, often with limited resources, and in areas near conflict and far from national service provision and security. DoS and DoD missions should review synergies and opportunities to better coordinate, and necessary mechanisms and adjustments to processes and logistics and labour prioritized by the necessary legal authorities.

## Inter-agency Coordination – Possible with CSOs

This effort to further inter-agency coordination is likely to face capacity restraints at the local level. These capacity restraints can be mitigated by further working with civil society organizations (CSOs) at the local level. This working with CSOs must be connected to top-down USG efforts with the civilian government. Up until this point, U.S. foreign security assistance has better connected with higher level authorities with a host nation's military and security apparatus than the civilian government. More intentionally connecting with and supporting relevant Ministries to civil society will support U.S. objectives. Working to encourage and support the relevant Ministries, that according to the host nation's policies are meant to work with civil society - to more intentionally and better work with civil society (without restricting or threatening civil society), will further conflict prevention and support democratic institutions.
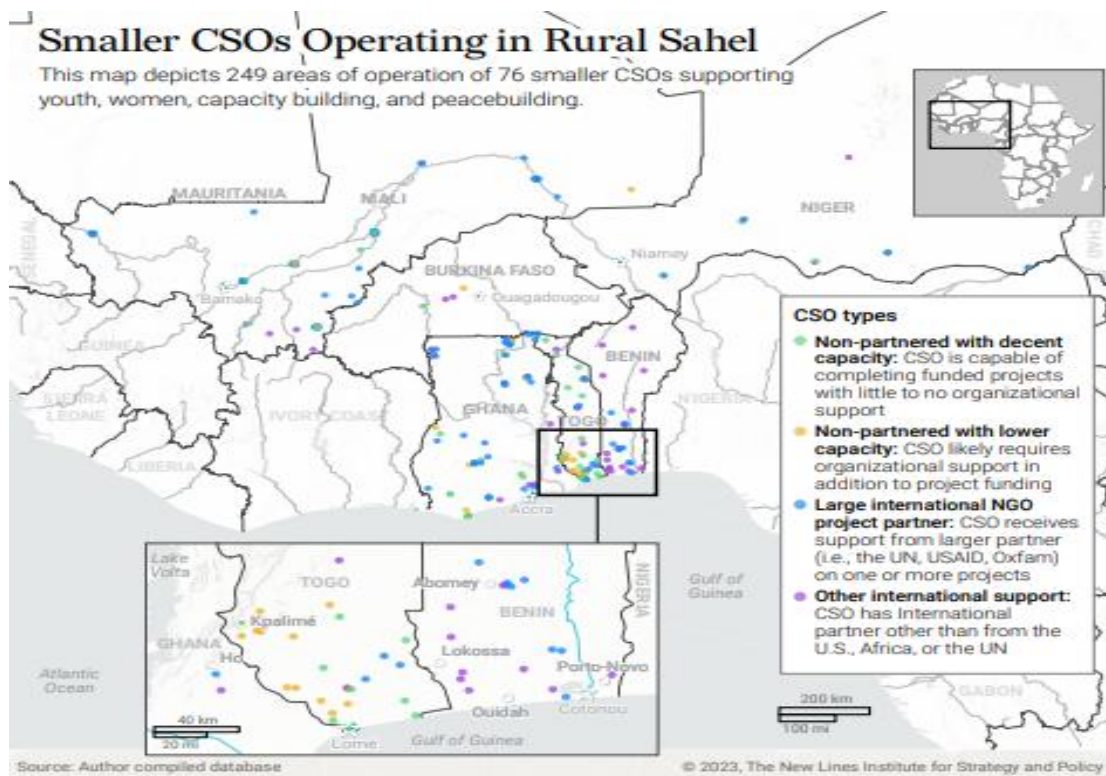


*Figure 3: Supporting CSOs to Mitigate the Spread of Terrorism in the Sahel, 2023.*
*Source: Author's resources.*

As seen in Figure 3, there are numerous CSOs working in areas relevant to strengthening communities against susceptibility to engaging with terrorist groups. Figure 3 is only a representation, a spattering of over 300 CSOs the author has collected data on in an extensive dataset since March of 2022. USAID, DoS and numerous international implementers work with hundreds of CSOs across West Africa, but there are still hundreds who are under-supported and under-connected to their district or state authorities, Ministries, and national governments. Those CSOs are also under-supported and under-connected to U.S. and United Nations support opportunities. Author's report "Supporting CSOs to Mitigate the Spread of Terrorism in the Sahel" published through the New Lines Institute and briefed to USG and United Nations offices outlines the opportunities to better support CSOs, especially those physically located and operating in remote areas.

## Reconceptualising Counterterrorism

Terrorism prevention and counterterrorism must be reconceptualised in order to effectively prevent and counter terrorism in Africa and around the world. Terrorism prevention and counterterrorism efforts have not disrupted the territorial expansion of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the dominant terrorist actor in the Sahel sub-region of West Africa. Leaving JNIM to become one of the fastest growing terrorist groups around the world, even after a decade of French-led counterterrorism efforts and a United Nations stabilization mission. Efforts have also failed to stem the capabilities and organizational growth of JNIM, ISIS affiliated groups such as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) in West Africa, or al Shabaab in East Africa at any significant rate. Al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates remain indignant, postured for growth and continue to utilize harrowing terrorist tactics to achieve their goals, including public beheadings, threat of violence unto an individual and their associates or loved ones, and lethal violence.

At this rate and reaction to terrorism prevention and counterterrorism efforts, al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates can be expected to continue their ascent in numbers of civilians that they kill and successful insurgencies attacking state and international security forces. Author analysis of JNIM's operations from January 1, 2022, through July 24, 2024 revealed a clear civilian engagement strategy. If allowed to continue unabated, this strategy will likely result in the al Qaeda-affiliate rooting themselves in the Sahel as al Shabaab has in Somalia (Palacios, Preventing Another al Qaeda-Affiliated Quasi-State: Countering JNIM's Strategic Civilian Engagement in the Sahel, 2024). JNIM has been benefiting from the lack of coordination and collaboration – this paper argues that JNIM's civilian engagement strategy that this author identified in a report published in April at the New Lines Institute and that was presented at the third annual International Security Seminar at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point.

## Effective Terrorism Prevention and Counterterrorism

Preventing and countering al Qaeda and ISIS in the Sahel and West Africa will lower the threat level of al Qaeda and ISIS, and thus the threat of terrorism globally, as well as address migration to Europe exacerbated by increased and continued conflict and instability or lack of opportunity in West Africa. Effective counterstrategy requires a more nuanced and updated understanding of the threat actor at the operational level and must come from an honest understanding of United States engagement in form and extent.

The sheer growth of terrorist activity in the Sahel since 2019 is reason for concern. There have been "11,200 deaths in the Sahel" thus far in 2024 - a number that has tripled since 2021 (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Africa's Constantly Evolving Militant Islamist Threat, 2024). Indeed, this concerning number follows a 70% increase in violent attacks by both al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in 2021 (The Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Surge in Militant Islamist Violence in the Sahel Dominates Africa's Fight Against Extremists, 2024). Activity and territorial spread into Coastal West Africa can mostly be attributed to the success and evolution of JNIM's strategy (and the extent of activity may be explained by the disconnect of prevention and counterterrorism strategies to core components of that strategy). According to author analysis of JNIM and ISGS activity in the Sahel from January 1, 2022 to January 1, 2024 re-collated from the ACLED export tool – JNIM has leveraged an intentionally low-kinetic civilian engagement strategy that hinges upon abduction & release of key persons of influence in the towns and villages the group is next expanding and moving into (Palacios, Preventing Another al Qaeda-Affiliated Quasi-State: Countering JNIM's Strategic Civilian Engagement in the Sahel, 2024).

## Connecting Counterterrorism Strategy to Terrorism Operations

Counterterrorism will be more effective in the Sahel when it more firmly addresses the operations of the al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates, namely in geographic focus and in actively counteracting JNIM's civilian engagement strategy, which can be counteracted with more intentionally coordinating and collaborating U.S. State Department, USAID, and DoD civilian affairs and special forces efforts. If U.S. engagement in the Sahel were to be coordinated geographically in respect to the cycle of localization/development, support of civil society, prevention, and non-kinetic and kinetic counterterrorism and conflict stabilization efforts – existing U.S. monies and programming would be more effective in achieving its objectives. U.S., international and national counterterrorism efforts so as not to 'sweep' the groups around the Sahel as this is not an effective use of force, when it is used to kinetically counter these groups). This is largely due to the lower levels of priority placed on policy and research on counterterrorism and West Africa as a region.

## Conclusion

There is great potential for the United States to be a better partner in supporting our African partners' terrorism prevention and counterterrorism efforts by leading in intelligence, terrorism analysis, and strategy guidance for a whole-of-government counterterrorism strategy. This strategy must be crafted through greater inter-agency coordination on the U.S. side that expounds on existing foreign aid and security assistance in the region and by coordinating and implementing such a strategy with both the partner nation's civilian government and security apparatus for whole-of-government application and implementation. This will be possible with a more nuanced understanding of the operations of al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates in a sub-region down to the town and village level, and with authorities from the national to the local levels.

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## Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

## Notes on Contributors

Tammy Palacios is a Senior Analyst leading the Priority Sustainable Counterterrorism initiative at the New Lines Institute and 2023-2024 Research Fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point. Palacios previously served as Program Head for the Non-state Actors program at the institute, where she worked in the field of violent and nonviolent non-state actors. Palacios earned a master's degree in security and terrorism studies from the University of Maryland Graduate School. She previously earned a graduate certificate in terrorism analysis from the National Consortium for the Study of

Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland and a bachelor's degree in international studies and politics and government from the University of Hartford.

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