MINTEL WORLD

Conflict and energy consultancy

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE WEEKLY

Region: Somalia-Nigeria-Democratic Republic of the Congo-Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso
Date: 2 May 2026
Scope: Security |Diplomacy | Defence
Classification: Client Confidential

Executive Assessment

The past week confirms a fundamental transformation in the conflict architecture of the Sahel. A simultaneous offensive carried out by the JNIM-FLA alliance across a 1,500-kilometer line in Mali signifies a transition from local insurgencies to a coordinated and systemic challenge to state capacity. By directly targeting major military headquarters (Kati), decapitating security leadership (death of the Minister of Defense), and severing critical supply corridors, opposition forces have shifted the conflict's center of gravity from intermittent tactical skirmishes to the control of national logistics. The forced, negotiated withdrawal of FAMa and the Russian Africa Corps from symbolic northern strongholds like Kidal and Bourem exposes the cascading security vulnerabilities created by the partial redeployment of Russian elements. Consequently, Mali has entered a phase of "controlled collapse," where state deterrence is rapidly eroding, and the security of the capital depends on the slim possibility of reopening supply lines.

The rapid retreat of state forces in Mali is creating power vacuums most visibly exploited by the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) in Labbezanga. Simultaneously, the unified command structure of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is under severe operational pressure. As Mali focuses entirely on its own internal survival, JNIM is preparing to expand its operational footprint toward Burkina Faso and Niger, systematically targeting isolated VDP (Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland) units and military outposts. Niger’s diplomatic maneuver of accusing France of organizing the offensive in Mali demonstrates a continued reliance on anti-Western rhetoric to maintain political cohesion amid a deteriorating regional security environment.

In the DRC, a stark decoupling persists between diplomatic initiatives and operational reality. While U.S. sanctions against Joseph Kabila have revealed the deep political networks fueling the M23 and the Congo River Alliance (AFC), dynamics on the ground remain trapped in a high-intensity stalemate, exacerbated by advanced drone warfare and stalled prisoner exchanges. In contrast, state forces in Nigeria and Somalia are demonstrating incremental tactical gains through international defense partnerships. The integration of Turkish defense technology (Aselsan anti-drone systems, STM UAVs) and specialized training in Somalia, alongside the Nigerian Air Force’s (NAF) precision strikes against ISWAP logistics, demonstrate the effectiveness of combined air superiority. However, the groups' resilient asymmetric retaliation capacity guarantees a prolonged tactical deadlock rather than immediate pacification.

MALI

On the morning of April 25th, JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) launched near-simultaneous attacks on at least six major urban centers. These attacks spanned an area of approximately 1,500 kilometers, stretching from Bamako in the south to Kidal in the far north, and included Kidal, Gao, Sévaré, the vicinity of the Sénou military camp, and Kati, near the capital Bamako. Fierce, close-quarters combat occurred particularly around the Sénou military camp next to the Bamako-Sénou International Airport, while in Kati, it was reported that locals acted alongside army forces to capture some of the attackers during the militants' attempts to infiltrate the military barracks. The main airbase on the outskirts of Bamako, the primary army headquarters in Kati, and the residences of senior officials were directly targeted. Defense Minister Sadio Camara and some of his family members were killed in a suicide car bomb (SVBIED) attack on his residence in Kati, while Intelligence Chief General Modibo Kone was reportedly severely wounded by multiple gunshots. Simultaneously, intense attacks on the Sévaré military base—located at the intersection of highways connecting the north and south—and the airbase near Bamako severely crippled the capacity of the Army and the Africa Corps to send airborne or ground reinforcements to the northern fronts. The government initially announced that the attacks had been repelled, whereas the Russian Africa Corps described the events as a coup attempt involving 10,000 to 12,000 militants, allegedly with the backing of Western intelligence services.

As army reinforcement lines were severed in the south and center, JNIM and the FLA launched a fierce joint offensive against Kidal, Gao, and Bourem in the north. It was revealed that JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghali and FLA leader Al-Ghabass Ag Intalla directed the Kidal operation in real-time via drone footage; the FLA claimed to have carried out kamikaze drone strikes on the former MINUSMA camp in Kidal and shot down at least one Russian helicopter using man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). Following hours of clashes, Kidal fell, and the Africa Corps and Malian forces agreed to a negotiated withdrawal, abandoning the city to the JNIM-FLA. With the complete capture of Bourem, the army and Russian forces were confined to bases near Gao. While militants allegedly shot down an army helicopter in Gao, the army base in Bourem was completely seized along with its ammunition, consolidating the militants' dominance in the region. In the ensuing period, the Tessalit, Ber, Intahaka, and Tessit regions were also surrendered to the FLA-JNIM through "safe withdrawal" agreements under military pressure. Notably, soldiers stationed at the Tessit military base in Gao surrendered their heavy weapons and equipment in exchange for guaranteed personal safety and withdrew from the area under FLA escort; the strategic Amachach camp in Tessalit also fell into the hands of the militants following a similar withdrawal agreement. The Africa Corps characterized the withdrawal from Kidal as a "joint decision by the Malian Republic administration" and claimed to have neutralized over 100 militants in airstrikes. Meanwhile, JNIM released a statement offering Russian forces

immunity from being targeted in exchange for their non-involvement in the clashes, along with a proposal to establish a balanced relationship in the future.

As JNIM spokesperson Abu Hudhaifa Al-Bambari declared a blockade encompassing vehicular and pedestrian traffic into and out of Bamako—with specific road blockades reported in Bamako's Soribougou, Naréna to the southwest, and Ouélessébougou to the south—JNIM attacked Mopti in central Mali and briefly seized the main military base in Sévaré. Simultaneously, the Hombori military base in the Douentza region was targeted and became the scene of intense clashes, while attacks were also carried out on the Fana and Kassela checkpoints near the capital to tighten the siege around Bamako. The Malian army was only able to re-enter the area the following morning. In response, FAMa and the Africa Corps focused heavily on air operations, announcing the destruction of numerous militant elements and armored vehicles in Kidal, Sévaré, and Ke Macina, and managed to deliver an air- and ground-escorted fuel convoy to Bamako. Additionally, the army successfully repelled a militant attack in Gourma-Rharous. However, during this wave of retreats in the north and center, the unilateral abandonment of the strategically vital town of Labbezanga near the Mali-Niger border by Russian and Malian forces on April 27th created a sudden power vacuum. Seizing this opportunity, the Sahel branch of ISIS (ISSP) immediately captured Labbezanga and amassed around the regional capital of Ménaka to test military positions, though FAMa successfully repelled the ISSP on the outskirts of Ménaka through air-supported operations.

Malian leader Assimi Goïta, who had briefly remained out of the public eye, resurfaced on April 28th with the announcement of his meeting with Russian Ambassador Igor Gromyko—during which Russia reiterated its commitment to support—and subsequently visited the wounded and the family of the Defense Minister. On the ground, however, the de facto alliance between the FLA and JNIM proved to be highly pragmatic and fragile, a reality that became evident through rhetorical divergences. While the FLA claimed participation in the Gao attack, JNIM claimed sole responsibility for the operation and called for a transition period focused on the "establishment of Sharia." Signaling their broader ambitions, an FLA spokesperson told Agence France-Presse on April 28th that "Gao, Timbuktu, and Ménaka will be our next targets to liberate." On the other hand, in Kidal, Imghad leader Assalim Ag Abanassa, the brother-in-law of Governor El Hadj Ag Gamou, joined the FLA and called on the Tuaregs to close ranks. Rejecting the "terrorist organization" designation leveled against them, the FLA stated that it is not at war with any regional or international actor other than the Bamako government, and called upon countries like Turkey to review their ties with the Malian government and play a more constructive role in the country.

The severing of the army's and the Africa Corps' logistics networks, forcing them into negotiated withdrawals from vast territories, coupled with the loss of a symbolic region like Kidal, has a severe negative impact on the Bamako administration's deterrence on the ground. Nevertheless, despite severe decapitation blows such as the loss of the Defense Minister, the army's air operations, its repelling of the ISSP, and the successful resupply of fuel to the capital demonstrate that the state mechanism has not entirely collapsed.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC)

The United States Departments of the Treasury and State have imposed sanctions on former President Joseph Kabila for his support of the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels and the organization's political wing, the Congo River Alliance (AFC). The justification for the sanctions stated that Kabila provided financial support to the AFC, encouraged members of the national army (FARDC) to join M23, attempted to launch a military offensive against the government from an unspecified neighboring country, and aimed to regain his influence over the government by backing a candidate against President Félix Tshisekedi. On the political front, the prisoner exchange process between the government and M23 is stalled because the Democratic Republic of the Congo has not granted the necessary approval to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), despite M23 stating its readiness for the process. This delay is primarily due to legal procedures, the government's sensitive political position, uncertainties regarding the number of detainees, and disagreements over the location of the exchange, even though the technical details have been finalized. Within the scope of military operations, the FARDC reported shooting down an M23 drone—assessed to have been launched from Rwandan territory—over Point Zéro and the Minembwe highlands in the Fizi territory of South Kivu province. On the ground, clashes were reported between M23 elements and Wazalendo forces along the Katana route, in Bugorhe north of Kavumu airport, in the Kalehe territory, and at positions in Chambombo, southwest of Numbi, near the North Kivu border.

NIGERIA

Nigerian security forces continued coordinated air and ground operations against terrorist networks in Borno State, focusing on the Sambisa Forest and Tumbuns axis. Precision airstrikes executed by the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) in the Mandara Mountains, which prioritized civilian safety, destroyed key logistical hubs, while terrorist hideouts across Sambisa and Tumbuns were struck, neutralizing numerous fighters. In an air-supported ground operation in the Azir Bridge and Bulabulin Forest areas of the Timbuktu axis, 11 terrorists were neutralized, and ammunition was seized. Army troops neutralized four terrorists in an ambush operation along the Sambisa forest axis, and repelled a terrorist attack involving an infiltration attempt on the Godel community in the Birnin Magaji area of Zamfara State. Army and Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) elements neutralized two suspected ISWAP/JAS-linked terrorists in a night ambush in Borno, and six in an operation in the Yunusari area of Yobe State. In response, the ISWAP organization announced that it had executed four army personnel on the road between Mairari and Monguno, and seized ammunition by attacking an army checkpoint and a police station near Buratai (Borno) and Auno. The organization also claimed to have carried out improvised explosive device (IED)

attacks against a military patrol near Mile and two armored vehicles on the Azir-Damboa route, stating that the vehicles were damaged and two soldiers were killed in these attacks.

SOMALIA

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud met with Tom Fletcher, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, at Villa Somalia to assess the country's humanitarian priorities, recovery efforts, and sustainable coordination processes conducted through the Somali Disaster Management Agency. Within the framework of bilateral military relations, Deputy Commander of the Somali National Armed Forces, Brigadier General Madey Nurey, met with a Turkish military delegation led by the Commander of the Turkish Forces, Major General Sebahattin Kalkan, to discuss strategies for strengthening military cooperation. In line with capacity-building activities, it was reported that Somali Gorgor Commandos are receiving armored vehicle and tank training in Turkey; additionally, training activities are ongoing regarding Aselsan-produced EJDERHA and IHTAR anti-drone systems, as well as various STM unmanned aerial vehicles. As part of security operations, the Somali Ministry of Defense announced that 22 Al-Shabaab militants, including commander Abdirahman Jeeri, were neutralized in a joint ground and air operation executed by the National Armed Forces and international partners in Buulo Cabdalla, Lower Shabelle region.

BURKINA FASO

BIR 30 and Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP) elements affiliated with the Burkina Faso security forces repelled an infiltration attempt in Soudougui, neutralizing numerous militants, while BIR 12 units eliminated militant elements with a similar intervention in the Namoungou area. Despite these developments, the JNIM organization claimed to have seized control of VDP posts in the Bagare and Fada N'Gourma regions. The group reported that eight military personnel were killed in an attack on a military post in Bagare, five in a military post in Bango, seven in an operation in Koulpelogo, and six VDP members were killed in an attack in Toere, adding that various weapons, ammunition, and vehicles were seized during these operations.

NIGER

In a cabinet meeting on April 26, the Nigerien government alleged that the French administration and President Emmanuel Macron played a role in the planning and execution of terrorist attacks in Mali, which were claimed by the JNIM and FLA organizations. Niamey officials argued that these attacks targeted the progress of the Confederation of Sahel States (AES) and were carried out with a level of international logistical and resource support that exceeds the operational capacity of the respective terrorist groups. Within the scope of

internal security activities, the Nigerien army announced the neutralization of five terrorists—two lookouts and three individuals planting explosives—during Operation NIYA in the Tillabéri region, and a total of eight armed elements during Operation SHARA in the Tahoua region. While no elements were neutralized during Operation DAMISSA in the Dosso region, two explosives were detected and destroyed; in Operation NALÉWA DOLÉ in the Diffa region, it was reported that suspects withdrew from the area, leaving behind vehicles and ammunition.

Forward Outlook

The next 7 to 14 days are critical for the survival of the Bamako administration. The primary indicator will be the security of fuel convoys and logistical routes leading to the capital (Soribougou, Naréna, Ouélessébougou). FAMa and the Africa Corps are expected to conduct intensive air operations to break the JNIM blockade. If land corridors cannot be secured, the state's military operations face the immediate risk of paralysis due to fuel depletion.

As the pragmatic JNIM-FLA alliance fractures due to diverging end-goals (Sharia implementation vs. the liberation of Azawad), local clashes between the two groups should be expected, particularly as the FLA moves toward Gao and Timbuktu, which it has identified as clear targets. Meanwhile, ISSP is likely to launch probing attacks around Ménaka to test weakened defensive lines.

JNIM will aggressively exploit the regional distraction created by the crisis in Mali. Synchronized attacks targeting Burkina Faso’s VDP forces (especially in Fada N’Gourma) and Niger’s border security infrastructure, involving IED deployments and outpost raids, are anticipated.

In response to the NAF’s effective airstrikes in the Sambisa and Tumbuns axes, ISWAP will continue its asymmetric retaliations. There is a high probability of IED attacks and ambushes targeting military patrols and civilian logistics hubs along main supply routes in Borno and Yobe states.