

MALI & SOMALIA BRIEFING

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Table of Contents

MALI	1
BATTLE TO RESHAPE THE MALIAN STATE	1
THE CURRENT OFFENSIVE	2
ECONOMIC WARFARE AS STRATEGY	2
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BROADER REGION.....	3
POSSIBLE SCENARIOS.....	3
SOMALIA.....	4
BATTLE FOR THE SEAS	4
SPIKE IN PIRACY	4
'SAVIOUR OF THE SEA'	4
EMERGING ALLIANCES AND COUNTER ALLIANCES	.5
AL SHABAAB AND HOUTHIS.....	5
SOMALILAND AND THE 'BERBERA AXIS'	5
THE SOMALIA GOVERNMENT AND THE COUNTER-BLOC OF STATES	.6
ROLE OF THE AFRICAN UNION	6
BALANCE OF FORCES	7
INSTABILITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT	7

MALI

Battle to reshape the Malian state

It was with unprecedented speed and coordination that Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Front de Libération de l'Azawad (FLA) swept across northern Mali on 25 April 2026, launching one of the most consequential offensives since 2012.

What began as a rapid seizure of strategic northern positions quickly evolved into a direct challenge to the authority of President Assimi Goïta, as fighting pushed southward toward the military stronghold of Kati, just kilometres from the capital Bamako, and the symbolic heart of the junta.

The speed of the advance exposed not only the vulnerability of the Malian military, but also the fragility of the security architecture constructed since the junta seized control in 2021.

Particularly striking was the abrupt retreat of Russian forces from the strategically and symbolically important town of Kidal, a former separatist bastion recaptured by the junta in 2023 and presented as proof that the state had regained control of the north. Its rapid fall back into rebel hands suggested more than a battlefield setback; it pointed to an intelligence and strategic failure at the centre of Mali's new security order.

Yet weeks later, the junta remains in power, battered and increasingly isolated, but still standing, as JNIM tightens its [siege](#) around Bamako through attacks on transport corridors and fuel supply routes.

The offensive however, has moved the conflict beyond the conventional insurgency to a struggle over the future shape of the Malian state.

The current offensive

The latest phase of the conflict has been marked by unprecedented coordination and scale. JNIM and the FLA launched [simultaneous attacks](#) across multiple cities, including Bamako, Kidal, and Gao in April 2026. These operations resulted in the capture of key northern regions, as well as the targeted killing of Defence Minister [Sadio Camara](#), a massive psychological blow to the ruling junta.

Since then, JNIM has [stormed a prison](#) where high value political prisoners were reportedly being held about 60km from the capital. They have also imposed a partial blockade on Bamako, deepening a crisis that began months earlier with JNIM's systematic targeting of fuel transport routes into the capital.

Formed in 2017 through the merger of several local groups, and linked to al-Qaeda, JNIM has transformed from a loose militant coalition into a sophisticated armed movement combining military capacity, local integration and governance structures in areas under its influence.

Central to the current offensive has been its tactical alliance with the FLA, a Tuareg separatist movement whose resurgence followed the collapse of the 2015 Algiers Agreement after Mali's 2021 coup.

Economic warfare as strategy

By attacking fuel tankers from late 2025 onwards and controlling key routes from neighbouring countries, JNIM had effectively choked the Malian economy. Fuel shortages disrupted transport, electricity and supply chains. This strategy reflects a broader shift: rather than relying solely on battlefield victories, JNIM targeted the economic lifelines of the state, aiming to erode legitimacy and force concessions.

While earlier reports suggested a temporary [truce](#) between JNIM and the junta in the first few months of 2026 to ease the fuel blockade, the April offensive has effectively given JNIM additional leverage and new territorial advantage.

Implications for broader region

The offensive by JNIM and FLA represents a major challenge not only to Mali's junta, but to the broader [Alliance of Sahel States](#) (AES) involving Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

The AES was framed as a new regional security bloc capable of replacing dependence on Western powers through military cooperation and strategic alignment with Russia. The offensive however, risks reshaping perceptions of Moscow's role in Africa.

Furthermore, Russian involvement has increasingly become associated with allegations of human rights abuses, with [civil society organisations](#) recently taking the junta to the African Court over the conduct of its armed forces and Russian mercenaries.

Possible scenarios

Mali's crisis is rooted in long-standing structural tensions that extend far beyond the current insurgency, including ethnic divisions, competition over arable land, natural resources and minerals, as well as ideological and socio-economic grievances driven by marginalisation and youth unemployment.

These dynamics are further shaped by weak state institutions, the legacy of colonial borders and regional power competition.

Against this complex backdrop, the country faces several possible trajectories ranging from the secession of the northern region of Azawad; to prolonged territorial and political fragmentation between JNIM, the FLA, and other actors such as Islamic State in the Sahel Province, influential opposition figures, and the junta itself; or a renewed military counter-offensive backed by Russia and other AES states.

The growing territorial reach of JNIM and the FLA has also led some analysts to forecast the possibility of a ["third way"](#) driven by political pragmatism, recognising the balance of forces and leads to negotiations inclusive of insurgent groups.

SOMALIA

Battle for the seas

While today's headlines often focus on flashpoints like the Strait of Hormuz, it is the waters off the Horn of Africa that perhaps most vividly capture the overlapping crises shaping maritime order.

Somalia sits astride one of the world's most critical chokepoints near Bab el-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden, where millions of barrels of oil and vast volumes of global trade pass daily. This narrow corridor links the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, placing Somalia at the centre of a maritime highway that is not only economically vital but increasingly militarised and contested.

The Somali coastline has become a theatre where multiple pressures converge: the resurgence of piracy driven by economic desperation and weak maritime enforcement; the militant insurgency by Al Shabaab; and the persistent fragility of the federal government of Somalia, whose political legitimacy is strained by constitutional uncertainty and federal tensions.

At the same time, international and regional powers are deeply embedded in the country's strategic landscape, competing for influence over ports, offshore resources and security architecture across the Horn of Africa. What emerges is not a simple story of pirates or failed governance, but a far more complex struggle for sovereignty, sea lanes and survival.

Spike in piracy

In May 2026, there were at least 3 vessels [hijacked](#) off the coast of Somalia. This comes in the wake of reduced international naval presence in the region. Since 2010, piracy had been contained largely through coordinated patrols by global powers, but many of these forces have reportedly been redeployed to address [Houthi](#) related attacks in the Red Sea. Together with international focus on the Strait of Hormuz, the resultant vacuum has created a new gap for pirates. At the same time, disruptions to shipping routes due to the Iran war have led to more vessels looking for [alternative routes](#), increasing the number of potential targets passing by the Horn of Africa.

'Saviours of the Sea'

Economic conditions within Somalia have also played a major role. The World Food Programme this month warned that [6 million](#) Somalis face acute hunger. Widespread poverty and [drought](#) may push individuals toward piracy as a [means of survival](#). Furthermore, the resurgence of piracy cannot be understood without looking at its historical roots. In the 1990s and early 2000s, following the [collapse](#) of the Somali state, the country's waters were left largely unprotected. Foreign

fishing fleets began [illegally overfishing Somali waters](#), severely damaging local livelihoods.

In response, local fishermen initially took up arms to defend their resources, positioning themselves as informal “coastguards” or “saviours of the sea.” Over time, this defensive posture evolved into organised, ransom-based piracy. The current wave of piracy, therefore, reflects not a new phenomenon but the re-emergence of unresolved conditions: weak governance, economic hardship, and continued exploitation of maritime resources, now intensified by shifting global security priorities.

Emerging alliances and counter alliances

Al Shabaab and Houthis

There have been ongoing speculative reports over the years about Al Shabaab’s links with local pirate groups for revenue shares from ransom. In recent months however, a new, strategic maritime alliance appears to have formed between the Houthis across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen and Al Shabaab on Somalia’s coastline, based on a convergence of interests, rather than an alliance based on ideological or doctrinal underpinnings. This adds a new dimension to transnational alliances between armed groups in the region, with [reported](#) exchanges of weapons, training and logistical support, mutually reinforcing control over shipping routes.

Somaliland and the ‘Berbera Axis’

Israel’s [recent recognition](#) of Somaliland is best understood as an opportunistic geopolitical move, centred on control of the Gulf of Aden. Somaliland - one of Somalia’s federal states - sits directly along this corridor, which connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and ultimately the Suez Canal. Israel has framed its recognition in terms of securing maritime routes and countering regional threats, particularly attacks by Houthi forces.

The [role of the United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) reinforces this picture, with some analysts suggesting that the UAE facilitated Israel’s recognition of Somaliland. The UAE appears to be one of Somaliland’s strongest external backers, investing in the Berbera port, and maintaining a [military presence there](#). This support is tied to the UAE’s broader ambition to dominate geopolitics from the Gulf through to north Africa, ensuring influence from Yemen, where it supports the Southern Transitional Council, through to countries such as Sudan and Libya, where it backs particular factions. The UAE’s alignment with Israel through the Abraham Accords - which Somaliland is expected to join - further deepens this relationship.

Enter [landlocked Ethiopia](#) into the equation, and one begins to see the emergence of the informal, yet strategic ‘Berbera Axis’. In 2024, Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland to access a stretch of the Red Sea shoreline, to reduce its dependence on access routes from Djibouti. This was

reportedly done in exchange for reassessing its diplomatic approach to Somaliland's bid for independence. While maintaining [ties with Israel](#) and sharing common interests with the UAE in relation to [Sudan](#), Ethiopia's role remains complex as it also maintains a military presence in Somalia under the African Union, backing state-led efforts against Al Shabaab.

While the United States (US) has not recognised Somaliland as yet, there is [active lobbying](#) within Washington to do so.

The Somalia government and the counter-bloc of states

Mainland Somalia has responded to Israel's recognition of Somaliland and the UAE's backing of it with strong diplomatic rejection, [retaliatory measures](#), and the consolidation of counter-alliances. The federal government views recognition as fuelling separatists ambitions and a direct violation of its sovereignty.

Although the government and Al Shabaab both have a common enemy in the form of Israel, there are no indicators as yet that they will cooperate based on this shared interest.

However, as a regional level, Somalia has leaned on alliances with key states such as [Egypt](#), [Qatar](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [Turkiye](#), and [Djibouti](#), all of which have publicly reaffirmed support for Somalia's unity.

These partnerships are not incidental, but point to each countries' own interests and attempts at maintaining influence in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have signed recent military deals with Somalia, while Turkiye maintains strong military ties with the federal government, deploying F-16 fighter jets to the region earlier this year. Turkiye has also begun offshore [exploration for oil reserves](#) off Somalia's coast.

Role of the African Union

The African Union (AU) has [rejected](#) Israel's recognition of Somaliland, and has been central to the Somali government's campaign against Al Shabaab. The African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM), composed of forces from several regional countries, operating in coordination with the Somali National Armed Forces (SNA), launched a recent offensive, [Operation Rolling Thunder](#), targeting key Al Shabaab strongholds.

Coordinated assaults in regions like [Lower Shabelle](#) and [Middle Juba](#) have resulted in the destruction of militant hideouts, and the killing or arrest of senior commanders, signalling an attempt to dismantle the group's operational infrastructure. These offensives are often supported by air power by international partners.

In this regard, the use of Turkish drones and the US's escalating air attacks on Somalia have come under increased scrutiny and critique, with reports by [Amnesty](#)

[International](#) and [others](#) of civilians being killed. News of the US's [\\$70 million upgrade](#) of its airfield on the Kenya-Somalia border suggests that US airstrikes in the Horn of Africa are, however, set to continue.

Balance of forces

Despite the recent AUSSOM offensive, the broader balance of forces in Somalia remains highly contested and far from decisively in favour of the Somali state. Al Shabaab continues to demonstrate significant resilience: it retains [control over large areas](#) in southern and central Somalia, maintains [parallel governance and administrative structures](#), and has proven capable of [regrouping after losses](#).

Territorial control remains constantly shifting in Somalia between the state, Al Shabaab and [ISIS](#) aligned forces, compounded by threats or attempts at secession by [federal states](#).

At present, Somalia is facing a deepening parliamentary and constitutional crisis as the mandates of key federal institutions - particularly Parliament - have stretched beyond their formal timeframes [without a fully agreed electoral transition](#) - eroding legitimacy both domestically and internationally.

There are early signs of possible popular unrest sparked by evictions in Mogadishu, with [planned opposition protests](#) being curbed by the government. This follows news of the [arrest of a 27-year-old female](#) rickshaw driver, who was recently detained and reportedly beaten up for using social media to criticise the federal government, speaking out against alleged corruption and nepotism, the forced evictions, youth unemployment, taxation and high fuel prices.

Instability and socio-economic impact

Somalia is increasingly becoming a space where local vulnerabilities intersect with global strategic interests - from control of the Gulf of Aden to rivalries involving regional and international powers - with the central authority incapable of navigating these pressures.

Taken together, the resurgence of piracy, intensifying international competition and regional hostilities, domestic insecurity, contestation for territorial control and militant activity, extreme poverty, and the fragility of the federal state point toward a foreseeable future marked by prolonged instability in the Horn of Africa.