



When jihadists govern

Lessons across the Sahel cases

Kari Osland, Morten Bøås, Natasja Rupesinghe

Summary and recommendations

Fifteen years of international engagement have failed to halt the rise of jihadist insurgency in the Sahel. The Jihadist Governance in the Sahel (JIGOV-Sahel) research project shows that neither the absence of the state nor the insurgents' ideological commitment alone is the cause. The state is present in ways that generate resistance, and jihadists govern because they fulfil functions the state does not. Norwegian and international strategies should move away from a military-first response and from the restoration of the same state, and towards assistance that strengthens state legitimacy, services, and rule of law in the daily lives of citizens.

A decade of misdiagnosis

Over the weekend of 25 and 26 April 2026, JNIM, together with the Tuareg separatists of the Azawad Liberation Front, carried out coordinated attacks on several Malian cities at once, including the capital Bamako, the Kati military base, Gao, Sévaré, Mopti and Kidal. It was the largest synchronised jihadist attack yet. Senior figures in the government were targeted and JNIM managed to kill Defence Minister Sadio Camara with a car driven by a suicide bomber. This took place in the army garrison town of Kati. This means that this attack took place in what's supposedly the most secure town in Mali. . Russia's Africa Corps, which has assumed the role France played before 2022, helped repel the attack but could not prevent it.

The episode is not a break with the trend in the Sahel. It is a culmination of it. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all undergone military coups during the project period. The UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA and France's Operation Barkhane have withdrawn.

Russian actors have taken over the security partnership, but the security situation is deteriorating in the Sahel, and violence has spread southwards towards Ghana, Togo and Benin. JNIM and ISSP continue to expand in the central Sahel, and ISWAP has consolidated its position around Lake Chad.

For fifteen years, Western policy has treated jihadist groups primarily as terrorists and the state primarily as absent. The result has been strategies built on military operations, leadership decapitation and capacity-building of national security forces. The outcome is well known: tactical gains alongside jihadist groups that continue to grow.

What the research shows

Jihadist groups govern

The dominant academic literature on rebel governance has been built around actors such as the FARC in Colombia and the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These are groups that controlled territory and built formal institutions. Sahelian jihadists fit this model poorly. They rarely control areas over time, build only nominal ad-hoc administration, and do not deliver consistent services. Yet they continue to exercise authority over people.

They regulate behaviour, settle disputes and redistribute resources. Coercion is one instrument. Others include intervening in local rights-based conflicts, the revitalisation of Islamic institutions and practices such as zakat and ghanima, social ties through marriage and economic exchange, and the strategic management of mobility rather than territory.

State illegitimacy, not absence, is the problem

The standard question in policy debates is why jihadists gain a foothold where the state cannot reach. The question is misplaced. The state is rarely entirely absent; indeed, it may be absent in some places, but in others it is present as police, judges, tax collectors, and local officials, and is often experienced as corrupt, partisan, and predatory.

In central Mali, respondents described jihadist courts as being “just like the state’s, but they work.” In northeastern Nigeria, ISWAP has built an organised system of governance, with four governorates, a Shura Council, regularised zakat administration and a bureaucratised hisbah. Civilians under ISWAP control report more predictable taxation and more restrained violence than under the earlier Boko Haram faction

JAS, and then under the Nigerian state.

This is not a defence of jihadist governance. It is often brutal, misogynistic and religiously totalitarian. Our point is a different one: the strategy of “bringing the state back” falls short when the same state, with the same corruption and the same abuses, is the one that returns.

Indiscriminate counterinsurgency radicalises

French military doctrine in the Sahel demonstrates how counterinsurgency operations have repeatedly amplified the very violence they were meant to suppress. The doctrine formally acknowledges that insurgencies are political conflicts requiring host-state legitimacy. In practice, French forces prioritised territorial control, special operations and drone targeting over political engagement.

The consequences are familiar. In central Mali, the Fulani have repeatedly been collectively suspected and attacked by national forces and ethnic militias. Many have sought protection from jihadists, not because they endorse the ideology, but because the alternative was worse. In Burkina Faso, similar dynamics have enabled jihadists to consolidate their position along the border with Mali. In Niger, the criminalisation of nomadic communities has driven recruitment into ISSP.

The Russian alternative offers little ground for optimism. The Wagner Group and its successor, Africa Corps, have escalated violence against civilians without reducing the territorial reach of jihadist groups. Two years into the Russian presence in Mali, violence has increased.

Civilians are not passive

Local communities are not passive victims. They negotiate, resist, adapt and form strategic alliances, with the state, with jihadists, or with other local actors, depending on where protection comes from at any given moment.

In Mali, some villages have refused cooperation with jihadists and maintained their own self-defence militias. Others have entered into pragmatic agreements over market access, transhumance routes or humanitarian access. Still others have used the jihadist presence to settle local power struggles, as when a deputy chief allies with the insurgents to displace a chief.

This is strategic action under extreme conditions, not jihadist sympathy. Measures that exclude civilians

from policy responses miss the mark. Measures that build on local agency and include civilians in policy responses stand a better chance at gaining local legitimacy. They include imams, traditional leaders, women's associations and local traders.

Variation within the same system

Jihadist governance varies substantially even within the same region and religious framework. The Boko Haram universe in northeastern Nigeria illustrates this. Under Abubakar Shekau, JAS practised centralised, personalised and predominantly coercive rule with weak institutionalisation. ISWAP, in contrast, has built an organised system of governance and now displaces JAS militarily and politically.

The implication matters: blanket counterinsurgency strategies that treat all jihadist factions as equivalent lack the analytical precision needed to explain why some groups collapse while others consolidate.

Implications for Norwegian and international policy

Stop restoring the same state

Strategies aimed at restoring state territorial control without changing state practice will fall short. This does not mean abandoning the state as an interlocutor. It means tying assistance to genuine improvements in the rule of law, anti-corruption efforts, and equal treatment of ethnic minorities. Without these, military assistance and capacity-building become investments in the dynamics that drive jihadist recruitment.

Differentiate among jihadist groups

JNIM, ISSP, ISWAP and the remnants of JAS are distinct actors with different structures, different ties to local communities, and different sources of strength. Generic strategies that treat them alike forfeit both analytical precision and operational relevance. It is important to understand that these groups operate autonomously of central al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. They have their own agendas, and a group like JNIM, while formally still aligned to al-Qaeda, leans towards the moderate extreme of al-Qaeda. Right now, there is evidence that suggests that the main source of inspiration internationally is no longer al-Qaeda central, but HTS in Syria. This could pave the way for some sort of settlement that also the Western part of international community could accept.

Take civilian agency seriously

Programmes for preventing violent extremism should be built on local agency, not on assumptions of passive victimhood. Imams, traditional leaders, women's associations, local traders and others can play a role in countering jihadist influence, but first and foremost, they require protection and recognition from external actors.

Approach military partnerships with caution

The French experience shows that military doctrine was often richer than the practice that ensued. The doctrine acknowledged that insurgencies are political, that civilian populations are central, and that host-state legitimacy is decisive. Yet it was repeatedly overridden by short-term tactical logic. Norwegian and international actors should approach military partnerships critically: where state forces are themselves part of the problem, capacity-building can deepen rather than resolve the crisis.

Russia is not the answer

The current reorientation towards Russian actors is a response to Western failure, not a sign that an alternative model works. Wagner and the Africa Corps offer regime protection in exchange for access to resources. The events in Mali in April 2026 show the limits: Russian forces helped repel a coordinated attack but could not prevent it from striking the capital, the Kati base, and cities across the country. Norway should not compete with Russia on Russian terms, but maintain an offer grounded in legitimacy, long-term commitment and respect for host-state processes.

Think regionally, not only nationally

Jihadist groups operate transnationally. JNIM moves across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. ISSP crosses the same borders. ISWAP has ties to groups well beyond the Lake Chad basin. Violence is now spreading southwards towards coastal states such as Ghana, Togo, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, countries that until recently were considered relatively stable. Norwegian and European policy must follow this geography.

Conclusion

The Sahel crisis is not primarily a military crisis. It lies in the relationship between state and citizen, between external actors and local realities, and between the assumptions on which international policy has been built for a decade and a half and what has actually unfolded on the ground.

JIGOV-Sahel offers the basis for a different approach. There is no quick solution, but a policy grounded in how jihadist groups govern, why civilians seek protection from them, and what kind of state can sustain legitimacy stands a better chance than the strategies the West has pursued since 2012.

For Norway, with its long traditions as an actor in peace diplomacy and development, the research provides a basis for rethinking how a small state with strong expertise can contribute in a region where many traditional Western instruments have lost their effect.

Acknowledgments

This policy brief draws on findings from the JIGOV-Sahel research project (2020–2026), funded by the Research Council of Norway (grant no. 302440) and led by NUPI. The project was carried out in collaboration with Idayat Hassan (Centre for Democracy and Development – CDD, Nigeria), Niagalé Bagayoko (African Security Sector Network – ASSN), Abdoul Wahab Cissé (Alliance for Rebuilding Governance in Africa – ARGAs; later ARDOA), and Stathis Kalyvas (University of Oxford), whose research and partnership throughout the project have been essential to the insights presented here.

The project conducted more than 100 interviews in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, carried out fieldwork in northeastern Nigeria, and analysed jihadist sermons and doctrinal texts. We are grateful to all those who

took part in interviews and focus groups, and to colleagues and collaborators who made this work possible.

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Authors:

Kari M. Osland (PhD) is Director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and was project leader for JIGOV-Sahel. **Morten Bøås** is Research Professor at NUPI and author of *Sahel – The*

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Rosenkrantz' gate 22
0160 Oslo, Norway
post@nupi.no | nupi.no

