

THE BATTLE OF ANÉFIS AND NEW CONCEPT OF WAR IN THE DESERT

By Hasret Kargin

JNIM and the FLA took coordinated action on July 4, just as they did on April 25. Some of these attacks, which spread across many different areas, were intended as a distraction.

The main target in this jointly launched offensive was Anéfis. In addition to being a gateway connecting Gao to Kidal, which JNIM and the FLA captured on April 25, Anéfis was, in the words of the Malian Army spokesperson, "a strategic gateway to Kidal, a shield protecting Aguelhok and Tessalit, and the key point for the army and Russian forces (Africa Corps) to achieve their ultimate goal of reaching the Algerian border. Strategically utilized as an armed drone (UCAV) base, this facility provides the capability for direct airstrikes on regions like Kidal and Aguelhok. At the same time, the line stretching from Kidal to Gao serves as a vital logistical hub.

In this regard, targeting Anéfis was a strategic attack aimed at cutting supply lines in the north, securing Kidal, and pushing the government's close air support for the northern regions to the periphery. It was also an economic attack that would ensure control over smuggling routes in the north. On July 4, when the attacks began, it is evident that a distraction strategy was pursued, aimed at preventing army troops and the Africa Corps from sending reinforcements to Anéfis, rather than concentrating the operation on a single point.



While the main attack, jointly conducted by JNIM and the FLA, targeted the Anéfis base, simultaneous attacks were also carried out in different regions of Mali: The military camp in Gao, Aguelhok, Sévaré, Léré in the Tombouctou region, and the Kéniéroba Civil Prison (reported to hold 2,500 inmates, 72 of whom are high-value) located approximately 60 kilometers from the capital Bamako, as well as military barracks and Dozo militia headquarters in the Konna, Somadougou, and Kouakourou regions on the Mopti-Bandiagara axis, were targeted within the scope of this military tactic.

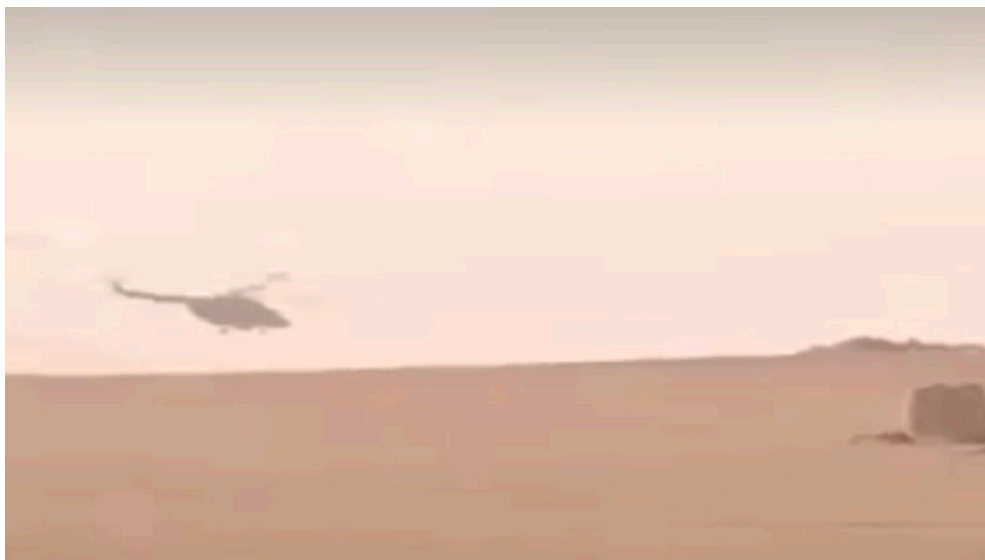
In these clashes, JNIM claimed to have killed 21 Dozo militiamen in Konna and 18 in Somadougou, whereas the Malian army announced that it neutralized a total of 35 militants in Sofara and Konna. Although open-source footage showed JNIM militants successfully breaching the prison in Kéniéroba, no verifiable data regarding the fate of the prisoners could be obtained. JNIM's initial attack in Sévaré was repelled by the Army and the Africa Corps, neutralizing numerous militants. Following the repulsion of the first attacks, JNIM withdrew from the area. It is alleged that shortly before the attack, a Turkish military cargo plane landed in the region to rearm the base. These simultaneous attacks once again proved the armed groups' capacity to operate across multiple points nationwide concurrently, while also revealing that they are no longer content with mere hit-and-run tactics, but aim to permanently seize bases and city centers.

DRONE WARS

In the early hours of the clashes in Anéfis, FLA and JNIM militants managed to enter the outskirts of the city. Army positions were captured, and many

soldiers were taken prisoner. However, prior to the attacks, the base commander, acting on intelligence received, left the previously reinforced positions and executed a strategic withdrawal tactic along with his troops. Although this strategic withdrawal initially created the perception that the army had lost the region, it actually minimized the destruction of the troops while buying time for counterattacks. On the other hand, although rumors circulated about an agreement similar to the one on April 25 being made, both sides categorically denied these allegations, showing that the parties were focused on a direct military solution rather than reconciliation throughout the conflict.

The days of July 5-7 also demonstrated the increase in the technological capacities of armed groups and the evolving conflict dynamics in the Sahel. It was observed that unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and kamikaze drones were used more frequently by the conflicting parties. During this period, where both sides utilized kamikaze drones, the accurate strikes of these vehicles, especially those used by JNIM-FLA, caused Malian troops and Africa Corps mercenaries trapped in the base to experience significant movement restrictions. During the same timeframe, the Africa Corps carried out multiple attacks, some of which were successful. According to the FLA's claims, a fleet of four helicopters sent by Africa Corps mercenaries to the region on July 5 to evacuate the wounded in Anéfis was subjected to heavy fire. The most significant material loss witnessed during the clashes was the downing of a helicopter escorting the convoy from Gao, 55 km southwest of Anéfis.



The FLA launched at least four kamikaze drone attacks targeting the Anéfis base and released footage of these strikes aimed at MRAP-type armored vehicles, military trucks, and howitzers. In response, the Malian Army and

the Africa Corps retaliated with UCAVs and 'Geran' type Shahed kamikaze drones procured from Russia—known to be used for the first time in the Malian theater during these clashes—striking the militants' armored vehicles and assembly areas. While army sources reported that 35 airstrikes were conducted just during the coordinated operations on July 6, claims emerging from the field suggest that civilian casualties also occurred during this period (e.g., civilians being targeted in a UCAV strike in Zarho).

THE ANÉFIS FRONT

The most critical point of the clashes was the arrival in Anéfis of a large reinforcement convoy setting out from Gao, comprised of the Malian Army, pro-government GATIA-MSA militias, and Africa Corps mercenaries. This followed the landing of two Il-76 transport aircraft, reportedly carrying military equipment from Bamako to Gao before the large ground convoy set off. Colonel Maïga, who had previously withdrawn his troops strategically upon intelligence of a potential attack, also mobilized towards the region alongside this convoy. However, a severe sandstorm that began while the convoy was en route to the Tabankort area and Anéfis hindered air support, rendering the moving troops an open target for FLA-JNIM ambushes.

The fragility of military planning that fails to account for natural conditions or adapt to them immediately in challenging geographies like the Sahel was demonstrated once again by the potential ambush attempts during this sandstorm. Nevertheless, the route was secured, and the convoy reached Anéfis on July 9 after three days. This successful deployment and Colonel Maïga's return to the region shifted the psychological advantage of the operation back to the army, tipping the balance on the ground entirely in favor of government forces.

Had the convoy failed to reach the area, the troops besieged at the Anéfis base would have been left defenseless. Furthermore, soldiers forced to leave the base to meet their most basic need for water would have become a much more exposed target. With the arrival of the supply convoy, the trapped troops found room to maneuver, and the JNIM-FLA elements in the outskirts withdrew from the area. The clashes did not remain confined within Mali's borders; it was observed that AES (Alliance of Sahel States) countries became involved in the process once again. During the clashes, messages released by the FLA urging the Nigerien government not to intervene in this war and encouraging the Nigerien people to rise up against the Tiani administration serve as a very strong indicator that active air support was provided to the Malian Army by Niger. Indeed, this situation was also corroborated by local sources and JNIM.

In the April 25 attacks as well, Burkina Faso and Niger provided active air and ground support to Mali. Similarly, JNIM announced that 8 army positions in Burkina Faso were targeted during the July 4 attacks. This situation indicates that armed groups in the Sahel, during their coordinated attacks, seek to prevent potential external support by striking not only the target country but also positions in other AES countries that have come or could come to its aid.

With the repulsion of the Anéfis-centered offensive, developments also occurred in local alliances on the ground. In the aftermath of the clashes, JNIM declared the Tuareg-origin GATIA and MSA groups fighting alongside the Malian government as a direct "primary target," announcing a war against them. Responding to this move, the GATIA/MSA coalition stated that they had secured control in and around Anéfis and announced that their next objective was to advance on Tinza.

The coalition further noted that FLA/JNIM elements, having failed to hold Anéfis and suffering a heavy blow, turned to civilian targets in the Tahalandak, Tamarassate, and Tinzaouatène regions. This development demonstrates that the war will increasingly intensify not only between the state and armed groups but also among different entities stemming from the same ethnic and regional base.

On July 14, the Malian General Staff announced that over 1,000 terrorists were neutralized in the air and ground operations conducted since July 4, and that 14 armored vehicles, 24 heavily armed vehicles equipped with anti-aircraft and heavy machine guns, around 30 military transport vehicles, and nearly 300 motorcycles were destroyed. The Malian Army reported that it lost 30 soldiers within its own ranks and that approximately 60 personnel were injured. In a statement on July 9, the FLA front also admitted to suffering severe casualties, stating they were fighting against the largest mobilized force backed by the Africa Corps and the AES.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the coordinated attacks centered on Anéfis on July 4, which spread across the country, demonstrate once again that the crisis in the Sahel has evolved into a technological and regional war of attrition alongside hit-and-run tactics. While JNIM and the FLA's multi-front attack capacity utilizing kamikaze drones indicates the armed groups' goal of establishing direct territorial dominance, the heavy firepower provided by the Malian Army, backed by its AES allies, the Africa Corps, and local militias (GATIA/MSA), initially prevented the fall of the strategic Anéfis line.

Despite these significant developments that prevented the fall of Anéfis, the short-lived nature of the military superiority of the army and its allies has been proven at the time of this writing: the JNIM-FLA coalition heavily ambushed an army convoy on the Gao-Anéfis line, killing and executing many soldiers and rendering numerous vehicles unusable. Furthermore, JNIM's destruction of an army helicopter near Kouakourou illustrates an increased threat capacity against aerial assets.

The period in which cross-border alliances play an active role on the ground and ambushes resulting in heavy casualties continue clearly reveals that, despite the army's gains, the multi-actor war in the region will grow increasingly complex and intensify.