

MALI & SOMALIA BRIEFING

JUN – JUL 2026

Table of Contents

PROTRACTED CONFRONTATION	1
IS US INVOLVEMENT ON THE CARDS?	2
TÜRKIYE'S 'DRONE DIPLOMACY'	3
REPORTS OF ATROCITIES	3
THE TABRICHAT AMBUSH	4
POLITICAL PRISONERS	4
COMPLEXITY OF THE CRISIS DEEPENS	5
CONTEST FOR THE RED SEA.....	5
US'S DUAL-TRACK POLICY	5
MORE DRONE STRIKES, LESS ACCOUNTABILITY	6
OVERTURES TO CHINA	7
NEW SAUDI-LED MARITIME COALITION	7
ON THE GROUND DEVELOPMENTS.....	8
INTERNAL FRAGMENTATION, COMPETING EXTERNAL INTERESTS	8

MALI

Protracted confrontation

More than three months after Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA) launched their coordinated offensive against Bamako, there is little evidence that the conflict in Mali is moving towards resolution.

Instead, the battlefield has settled into a protracted and increasingly complex confrontation, with neither side demonstrating the capacity as yet to secure a decisive military victory.

JNIM and the FLA have consolidated their control over significant areas of northern Mali, maintaining strategic presence on the ground. Meanwhile, the Malian armed forces, supported by Russia's Africa Corps, have sought to reverse these gains through aerial

bombardments and military operations aimed at recapturing lost territory. Despite these efforts, the balance of power remains contested, highlighting the limitations of a predominantly military approach to the conflict.

Compounding the situation are growing indications that additional regional and international actors may become more directly involved, risking a domestic conflict evolving into a broader geopolitical contest.

Is US involvement on the cards?

The Donald Trump administration appears to be resetting Washington's approach to the Sahel, signalling a departure from the relative diplomatic distance that characterised US policy towards Mali under former President Joe Biden. Rather than maintaining Mali's international isolation following the military coup and the country's deepening partnership with Russia, the administration has begun reopening diplomatic channels, suggesting that strategic considerations may outweigh previous governance and democracy concerns.

This shift was underscored by the recent visit of US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs [Frank Garcia](#), who met with Malian Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maïga in Bamako. The visit followed [reports in March 2026](#) that Washington was close to securing an agreement permitting US aircraft and surveillance drones to once again operate within Malian airspace.

Speculation over a renewed US military role has gathered further momentum following a report in [The Washington Post](#), citing US officials that the administration is actively considering direct action against JNIM. While no formal policy has been announced, the report suggests that counter-terrorism operations in Mali are once again under active consideration in Washington.

Any renewed US engagement must also be understood within the context of Russia's position in Mali. Despite the deployment of the Africa Corps following the withdrawal of the Wagner Group, JNIM and the FLA mounted a significant offensive in April 2026. The inability of Russian-backed forces to decisively reverse the gains by JNIM and the FLA exposed Moscow's limitations and may be creating space for Washington to re-establish itself in the Sahel.

The Trump administration's foreign policy has consistently emphasised strategic interests over ideological commitments, making Mali's vast mineral wealth [an important consideration](#). As one of Africa's leading gold producers, with substantial reserves of lithium essential to global energy and technology supply chains, Mali is a valuable geopolitical 'prize'. At present, Russian and Chinese companies enjoy influence across the country's [extractive industries](#), leaving the US with comparatively limited economic leverage. Renewed security cooperation could provide Washington with a pathway to expand its strategic and commercial footprint in the country.

Nevertheless, a deeper U.S. military role carries significant risks. American counter-terrorism interventions in Africa have produced often counter-productive outcomes, with Somalia being case in point.

Türkiye's 'drone diplomacy'

Türkiye's growing role in Mali reflects a broader foreign policy strategy that has become increasingly visible across Africa: leveraging defence cooperation, drone exports and security partnerships to expand its geopolitical and economic influence.

Having established itself as one of the principal external backers of Somalia's federal government through military assistance, infrastructure investment and resource agreements, Ankara now appears to be [replicating elements](#) of this model in the Sahel.

Türkiye [condemned](#) the JNIM-FLA offensive in April 2026, signalling its continued support for the Malian junta.

Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drones have now become [central components](#) of counter-insurgency operations across the Sahel, providing governments with enhanced surveillance and strike capabilities. The latest delivery of Akıncı drones arrived in early August 2026 in Sévaré.

Reports have also suggested that the Turkish private military company [SADAT](#) has [trained members](#) of Malian President Assimi Goïta's presidential security detail, further embedding Türkiye within Mali's evolving security architecture.

As in Somalia, [military partnerships](#) appear to be advancing wider economic and commercial interests in the region. Türkiye has steadily expanded its trade, infrastructure and mining footprint across West Africa, positioning itself as an [alternative partner](#) to both traditional Western powers and newer actors such as Russia and China.

This expanding role has not gone unnoticed by Mali's armed opposition. The FLA, and more recently Tuareg representatives in Libya, have publicly urged Ankara to reconsider its support for the Malian junta. JNIM has similarly [accused Türkiye of complicity](#) in civilian deaths resulting from drone strikes carried out using Turkish-supplied weapons.

Reports of atrocities

Russia's counter-insurgency strategy is also coming under increasing scrutiny as allegations mount that its military support for the junta is exacting a growing civilian toll.

A recent report by [Human Rights Watch](#) concluded that an airstrike carried out by Russia's Africa Corps in central Mali killed eight civilians, including children. It comes just as [Mali notified](#) the International Criminal Court of its withdrawal.

Earlier this year, [three civil society organisations](#) initiated proceedings before the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, accusing the Malian state and the former Wagner Group - whose operations have since been absorbed into the Kremlin-controlled Africa Corps - of [human rights violations](#) against civilians. The case is believed to be the first before the Court seeking to hold a state legally responsible for employing foreign private military contractors.

Moscow however appears to be doubling down in its support for the junta. Despite the mounting criticism, recent reports indicate that Russia has continued to reinforce the Malian junta, with additional military equipment delivered aboard a [sanctioned Russian cargo vessel](#).

The Tabrichat ambush

Since the launch of the coordinated JNIM-FLA offensive in April 2026, the conflict has evolved into a sustained war of attrition, characterised by frequent clashes between the Malian armed forces, Russia's Africa Corps, local militia groups and insurgent forces.

Rather than seeking decisive conventional engagements, JNIM and the FLA have adopted an asymmetric strategy, designed to steadily erode the military's operational capacity.

Alongside their ability to seize and hold territory in parts of northern Mali, JNIM-FLA have used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and coordinated ambushes, disrupting the mobility of government forces.

This strategy was demonstrated most dramatically in the [recent ambush](#) of a military convoy at Tabrichat, near Anefis. [Preliminary reports](#) indicate that more than 50 Malian soldiers were killed and at least 24 others captured, making it one of the deadliest attacks on government forces since the current offensive began.

Beyond its immediate military impact, the attack demonstrated JNIM and the FLA's continued ability to coordinate complex operations deep inside contested territory despite months of aerial bombardment.

The aftermath of the attack has also highlighted the growing human rights dimension of the conflict. Following its analysis of video footage, [Amnesty International](#) called for an independent investigation into what it said appeared to be the summary execution of captured Malian soldiers.

Political Prisoners

As Mali's security situation continues to deteriorate, the junta has intensified its crackdown on political dissent, raising further concerns about the shrinking civic space.

A notable development came with the recent release of former Prime Minister [Moussa Mara](#) after approximately one year in detention. Mara had been arrested after expressing solidarity with individuals imprisoned for criticising the junta. Upon release, he called for national unity, dialogue and reconciliation.

Mara also drew attention to the disappearance of prominent opposition figure [Mountaga Tall](#), who has not been seen since armed, masked men reportedly abducted him from his home in May 2026. His case has fuelled concerns over enforced disappearances.

The clampdown has extended beyond politicians. In June 2026, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on the Malian authorities to [immediately release journalists](#)

Abdrahamane Keïta, Chahana Takiou and Youssouf Sissoko, warning that the detention of media professionals reflected a broader assault on press freedom.

Complexity of the crisis deepens

As the battlefield expands, so too does the complexity of the crisis, reducing the prospects that a purely military solution can deliver lasting stability.

The junta's reliance on Russia's Africa Corps and expanding aerial operations has thus far failed to reverse insurgent momentum. Instead, JNIM and the FLA continue to demonstrate operational adaptability.

At the same time, allegations of civilian casualties and human rights abuses threaten to deepen local grievances. Equally concerning is the continued detention of opposition figures and the intimidation of journalists.

The growing interest of external powers further complicates the picture. These actors risk creating overlapping spheres of influence that could transform Mali into another arena for geopolitical competition.

SOMALIA

Contest for the Red Sea

As instability continues to disrupt maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz and tensions between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis persist around the Bab al Mandab strait, competition for influence over Somalia's strategically located coastline is set to intensify.

Sitting at the crossroads of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, Somalia occupies one of the world's most important geopolitical positions.

Consequently, external powers are increasingly likely to prioritise securing strategic access, military influence and control over key maritime corridors over advancing Somalia's long-term political stability.

In this environment, the country's internal political crises risk becoming secondary to the broader regional contest for influence unfolding across the Horn of Africa.

US's dual-track policy

While the United States [recently met](#) Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, publicly reaffirmed its support for Somalia's territorial integrity and [denied](#) that it intends to establish a

military base in the breakaway state of Somaliland, its engagement on the ground reflects a ["dual-track policy"](#) approach.

Recent reports suggest that Washington bypassed the federal government in Mogadishu, engaging directly with Somaliland and Puntland. In Puntland, reports indicate that the US has reached an [agreement](#) to expand military facilities in the strategic port city of Bosaso. This development should be understood within the broader regional security context, including [Djibouti's](#) reported reluctance to allow the US to use its territory to launch military operations against Houthi targets in Yemen. Access to Bosaso would provide Washington with an alternative strategic foothold overlooking key maritime routes in the Gulf of Aden.

These developments coincide with a deepening [political rift](#) between Puntland and the federal government. Most recently, Puntland rejected the appointment of a federal commander in its capital, Garowe, underscoring its resistance to Mogadishu's authority.

The dispute follows Puntland's 2024 declaration that it would operate independently from the federal government, accusing President Mohamud's administration of centralising power in Mogadishu.

Against this backdrop, external engagement with Puntland carries significance beyond 'counter-terrorism cooperation', with the potential to reshape Somalia's internal political balance and further complicate relations between the centre and its federal member states.

More drone strikes, less accountability

Despite announcing that it would [withdraw funding](#) for the African Union Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) - a decision expected to significantly undermine the mission's logistical capacity in its fight against Al Shabaab and Islamic State (IS) affiliates - the Trump administration has simultaneously intensified the US's military campaign in Somalia through aerial strikes.

Since President Donald Trump's second inauguration, the pace of US air and drone strikes has [exceeded](#) the total number conducted during President Joe Biden's entire term in office.

This escalation appears to have been facilitated by the [reversal of restrictions](#) introduced under the Biden administration, which required White House approval for drone strikes in Somalia. Under the revised policy, commanders at the US's Africa Command (Africom) have once again been granted broad authority to authorise strikes without direct presidential approval, significantly lowering the threshold for military action.

The increase in operations has coincided with a reduction in public transparency. Africom "temporarily" [suspended](#) the publication of civilian casualty assessments relating to its operations in Somalia, limiting external scrutiny and weakening public accountability over the conduct and humanitarian consequences of the US campaign.

These concerns were reinforced by a [recent investigation by The Guardian](#), which reported that a US airstrike in Jamaame, south of Mogadishu, killed 12 civilians, including eight children. The incident has renewed criticism of Washington's counter-terrorism strategy and

raised fresh questions about the human cost of the increasingly opaque [‘forever war’ in Somalia](#).

Overtures to China

As uncertainty grows over the future of AUSSOM, Mogadishu appears to be seeking to diversify its security partnerships. This shift was reflected in the [recent meeting](#) between Somalia's Defence Minister, Ahmed Moallim Fiqi, and Chinese Ambassador Wang Yu, during which the two sides discussed [counter-terrorism cooperation](#) and the future of AUSSOM following the US's decision to withdraw its financial support for the mission.

China, which has steadily expanded its economic, diplomatic and security footprint across Africa through the Belt and Road Initiative and its Global Security Initiative, is well positioned to capitalise on this vacuum. For Beijing, it offers an opportunity to strengthen its influence along one of the world's most strategically important maritime corridors.

China has also consistently recognised the federal government in Mogadishu as Somalia's sole legitimate authority, including after Israel's recent recognition of the self-declared state of Somaliland.

This position carries particular significance given the [close relationship](#) between Somaliland and Taiwan. In 2020, Somaliland and Taiwan established representative offices in each other's capitals, forging a partnership between two diplomatically isolated entities whose sovereignty is contested by larger powers. For Beijing, Taiwan remains an inseparable part of China under the "One China" principle, making Somaliland's engagement with Taipei more than a symbolic diplomatic gesture - it represents a direct challenge to one of China's core foreign policy priorities.

New Saudi-led maritime coalition

Somalia's central government has aligned itself with a new [Saudi Arabia-led](#) maritime military coalition of 14 countries to safeguard shipments passing through Bab Al Mandab.

Although [piracy](#) off Somalia's coast has resurged in recent months, Riyadh's primary concern remains the [threat posed by Houthi attacks](#) on commercial shipping transiting the strait.

The Houthi's have developed a [tactical alliance](#) with Al Shabaab, potentially one of the reasons why the Somali federal government has cast its lot with the new naval alliance.

The coalition reportedly also includes Türkiye, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Pakistan, Djibouti, Bangladesh, Yemen, Sudan and the Comoros.

Equally revealing, however, are the coalition's absences. The United Arab Emirates has not joined the initiative despite sharing Saudi Arabia's opposition to the Houthis. This reflects the increasingly divergent strategic interests of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, whose competition for influence in Yemen and across the Horn of Africa has become more pronounced in recent years.

Rather than integrating into the Saudi-led framework, the UAE appears to be consolidating its own network of strategic partnerships centred on the Horn of Africa. This includes its close relationship with Somaliland, as well as its broader alignment with Ethiopia and Israel around the strategic port of Berbera.

Recent reporting by [Le Monde](#) indicates that Berbera Airport is being developed by the UAE into a military facility, reinforcing the emirate's ambition to establish independent security and logistics architecture along the Red Sea.

These competing security arrangements underscore a broader geopolitical reality: Somalia is increasingly becoming an arena in which rival regional and Gulf powers pursue overlapping but often competing strategic interests, with implications that extend beyond the country's own borders.

On the ground developments

As the battle for control of the seas rages, so too does contestation on the ground in Somalia. A fragmented federal system, persistent political disputes and [electoral](#) delays continue to erode the authority and legitimacy of the federal government.

At the same time, Mogadishu's ability to exercise territorial control remains constrained, with large swathes of the country either contested or under the effective control of Al Shabaab and Islamic State (IS) affiliates.

In recent days, Al Shabaab recaptured Teedan - a strategically significant transport and logistics hub in the Hiraa region - highlighting the group's continued ability to seize and hold territory despite years of sustained military operations against it. Reports indicate that government forces now retain control primarily over a [limited number of major towns](#) in the region.

The consequences of the continued instability are increasingly being felt beyond Somalia's borders. In July, Al Shabaab was suspected of killing [five Kenyan security personnel](#) in the border town of Mandera, underscoring the regional nature of the insurgency. As Somali government offensives continue to intensify in the south, there are growing indications that Al Shabaab fighters are dispersing towards the porous Kenya-Somalia frontier, raising the prospect of a widening conflict and the emergence of a [secondary theatre of operations](#).

Internal fragmentation, competing external interests

Somalia is a theatre in which local insurgencies, federal political fragmentation and international geopolitical competition increasingly intersect. The country's strategic location at the gateway to the Red Sea has elevated its importance far beyond its borders, drawing in regional and global powers whose interests are shaped by maritime security, military access and commercial shipping routes, which could risk entrenching, rather than resolving Somalia's underlying political crisis.

Rival Gulf states are pursuing competing security architectures across the Horn of Africa, the US is reviewing its military footprint while intensifying aerial operations, China is expanding its diplomatic and security engagement, and questions surrounding Somaliland's future have become entangled in broader geopolitical contests involving Taiwan, Israel and the UAE.

At the same time, Al Shabaab has demonstrated its continued resilience, exploiting political fragmentation and governance deficits to regain territory and project instability beyond Somalia's borders.

If international engagement continues to be driven primarily by strategic competition rather than support for dialogue, inclusive governance and institutional development, the country's internal divisions are likely to deepen.