

Kidnapping Remains a Big Deal in the Sahel

By Rida Lyammouri

Summary

Following months of negotiations, Sahel extremist group JNIM has released three foreign hostages and one Malian political leader. The Mali government led these talks, while France and Italy played minor or negligible roles. JNIM received at least €10 million for the hostages, in addition to the release from prison of 204 of its members. One of the prisoners released is charged in the U.S. with the murder of a U.S. citizen during an attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in 2016. Other members released will provide a major boost to JNIM at the local level, especially in central Mali and southern Mali on the borders with Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. Kidnapping for ransom remains a lucrative business not only for jihadist groups, but also for individuals involved in negotiations over hostages.

Key takeaways:

- The kidnapping of a well-known political figure, other than westerners, has proved to be profitable in Mali for Jama't Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM).
- The kidnapping industry remains profitable, not only for jihadists but also for "businessmen and mediators" with questionable backgrounds.
- Mr. Soumaila Cissé could have been released as early as April 2020. However, France's and Italy's requests to include French and Italian hostages in negotiations delayed his release and put him at risk.
- The number of jihadists released is unprecedented and included influential figures and members responsible for high-profile attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire.
- Mimi Ould Baba Ould Cheick, among the prisoners released, is charged in the United States (U.S.) with the murder of a U.S. citizen in an attack in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, in March 2016.
- Jihadist groups in the Sahel continue to demonstrate the ability to move hostages over long distances without being detected. None of the hostages released were taken in the area where the exchange occurred.

On October 8, 2020 Malian opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé, French-Swiss humanitarian Sophie Pétronin, and two Italian nationals, Nicola Chiacchio and Pier Luigi Maccali, were released by a jihadist group, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM).¹ The release was an exchange for the freedom of at least 204 JNIM members held in Malian prison, and a reported ransom of at least €10 million². The next day, Sophie reported that a Swiss hostage, identified as Béatrice Stöckli, was killed a month ago during her captivity³.

The Freed Hostages

Soumaïla Cissé, 70 years old, is a former Malian minister, president of the political party the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD), and three times a presidential candidate. He was taken hostage at Saraféré, not far from his hometown of Niafunké, Timbuktu region, on March 25, 2020, while campaigning ahead of the legislative elections. The JNIM offshoot Katibat Macina is known to be operating in the area. However, despite the security risks Mr. Cissé was traveling without military escort. Some days earlier, another candidate had been abducted before being released within 24 hours under unclear circumstances. While local kidnapping of low-profile political figures in conflict zones occurred in the past, the kidnapping of a high-profile political personality like Mr. Cissé was unprecedented. JNIM never officially claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and the act was only discussed among sympathizers and in closed chat rooms used by al-Qaeda's affiliated members. Based on the area where the incident occurred, however, it was also clear that Katibat Macina was responsible. Additionally, the circumstances of the kidnapping indicated that it was not a chance occurrence, but was rather targeted and organized⁴.

Kidnapping for ransom by jihadist groups is not a new phenomenon in the Sahel. In Mali and the Sahel region in general in the past two decades, extremist groups have targeted almost exclusively foreign nationals, including tourists, aid workers, and employees of multinational corporations, with the aim of negotiating ransoms. The targeting of locals is usually motivated by score-settling, or to eliminate state representatives opposed to jihadist ideology. When soldiers are captured they are either released in exchange for jihadists held by state authorities or executed.

Sophie Pétronin, 75 years old, is a French-Swiss humanitarian who has been working in northern Mali since 2004. Her work focused on helping children suffering from malnutrition. She was abducted in December 2016 by al-Mourabitoun, an al-Qaeda branch in Mali that merged with other groups to form JNIM in March 2017. The kidnapping was organized by Mohamed Ould Lahbib (aka Abou Naim) who was arrested soon after by France's anti-insurgent operation Barkhane, but then released in 2018 in unclear circumstances. Sophie was well-known and respected in Gao. With the help of locals, she escaped a kidnapping attempt in Gao in April 2012, when the town was seized and occupied by the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), an al-Qaeda affiliated group.

After her kidnapping, she appeared in hostage videos twice, the most recent in November 2018. In the video, Sophie, seemingly in poor health, pleaded to the French government to help get her released⁵. However, in her interview after the release she stated that she was asked by her captives to pretend to be ill to help convince the French government to push seriously for her release⁶. Sophie has also said that negotiations on her release failed at least three times, most recently in summer 2019, and JNIM were becoming frustrated with France's lack of responsiveness.

1. Jeune Afrique, "Mali: Soumaïla Cissé et Sophie Pétronin Libérés," 08 October 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1053645/politique/mali-soumaila-cisse-et-sophie-petronin-liberes/>

2. Jeune Afrique, "Mali: Dans le Secret des Négociations qui ont Permis la Libération de Soumaïla Cissé et Sophie Pétronin," 09 October 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1056215/politique/mali-dans-le-secret-des-negociations-qui-ont-permis-la-liberation-de-soumaila-cisse-et-sophie-petronin/>

3. Fouchard, Anthony (October 11, 2020), "L'Ex Otage Sophie Pétronin Révèle les Détails de sa Captivité," [Mediapart.fr](https://www.mediapart.fr)

4. Dubois, Olivier (April 04, 2020), "Mali: Enlevé en Même Temps que Soumaïla Cissé, Voilà ce que j'ai Vu," https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-enleve-en-meme-temps-que-soumaila-cisse-voila-ce-que-j-ai-vu-22-04-2020-2372501_3826.php

5. Video viewed by the author.

6. Fouchard, Anthony (October 11, 2020), "L'Ex Otage Sophie Pétronin Révèle les Détails de sa Captivité," [Mediapart.fr](https://www.mediapart.fr)



Sophie Pétronin with her son and grand-son at Villacoublay airport. Photo Credit: Anthony Fouchard.

The Italian hostage, father Pierluigi Maccalli, was abducted on September 17, 2018, from his church in Bomoanga, Tillabéri region, Niger, close to the border with Burkina Faso. His compatriot Nicola Chiacchio, who is an aerospace engineer touring Mali, was abducted in February 2019 south of Douentza, Mopti region, Mali, while traveling alone on his motorcycle between Douentza and Sévaré. He was initially stopped by Malian gendarmerie in the area with an offer of a transfer to Bamako for fear for his safety, but he refused. While humanitarian and aid workers have legitimate reasons to be present and operate in conflict zones, sometimes irresponsible behaviour by foreign nationals puts local and national governments in difficult situations when not respecting security guidelines and warnings. For instance, during same period a Japanese national attempted a similar adventure before being arrested and transferred to Bamako by team of peacekeepers⁷.

The Swiss Béatrice Stöckli was also a hostage held by JNIM since January 2016. Sophie said she was most likely killed after her guards grew frustrated with her refusing to follow orders⁸. It was the second time Beatrice was captured by al-Qaeda affiliated groups in Mali. She was briefly kidnapped before being released in April 2012 in Timbuktu. Al-Qaeda's branch responsible for her kidnapping that year accused Beatrice of proselytising for Christianity and warned she would be

executed if she returned to Timbuktu⁹. She returned to Timbuktu in the summer of 2013 before being kidnapped in January 2016.

Deal After Deal, and Delay After Delay

After days of anxiety, the four hostages finally arrived in Bamako during the evening of October 8, 2020. It was a happy ending after fears that the deal might fall apart. It would not have been the first time the releases of Mr. Cissé and Beatrice had fallen apart and/or delayed. Mr. Cissé could have been released much sooner, probably as early as April, 2020¹⁰. Negotiations for his release made promising progress in April and May 2020 after Malian presidential and prime ministerial approval on April 5, 2020¹¹. However, once France learned about the talks, it requested the inclusion of Sophie in negotiations. France would not have accepted Mr. Cissé's release before Sophie, who had been detained for almost four years. Simultaneously, the list of prisoners included in JNIM demands contained key members, and their release required approval from Mali's head of intelligence, who was kept out of the negotiations until then. As a result, new negotiators were put in place, in addition to new demands made by JNIM.

France refused to work with the already engaged mediator, Chérif Ould Attaher, who was put in place by the Malian government. Ould Attaher is a well-known figure in Mali and the Sahel, mainly for his involvement in drug trafficking and previous collaboration with MUJAO in 2012, during the latter's occupation of Gao. Ironically, France and Malian authorities brought in Ahmada ag Bibi, a politician with long existing ties to JNIM's supreme leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, France's enemy number one in the Sahel. Additionally, the other questionable negotiator included was Colonel Ibrahima Sanogo, a Malian counterterrorism official who is also implicated, along with his superior Moussa Diawara, in drug trafficking,

9. Callimachi, Rukmini (August 26, 2013), "Women Taken Hostage in Mali Back in Timbuktu," Associated Press, <https://news.yahoo.com/woman-taken-hostage-mali-back-timbuktu-142402996.html>

10. Carayol, Rémi (October 11, 2020), "Entre Paris et Bamako, des Divergences d'Intérêts Autour de la Libération des Otages," Mediapart.fr, https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/111020/entre-paris-et-bamako-des-divergences-d-interets-autour-de-la-liberation-des-otages#at_medium=custom7&at_campaign=1047

11. Daniel, Serge (October 12, 2020), "4 Otages Libérés Contre 204 Djihadistes et une Rançon Payée," La Lettre Confidentielle du Mali.

7. Conversation with local security expert in Mali.

8. Fouchard, Anthony (October 11, 2020), "L'Ex Otage Sophie Pétronin Révèle les Détails de sa Captivité," Mediapart.fr

according to an August 2020 United Nations (UN) panel of experts report¹².

In addition to delaying the release of Mr. Cissé and putting him at risk, JNIM swiftly exploited the French and Malian differences, and the personnel changes, to make heightened demands. The number of prisoners to be exchanged jumped from 30 to 204, and the reported ransom payment from €2 million to at least €10 millions. Subsequently, the demands were accepted and an agreement was reached with a scheduled exchange late August 2020, but the political turmoil in Bamako and change of power caused yet another delay. The process was put on hold until an interim president was nominated on September 25, 2020. Talks quickly got back on track and by October 5, 2020, Sophie was on her two-day journey to an undisclosed location after joining Mr. Cissé's vehicle along the way¹³.

Reportedly, the United States pushed back against the release of a prisoner Mimi Ould Baba Ould Cheikh¹⁴. He was charged in the U.S. with the overseas murder of a U.S. citizen and with providing logistical support to al-Qaeda in relation to 2016 attacks in Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, with one U.S. citizen killed in the Burkina attack¹⁵. Supposedly, this was one of the reasons that delayed the release of the four hostages by a couple of days.

Who Are Some Key JNIM Prisoners Released?

The high number and profile of prisoners released is unprecedented. On October 3 and 4, reports started to emerge about the release of at least 204 JNIM prisoners and their evacuation, some by plane to Tessalit, Kidal

12. United Nations Security Council (August 7, 2020), "Letter dated 7 August 2020 from the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali addressed to the President of the Security Council," <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/785/Rev.1>

13. Fouchard, Anthony (October 11, 2020), "L'Ex Otage Sophie Pétronin Révèle les Détails de sa Captivité," [Mediapart.fr](https://mediapart.fr)

14. Prevost, Nathalie (October 9, 2020), "Une Libération d'Otage Négociée Habilement par les Djihadistes," <https://mondafrique.com/une-liberation-dotages-negociee-de-main-de-maitre-par-les-groupes-djihadistes/>

15. The United States Department of Justice (January 16, 2020), "Malian National Charged With the Overseas Murder of a U.S. Citizen and Providing Material Support to Two Foreign Terrorist Organizations," <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/malian-national-charged-overseas-murder-us-citizen-and-providing-material-support-two-foreign>

region, northern Mali and others to Niono, central Mali. The freed prisoners included members responsible for high-profile attacks in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire. Their release boosts JNIM at a critical time. The group have been engaged for at least a year in violent clashes with the Islamic State branch ISGS in Mali and Burkina Faso. Simultaneously, the group is facing aggressive counterterrorism efforts led by France and regional partners, in addition to the newly formed special forces Takuba Task Force, made up of multiple European countries in addition to Mali. The number of prisoners released is also significant for a group that is estimated to have hundreds, maybe low thousands of fighters.



JNIM supreme leader, Iyad Ag Ghali speaking to released prisoners.

The releases of Mimi Baba Ould Cheick and Fawaz Ould Ahmeida (aka Ibrahim 10) remain questionable. Their role in killing dozens of westerners, including French citizens and at least one U.S. citizen, made them the most notorious high-profile members released. However, JNIM will benefit more from the release of influential figures at the local level. For instance, released prisoner Mohamed Ag Siguidi Ag Magdi is key for JNIM in its ongoing fight against the Islamic State branch ISGS in the Ménaka region. The same could be said about the many al-Mourabitoun members released. JNIM will reassert its control in areas where it is being challenged by ISGS. Furthermore, Souleymane Keita, another released prisoner, was responsible for JNIM's expansion into southern Mali and northern Cote d'Ivoire prior to his arrest in 2015. His release will provide the group with an extra boost as it seeks to establish a strong presence in the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cote d'Ivoire.



JNIM supreme leader, Iyad Ag Ghali greeting released prisoners.

Key members released

Mimi Ould Baba Ould Cheick: A Lamhar Arab and son of the mayor of Tarkint, Gao region, and known drug trafficker, Baba Ould Cheick. Mimi was in charge of the logistics, coordination, and planning of al-Qaeda's branch al-Mourabitoun's attack on restaurant Capuccino in Burkina Faso, and a resort in Burkina Faso, in January and March 2016, respectively. He also facilitated equipment transportation from Libya through Niger into Mali for al-Mourabitoun. He was arrested in 2017.

Ibrahim Ould Hamoud (aka Abou Dardar al-Chinquit): His release was also fiercely negotiated since he is an important member of JNIM's branch Al-Furqan in Timbuktu region. He is an intellectual from Mauritania, and known for his Islamic knowledge which makes him more of an ideological driver than a fighter. He was arrested February 7, 2019.

Hama Cissé: A Fulani from the Inner Niger Delta in central Mali. He is an important Lieutenant to Amadou Kouffa and a strategist whose capture slowed down certain actions of Katibat Macina.

Abdoulaye Mamoudou (aka Jouleybib Nampala): A Fulani from the Nampala area, he was in charge of Katibat Macina propaganda before his arrest. He is an important lieutenant to Amadou Kouffa. He is fluent in Arabic and is a genius in new technologies. He is young (20s) and very experienced.

Souleymane Keita: Head of Katibat Ansar al-Dain south (Tariq Ibn Ziyad) and he was deployed in the Sikasso area on the borders with Burkina Faso and

Cote d'Ivoire in 2015 before his arrest, after which Katibat Ansar al-Dain was dismantled. However, it has gradually been reconstituted in his absence under the leadership of Katibat Macina and is on the rise. His liberation is a boost for JNIM as the group continues to establish itself in this tri-border area (Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso). A large number of his lieutenants were released with him.

Mohamed Ag Siguidi ag magdi: From an influential family in Ménaka area. He was Ansar al-Din then JNIM commander in the area and led multiple armed assaults and rocket attacks against the Malian Army, MINUSMA, and Barkhane. His release is a boost for JNIM as the group tries to reassert itself while being challenged by the Islamic State branch ISGS.

Mahmoud Barry (aka Abou Yahya): A Fulani from Nampala area and a founding member of the Macina Liberation Front (FLM) before it became Katibat Macina. He was long considered by many to be the head of the branch, because he was very active militarily and in propaganda more than Amadou Kouffa at the beginning. He is a marabout and influential. He is also a military commander and a great strategist. He was arrested by Malian security forces on July 26, 2016, just a week after the deadly attack on the Malian Army camp of Nampala on July 19, 2016. His release was also fiercely negotiated at different levels, because with him Katibat Macina will be more dangerous.

Tahar al-Jazairi: The most long-serving jihadist among all those released, with links back to GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat). He is an Algerian, blind, and lost his right arm in an accident with explosives. He is active and very important in the ideological propagation of the group in Timbuktu and Taoudeni regions. He was arrested in 2019 along with other members in the Timbuktu region.

Alhousseini Ould Ahmada (aka Zakaria): Originally from Almoustrat area, Gao region. He was a military strategist for Almourabitoun and knew Mokhtar Belmokhtar. He is one of the founding members of MUJAO before the creation of Almourabitoun. He played a part in the planning of the car bomb attack against Gao airport at the end of 2016 and MOC (Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination) in Gao, January 2017.

Fawaz Ould Ahmeida (aka Ibrahim 10): A Mauritanian who was an active member of Almourabitoun. He either participated, planned, or assisted in carrying out multiple high profile attacks that targeted westerners in Bamako and Sévaré, Mali; Grand Bassam, Cote d'Ivoire, and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

The Happy Ending Has a Price!

France, Mali, and Italy will never confirm payment of ransoms for the release of the four hostages. However, based on multiple reporting, at least €10 million has been paid, while other reports suggested €30 million was paid. The amount paid and who provided it will remain a mystery, but one thing is for sure: a payment was made to JNIM. A document from April 2020 published by La Lettre Confidentielle du Mali revealed the demand for €2 million in order for Mr. Cissé to be released. The release of at least Mr. Cissé confirms that this demand was accepted. The inclusion of the French and the two Italian hostages, reportedly, brought the ransom total to €30 million¹⁶. Carrying out high-profile attacks in West Africa has cost JNIM around €16,000 and a ransom of between €10 million and €30 million is thus a significant gain for an organization that saw its funds from kidnapping for ransoms drying up.

Conclusion

This is not a first time hostages have been released in exchange for ransoms and for prisoner releases. The involvement of an influential local politician added another aspect to it, however. While in the past, foreign governments have played key roles in the release of hostages, this time France and Italy played minor roles, if any. Malian authorities took the lead in order to release one of their own, which could have happened in a matter of weeks after his kidnapping. France had the opportunity to negotiate the release of Sophie Pétronin over a couple of years, but failed multiple times.

There is no question that October 8, 2020 was a memorable day for the free hostages, for their families, and friends. The other reality is that it came at a cost. JNIM, a group that has terrorized Mali and the Sahel region, is now stronger than ten days ago. The group gained a significant amount of money in addition to welcoming back 204 of its members. These members were responsible for the killing of hundreds if not thousands of civilians. The group's moral has been boosted by seeing their compatriots free and the commitment of their leaders to liberate them through the kidnapping of foreign nationals and high-profile personalities. This is an encouragement to new recruits and low-ranked members, knowing they can take risks carrying out missions and being arrested, since there will always be the possibility of release. JNIM and their brigades will continue to exploit opportunities for kidnapping as a way of generating funds and freeing their members. As a result, foreign nationals working in the Sahel region are at constant risks of abduction. Still, due to the localized characteristics of JNIM's brigades, the threat will be more felt by local communities where the group operates while the state remains almost absent.

Kidnapping for ransom is lucrative, not only for jihadist groups, but also for mediators, and not necessarily financially but also in terms of relationships and positioning for future negotiations. It is thus unlikely to stop in the Sahel. There were multiple offers to negotiate the release of Mr. Cissé. Some were legitimate and others were not¹⁷. Those that facilitated his release, without exception, have questionable backgrounds, including drug trafficking and ties to extremist groups responsible for ongoing instability in Mali and the Sahel in general. Mr. Cissé today is a hero in Mali and if presidential elections are held next month, he would certainly be elected. He will still be a favorite come the presidential elections of 2023 if he decides to remain in politics. He is popular in Mali and West Africa in general. Following his kidnapping, new contacts have been developed and only time will tell how they will be managed and exploited.

16. Daniel, Serge (October 12, 2020), "4 Otages Libérés Contre 204 Djihadistes et une Rançon Payée," La Lettre Confidentielle du Mali.

17. Ibid. "Les escrocs qui affirmaient pouvoir libérer Soumi."

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