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ISLAMISTS IN CENTRAL SAHEL

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Violent Islamist Groups in the Central Sahel

By Madeline Velturo, Policy Analyst

Summary

Over the past five years, violent Islamist groups have gained ground in the central Sahel region of West Africa. Both Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated armed groups control territory and conduct attacks in the tri-border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

Among these groups, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Katiba Macina are responsible for grave violations of international religious freedom in their areas of control, including executing individuals based on their beliefs and imposing a strict interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law) on Sahelian citizens. In December 2020, the U.S. State Department *designated* both ISGS and Katiba Macina's parent organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, as entities of particular concern (EPC), as defined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), as amended by the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act, for committing severe religious freedom violations in areas under their control.

This factsheet provides a brief background on the emergence of violent Islamist groups in the central Sahel region, particularly ISGS and Katiba Macina, and documents religious freedom violations that they have perpetrated in recent years. It also highlights current regional and international efforts to neutralize these groups and reduce the violence.

Background

The central Sahel is a region of West Africa at the borders of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. These are Muslim majority countries, with Muslims representing *99 percent*, *94 percent*, and *62 percent* of the populations, respectively. Most follow Sunni Islam and practice Sufi traditions, often incorporating traditional beliefs into religious practice. Countries in the region are also home to Christian communities, with Christians representing the largest minority in Burkina Faso at roughly *30 percent* of the population.

In recent years, the central Sahel has experienced the *largest increase in violent extremist activity* of any region, with violent incidents linked to militant Islamist

groups increasing nearly seven-fold since 2017. Despite territorial expansion in recent years, militant Islamist groups in the Sahel enjoy [little popular support](#) from local communities, leading to high levels of violence against civilians. These militant groups routinely employ intimidation and force to impose their will in areas they seek to control.

Violent Islamist groups in the Sahel pursue a diverse array of political, economic, and ideological objectives. Most of the Islamist extremist violence in the region targets state authorities and those perceived to be collaborating with them. Islamist groups also often use violence to secure control over access to lucrative mines and trade routes.

Religious and ideological objectives have nonetheless driven some militant Islamist groups to commit violations of the rights for freedom of religion or belief as outlined under international law. Groups like the ISGS and Katiba Macina have placed restrictions on religious practice and tradition in their areas of control and have conducted attacks on individuals based on their religion or beliefs.

These violations led the U.S. Department of State to designate both ISGS and Katiba Macina's parent organization, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, as EPCs. According to IRFA, an EPC is a nonstate group that engages in particularly severe violations of religious freedom and must also be "a nonsovereign entity that exercises significant political power and territorial control; is outside the control of a sovereign government; and often employs violence in pursuit of its objectives."

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, founded and led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, emerged in 2015 as an off-shoot from the Malian-based militant Islamist group al-Mourabitoun. Sahrawi had been a key leader in al-Mourabitoun but broke with the group to declare loyalty to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS accepted ISGS as an affiliate in 2016.

Sahrawi's background remains opaque. He was born in Western Sahara to a powerful family and relocated to Algeria in the 1990s, where he joined the Polisario Front, a national liberation movement aiming to end Moroccan presence in Western Sahara. [Sahrawi likely](#) navigated between nascent factions of militant Islamist groups in the Maghreb and the Sahel throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

At present, ISGS possibly has several hundred fighters, although the group also [coerces and intimidates](#) non-members to conduct violence and criminality on its behalf. Violence linked to ISGS [more than doubled](#) in 2020, with attacks targeting civilians nearly half the time. ISGS is one of the [dominant](#) militant Islamist group in Niger's Tillaberi region and conducts attacks along the Nigerian border with Mali and in northern Burkina Faso.

In addition to conducting attacks against state authorities and traditional leaders, ISGS also restricts religious freedom in its areas of control. In Tillaberi, "villagers suffer jihadists' [constraints on religious practice and tradition](#)," including the prohibition of music and parties and limitations on women's abilities to choose their own partners. ISGS also collects *zakat* (a religious obligation tax), and those who refuse to pay are [executed](#). In addition, ISGS leaders [restrict preaching](#), for example, permitting members of the traditional Tijani Sufi Brotherhood to preach in select mosques.

ISGS violence against members of rival jihadist groups in the region may also amount to targeting individuals based on their beliefs. Following an extended period when ISGS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the region tolerated each other's presence, relations between these groups deteriorated in 2020. The reasons for this deterioration are complex, including competition over access to resources and recruits, as well as cleavages surrounding willingness to negotiate with regional governments. However, religious rhetoric pinpointing rival jihadist group leaders as ["apostates"](#) and highlighting their willingness to compromise with ["pagan"](#) groups suggests these attacks may be partially motivated by ISGS's desire to enforce a particular religious ideology and interpretation of Islam on rival jihadist groups.

ISIS considers ISGS to be a subsidiary of its West Africa Province branch, ISWAP. The U.S. [State Department](#) has designated ISWAP as an EPC for committing egregious violations of religious freedom in [northern Nigeria](#) and throughout the Lake Chad Basin, consistent with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) [recommendation](#). Links between ISWAP and ISGS have historically been minimal, with analysts accusing ISIS leadership of implying a stronger connection than exists to strengthen their brand. In early 2021, however, ISWAP reportedly sent [reinforcements](#) to assist ISGS attacks in southwest Niger, suggesting the strengthening of ties between the two groups.

Katiba Macina

Katiba Macina, formerly known as the Macina Liberation Front (*Front Libération du Macina* in French, or FLM), was founded in 2015 by Amadou Kouffa. A Malian national and member of the Fulani ethnic group, Kouffa draws on [historical marginalization of Fulani](#) herders to mobilize fighters. Kouffa is believed to have been [radicalized via contacts with Pakistani preachers](#) from the Dawa sect in the 2000s.

In 2016, Katiba Macina aligned with several other Salafi jihadist groups operating in central Mali to establish Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), a coalition of loosely affiliated militant Islamist groups. JNIM serves as an [umbrella](#) under which likeminded groups can share information and avoid direct responsibility for attacks and thereby consequential targeting by counterterrorism forces. However, JNIM is not a single operational entity and lacks a centralized command and control structure.

Katiba Macina is [almost exclusively responsible](#) for the near doubling of violent activities and associated fatalities in the Sahel each year since 2016. Because Katiba Macina operates under the umbrella of JNIM, it is difficult to determine exactly how many of JNIM's several thousand fighters answer to Kouffa specifically. Katiba Macina controls territory and operates in central Mali, with some fighters also operating in Soum province in Burkina Faso. The group reportedly has [expanded west](#) into the Kayes region of Mali near the borders with Senegal and Mauritania.

Kouffa's objectives are more significantly driven by religious ideology than those of other jihadist group leaders operating under JNIM, and the activities of Katiba Macina amount to severe violations of religious freedom. Katiba Macina [imposes a harsh version of Shari'a](#) and strict behavior rules in its areas of control, especially on women. Katiba Macina reportedly enforces guardianship rules on women's movements in some areas. Katiba Macina fighters have also [publicly killed local imams](#) and traditional leaders in central Mali and northern Burkina Faso who have disagreed with Kouffa's beliefs.

Counterterrorism Efforts

Regional governments in the central Sahel are prioritizing efforts to reduce violent Islamist group activity. The governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all [increased their military budgets](#) and bolstered troop levels. Additionally, these three nations are collaborating with Mauritania and Chad through the [G5 Sahel Joint Force](#),

an ad hoc military coalition that allows for information sharing and cross border operations.

Bilateral and multilateral military and diplomatic engagements augment regional counterterrorism efforts, particularly bolstering efforts in Mali. The [UN Multilateral Stabilization Mission in Mali \(MINUSMA\)](#) deployed to Mali in 2013 to protect civilians from violence, including violence by militant Islamist groups, and to strengthen rule of law, human rights, and access to justice. The French military's [Operation Barkhane](#) has operated in Mali since 2014, collaborating with Malian security forces to conduct military operations against militant Islamist groups. Starting in 2012, the European Union (EU) deployed [training missions](#) to Mali and the broader Sahel region that bolster local security forces' capacity and intelligence. Several European nations have contributed to the [Takuba Task Force](#), an ad hoc military task force to advise, assist, and accompany Malian Armed Forces, in coordination with G5-Sahel partners, to counter growing violent extremism in the region.

Regional governments have also partnered with informal militia groups to outsource protection against militant Islamist violence. The Nigerien government has collaborated with informal militias in neighboring Mali to prevent the spread of militant Islamists to its Tillaberi region, although Niamey, the capital of Niger, later [abandoned](#) this approach when it yielded increased intercommunal tensions. In February 2020, Burkina Faso's parliament [voted](#) to formalize its support to local self-defense militias in their efforts to prevent the spread of militant Islamist activity in the north and east of the country.

In addition to military efforts, regional governments in the Sahel have pursued political and diplomatic efforts to reduce violence and abuses by militant Islamist groups. Both the Malian and the Burkinabe governments have [opened negotiations](#) with JNIM. These efforts respond to [calls from local constituents](#) to engage in dialogue and pursue a political solution to the violence.

Both military and diplomatic efforts to reduce militant Islamist violence in the Sahel have faced significant challenges. State security forces and state-supported informal militias have committed grave human rights abuses against civilians during their counterterrorism operations. A recent report by the UN mission in Mali found that Malian security forces committed [nearly 200 human rights abuses](#) over the course of two months in 2020, more than any nonstate armed group in the country.



Burkinabe forces have been accused of executing at least 31 individuals without a trial during counterterrorism operations and the Nigerian military allegedly *arrested and forcibly disappeared* more than a hundred individuals in 2020 during counterterrorism operations. These abuses have created demand among local communities for alternative protection services, which militant Islamists *exploit* in exchange for support and recruits.

Meanwhile, *critics* have highlighted the unequal nature of gains made through diplomatic negotiations with JNIM. In October 2020, the Malian government reportedly *released 180 suspected jihadists* in exchange for just four hostages — a high-level Malian government official, a French aid worker, and two Italian nationals.

Conclusion

As violent Islamist groups gain ground in central Sahel, they are committing religious freedom violations in their areas of operation. Across parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, ISGS and Katiba Macina have imposed strict interpretations of Shari'a law, restricted religious practice, and executed individuals because of their beliefs. These trends have inflamed religious tensions and increased persecution across West Africa, a religiously-diverse region home both to an *inspiring history of interfaith tolerance* and also *pockets of sectarian violence* and *poor religious freedom conditions*. The implications of this trend are enormous and concerning for U.S. policy in the region and for efforts to promote religious freedom around the world.

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