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POLICY PAPER

DRONE WARFARE AND CARTEL CONVERGENCE IN WEST AFRICA: RISKS TO AMERICAN SAFETY, SECURITY, AND PROSPERITY

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The convergence of armed group drone warfare and cartel expansion in the Sahel is a global problem with direct consequences for the United States. Far from being a peripheral conflict, instability in the Sahel directly affects American safety, security, and prosperity. For U.S. safety, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)'s rapid shift from crude drone experiments to battlefield strikes—combined with cartel drone attacks and Ukraine-trained operatives—means tactics tested abroad can now reach Americans and U.S. border communities far more quickly than before.

*For **U.S. security**, the Sahel's role as a trafficking hub links cartels and armed groups in ways that accelerate the spread of new weapons, synthetic drugs, and criminal expertise. This undermines U.S. deterrence, weakens partners, and creates openings for Russia and China to expand their influence. The recent dismantling of an ISIS financial network running through West Africa further demonstrates how the region sustains global terrorist operations with direct implications for American security.*

*For **U.S. prosperity**, the same instability raises costs for American firms, disrupts supply chains, and channels valuable mineral and energy deals toward U.S. competitors. Early U.S. engagement—through counter-drone innovation, maritime security, and financial integrity—can contain the threat at its source and keep America safer, stronger, and more prosperous.*

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

The rapid adoption of drone warfare by JNIM, al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Sahel, and the separatist Liberation Front of Azawad (FLA) marks a dangerous escalation in non-state actor capabilities. In less than two years, JNIM has advanced from rudimentary drone experiments to integrated battlefield operations, employing drones for intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and precision or kamikaze strikes across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo.¹ This represents the fastest adoption of operational drone warfare by a Sub-Saharan non-state group.² Paired with offline AI tools and geofence bypass techniques, JNIM's advances highlight a broader global challenge: the convergence of insurgent and transnational criminal networks, including Mexican cartels, in ungoverned spaces like the Sahel.

The vulnerability of existing defenses is already evident. In September 2025, the FLA penetrated a Malian TB2 drone base—an installation worth hundreds of millions of dollars in assets. Whether due to the absence of counter-drone systems or the use of fiber-optic or coded First Person View (FPV) drones to override them, the result was the same: a glaring exposure in a high-value facility. Such incidents demonstrate how quickly state-of-the-art capabilities can be undermined, underscoring why the prospect of cartels adopting similar methods near U.S. borders is a direct concern. French investigative reporting further indicates that Mexican cartels have infiltrated Ukraine's International Legion to acquire advanced FPV drone tactics,³ raising concerns about potential knowledge transfer and amplifying risks to U.S. interests.

The groundwork for this convergence was laid over a decade ago, when al-Qaeda-affiliated groups collaborated with Mexican cartels to facilitate drug trafficking and share operational expertise in West Africa.^{4,5,6} As early as 2017, reports documented Mexican cartels, including the Sinaloa Cartel, expanding into African markets by leveraging AQ-linked networks to move cocaine through ports in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Cape Verde, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Dakar.⁷ Our analysis is that large-scale shipments—such as those detailed in recent investigations tracing cocaine flows through these ports and onward to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso⁸—are highly unlikely to occur without at least tacit coordination or acquiescence from JNIM or its local affiliates, in addition to corrupt officials.

1. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025). *Drone Proliferation in Africa Is Destabilizing*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/drone-proliferation-africa-destabilizing/>

2. Niccola Milnes and Rida Lyammouri, "Countering JNIM's Drone Proliferation in the Sahel," 14 July 2025, *Policy Center for the New South*, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/countering-jnims-drone-proliferation-sahel>

3. Intelligence Online. (2025, July 29). Mexico/Ukraine: Ukraine counterintelligence investigates presence of sicarios on front line. <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2025/07/29/mexico-ukraine-ukraine-counterintelligence-investigates-presence-of-sicarios-on-front-line.202413134-art>

4. Pulitzer Center. (2023). *The Bissau Corridor*. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/bissau-corridor>

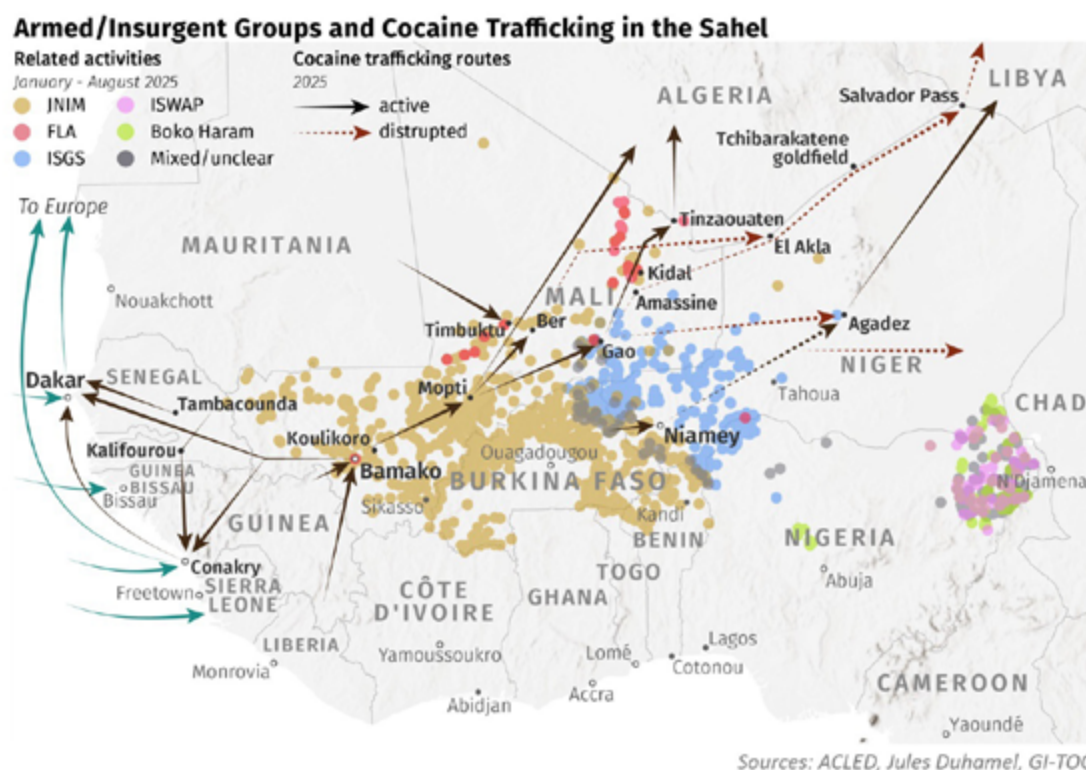
5. Brookings Institution. (2023). *The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-foreign-policies-of-the-sinaloa-cartel-and-cjng-part-iii-africa/>

6. El Universal. (2017, July 1). *Mexican Cartels Expand to New Markets*. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/english/2017/07/1/mexican-cartels-expand-new-markets/>

7. Ibid

8. SeneNews. (2025, August 29). *Cocaine, Cash, and Cartels: The Ins and Outs of a Trafficking Operation that Puts Dakar on the Radar*. <https://www.senenews.com/en/senegal/cocaine-cash-and-cartels-the-ins-and-outs-of-a-trafficking-operation-that-puts-dakar-on-the-radar-9075.html>

While direct operational links between JNIM/FLA and Mexican cartels have not been confirmed, the sheer volume of trafficking suggests at minimum coexistence and communication between cartel-backed smuggling networks and insurgent actors who control critical transit zones. The map **Armed/Insurgent Groups and Cocaine Trafficking in the Sahel** illustrates these overlaps, showing jihadist corridors in West Africa running along the same northbound cocaine routes moving from coastal ports towards Europe. This convergence should not be assumed to stop at trafficking. As documented with drones, the Sahel's ungoverned spaces, strategic location, and exposure to external actors make it a testing ground for tactical innovations that spread across regions.⁹



Mexican transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), including the Sinaloa Cartel, are expanding operations in coastal West Africa¹⁰ to bypass stricter enforcement at U.S. and Mexican borders. By partnering with local networks, they traffic cocaine through regional ports while exploiting porous borders and corrupt officials. These dynamics also create conditions for synthetic drug production,¹¹ as suggested by recent cartel-linked activities in South Africa.¹² West Africa's role as a hub for illicit activities amplifies the threat posed by Latin American cartels and JNIM, particularly as both advance their drone capabilities and

9. Africa Center for Strategic Studies; Niccola Milnes and Rida Lyammouri, "Countering JNIM's Drone Proliferation in the Sahel," 14 July 2025, *Policy Center for the New South*, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/countering-jnims-drone-proliferation-sahel>

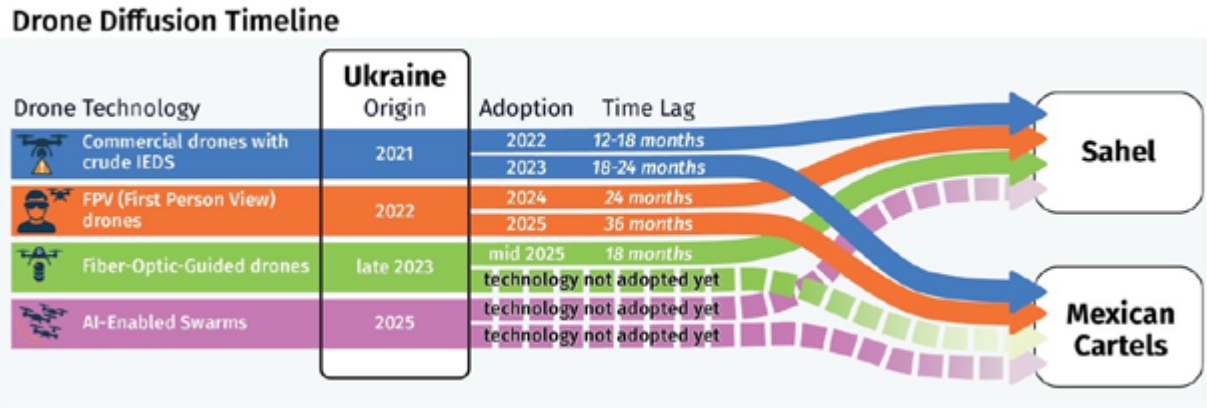
10. Homeland Security Today. (2024, August 23). *Mexican Cartels Expanding into West Africa, ISIS Operating in South Africa, USAFRICOM Says*. <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/mexican-cartels-expanding-into-west-africa-isis-operating-in-south-africa-usafricom-says/>

11. Eyewitness News. (2024, November 20). *Notorious Mexican Drug Cartels Extend Reach into South Africa*. <https://www.ewn.co.za/2024/11/20/notorious-mexican-drug-cartels-extend-reach-into-south-africa>

12. Brookings Institution. (2023). *The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-foreign-policies-of-the-sinaloa-cartel-and-cjng-part-iii-africa/>

explore synthetic drug production.¹³ Mexican and Brazilian cartels, including the PCC, are expanding cocaine trafficking through West African coastal routes into European markets, exploiting the region’s poorly governed spaces to bypass U.S. border enforcement.¹⁴ The parallel use of drones by cartels, FLA, and JNIM raises concerns about potential exchanges of drone tactics that could enhance both smuggling and attack operations. At the same time, cartel-linked drug production in West Africa further destabilizes the region.¹⁵ Without a coordinated U.S. response, these evolving threats risk undermining American security in a theatre increasingly contested by China and Russia.

Mexican cartels deploy drones more frequently than JNIM, though with less sophistication, raising concerns about potential learning through Sahelian partnerships that could circumvent U.S. border enforcement. Between 2022 and mid-2023, Mexico’s SEDENA reported over 493 cartel drone attacks, primarily against rival groups, using modified commercial drones—such as DJI Mavic or Avata 2—equipped with grenades or improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹⁶ Notable incidents include a CJNG chemical drone attack in Michoacán in April 2024 and an attempted FPV drone strike in Nayarit in April 2025. By contrast, JNIM’s use of drones for surveillance and coordinated strikes in the Sahel is more advanced, suggesting that future collaboration could significantly enhance cartel capabilities for trafficking and drug production, thereby amplifying threats to U.S. security.



13. Pulitzer Center. (2023). *The Bissau Corridor*. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/bissau-corridor>

14. Degenhardt, B. (2025, July 29). *The evolving nexus: Narco trafficking between Latin America and Africa*. Defense.info. <https://defense.info/highlight-of-the-week/the-evolving-nexus-narco-trafficking-between-latin-america-and-africa/>

15. Homeland Security Today. (2024, August 23). *Mexican Cartels Expanding into West Africa, ISIS Operating in South Africa, USAFRICOM Says*. <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/mexican-cartels-expanding-into-west-africa-isis-operating-in-south-africa-usafricom-says/>

16. Armament Research Services. (2025, June 17). *Mexican Drug Cartel Use of UAV-delivered Munitions*. <https://armamentresearch.com/mexican-drug-cartel-use-of-uav-delivered-munitions/>

PILLAR 1: U.S. SAFETY

How does drone proliferation and criminal-insurgent convergence affect U.S. safety? Will Americans or our partners be harmed?

JNIM's and FLA's use of commercial drones for real-time surveillance, targeting, and strikes on military installations illustrates a low-cost, high-impact capability that is difficult to detect and counter.¹⁷ These systems—enhanced by offline AI tools and geofence bypass techniques—can operate without external communication, enabling them to evade traditional detection methods.¹⁸ While no deliberate drone attacks on U.S. or Western personnel in West Africa, including the Sahel, have been confirmed, the risk to Americans and partners is increasing as shared infrastructure, transit routes, and proximity to host-nation targets expand exposure.

The Sahel has a record of exporting tactics. Just as IEDs spread beyond their original conflict zones, JNIM and the FLA's drone innovations—such as fiber-optic control and comms-free programming—are likely to proliferate. Mexican cartels, which attempted an FPV drone strike in April 2025, could absorb these advances, building on more than a decade of AQ-cartel collaboration in trafficking networks.¹⁹ The TB2 base incident in Mali illustrates the scale of the challenge: a non-state group breached one of the region's most valuable military installations with a relatively low-cost FPB drone, exposing the limits of current counter-drone defenses in practice. Cartels experimenting with FPV systems could exploit the same techniques, accelerating the arrival of these capabilities at U.S. borders and heightening risks for American partners and communities.

Humanitarian actors and civilian populations in West Africa also face heightened risks, lacking early warning systems or hardened infrastructure. JNIM's and FLA's attacks on Mali's resource infrastructure exacerbate instability, displace communities, and create space for criminal-insurgent cooperation. The presence of U.S. personnel—including diplomats, contractors, and aid workers—in these environments increases the likelihood of deliberate or opportunistic targeting. Cartel adoption of JNIM's and FLA's drone tactics would amplify the danger within the Western Hemisphere, adding to the 493 cartel drone attacks already reported in Mexico between 2022 and 2023.²⁰ Instability in the Sahel also drives displacement flows into Europe, which can extend to U.S. borders. Al-Qaeda affiliates in the region continue to articulate their intent to target Western interests, making each advance in capability a direct threat to American safety.

Today represents the fastest period of innovation uptake in the history of asymmetric warfare. FPV drones took less than two years to move from Ukraine to the Sahel. With cartels and armed groups now sharing operational space, the next wave of systems—such

17. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025). *Drone Proliferation in Africa Is Destabilizing*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/drone-proliferation-africa-destabilizing/>

18. Ibid

19. Pulitzer Center. (2023). *The Bissau Corridor*. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/bissau-corridor>; Brookings Institution. (2023). *The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa*; El Universal. (2017, July 1). *Mexican Cartels Expand to New Markets*. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/english/2017/07/1/mexican-cartels-expand-new-markets/>

20. Armament Research Services. (2025, June 17). *Mexican Drug Cartel Use of UAV-delivered Munitions*.

as drone swarms or AI-enabled drone swarms²¹—could appear in months rather than years. This acceleration increases the likelihood that lethal capabilities tested abroad will emerge closer to U.S. citizens and border communities.

PILLAR 2: U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

How does this affect U.S. national security? Will it undermine American strength, presence, or deterrence?

JNIM's drone-enabled operations across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Togo, employing ISR-guided targeting and jamming-resistant drones, demonstrate rapid tactical innovation.²² Mexican TCOs are also advancing drone capabilities, with frequent but less sophisticated attacks, such as the Sinaloa Cartel's January 2025 drone bombing in Chihuahua (Armament Research Services, 2025).²³ French investigative reports reveal that Mexican cartels have infiltrated Ukraine's International Legion to acquire advanced FPV drone tactics, with operatives like "Águila-7," a possible former GAFE member, gaining expertise in Lviv training centers.²⁴ This deliberate effort to accelerate drone capabilities, potentially shared with JNIM through Sahel-based networks, increases the risk of tactical convergence.²⁵

The threat environment extends beyond JNIM. Islamic State affiliates in the Sahel—most notably Islamic State in the Sahel (IS-Sahel) and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)—are emerging as critical nodes in the group's global survival. A recent Iraqi intelligence operation dismantled an IS financial network spanning three West African states, which was channeling funds to Iraq and supporting attack planning in Europe.²⁶ ISWAP alone generates millions through taxation, governance, and cryptocurrency networks, sending funds across Africa and beyond. This illustrates that West Africa is not only a testing ground for new battlefield systems but also a financial hub sustaining global terrorist operations.

West Africa, notably the Sahel, serves as a trafficking hub that links cartels and armed groups,²⁷ accelerating the spread of weapons, synthetic drugs,²⁸ and criminal expertise. Despite JNIM's nominal bans on drug use, its history of facilitating trafficking flows indicates

21. Wall Street Journal. (2024, September 25). AI-powered drone swarms have now entered the battlefield. <https://www.wsj.com/world/ai-powered-drone-swarms-have-now-entered-the-battlefield-2cab0f05>

22. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2025). *Drone Proliferation in Africa Is Destabilizing*. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/drone-proliferation-africa-destabilizing/>

23. Brookings Institution. (2023). *The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa*.

24. Intelligence Online. (2025, July 29). *Mexico/Ukraine: Ukraine counterintelligence investigates presence of sicarios on front line*. <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2025/07/29/mexico-ukraine-ukraine-counterintelligence-investigates-presence-of-sicarios-on-front-line.202413134-art>

25. Kyiv Post. (2025, July 31). Latin American drug cartels send 'volunteers' to Ukraine for drone training. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/57311>

26. Weiss, C. (2025, September 3). Iraqi intel busts Islamic State financial network in West Africa. *FDD's Long War Journal*.

27. Pulitzer Center. (2023). *The Bissau Corridor*. <https://pulitzercenter.org/stories/bissau-corridor>; Degenhardt, B. (2025, July 29). *The evolving nexus: Narco trafficking between Latin America and Africa*. Defense.info.

28. Homeland Security Today. (2024, August 23). *Mexican Cartels Expanding into West Africa, ISIS Operating in South Africa, USAFRICOM Says*. <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/mexican-cartels-expanding-into-west-africa-isis-operating-in-south-africa-usafricom-says/>

continued involvement in smuggling, as evidenced by the recent seizure of cocaine at the Mali–Senegal border.²⁹ These permissive environments create opportunities for operational exchange—whether in drone tactics, trafficking logistics, or synthetic drug methods. The integration of IS-Sahel and ISWAP into global Islamic State finance adds another dimension: groups in the Sahel are not only learning locally but also sustaining and exporting instability abroad.

For the U.S., this convergence undermines deterrence and erodes influence in a region already contested by Russia and China. It increases the likelihood that tactical innovations pioneered in the Sahel will appear in U.S. border regions, while IS financing networks continue to directly fuel plots in Europe and Iraq. A coordinated counter-drone and counter-trafficking strategy is essential to protect American security, contain diffusion, and preserve U.S. strength where rivals are already expanding their foothold.

PILLAR 3: U.S. PROSPERITY

How does this affect U.S. prosperity? Will it cost or create economic access, resilience, or influence?

The drone threat is one expression of a broader insecurity–cartel ecosystem that is expanding across the Sahel and coastal West Africa. Left under-resourced, this ecosystem will extend its reach, raising costs for U.S. firms while eroding market access. JNIM’s operational learning with commercial drones occurs alongside cartel logistics and finance networks; together, they create compound risks to trade, investment, and supply chains.

Sectors such as energy, logistics, telecom, and extractives already operate in areas affected by drone activity, which increases the risk of surveillance or attacks if targeting priorities expand from strictly military sites to economically symbolic infrastructure, including transport corridors, storage facilities, and ports.³⁰ As operations push toward Benin and Togo, coastal corridors anchoring regional trade and energy movement face greater exposure.

At the same time, the reported presence of Mexican TCOs in coastal West Africa heightens the risk of illicit finance, port infiltration, and smuggling near critical infrastructure.³¹ These conditions create fertile ground for the transfer of tactics and technologies between trafficking and insurgent actors, undermining governance, increasing commercial security costs, and reducing investor confidence.

The same networks moving cocaine through Atlantic routes and West African gateways—and now linked to synthetic drug production in southern Africa—signal a broader illicit economy that raises insurance, security, and counterparty risks for U.S. companies while depressing investor confidence.³² The July 2025 seizure of a ‘drugs superlab’ in Limpopo,

29. APA News, “Sénégal: l’Opération Douanes-Gendarmerie Saisit 643 kg de Cocaïne,” 05 Aout 2025, <https://fr.apanews.net/news/senegal-643-kg-de-cocaine-saisis-lors-dune-operation-conjointe-douanes-gendarmerie/>; Agence France Press, “Senegal Customs Seize Cocaine Shipments Worth \$50M,” 18 June 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/senegal-customs-seize-cocaine-shipments-worth-over-50m/7661544.html>

30. Countering JNIM’s Drone Proliferation PCNS

31. Brookings Institution. (2023). *The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part III: Africa*.

32. Eyewitness News. (2024, November 20). *Notorious Mexican Drug Cartels Extend Reach into South Africa*; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). (2023). *World Drug Report 2023*. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/world-drug-report-2023.html>

linked to the Sinaloa Cartel, provides a stark illustration of this diversification.³³ What began as trafficking flows has now escalated into industrial-scale synthetic production on the continent, compounding the economic and security risks for U.S. firms operating in African markets.

Cartels' rapid adoption of UAV-delivered munitions, along with reported efforts to acquire advanced FPV know-how via Ukraine, increases the likelihood of technique transfer across theatres—capabilities that could be repurposed against economic targets or to streamline smuggling.³⁴ Each increment of capability on the Sahel–West Africa–Atlantic axis risks reverberating through the maritime gateways and financial channels that U.S. firms rely on.

As instability raises private-sector risk premiums, competitors with stronger state backing gain a relative advantage in mining, energy, and telecom concessions, gradually shifting long-term commercial influence away from the U.S. Recent reports of U.S. interest in mineral deals in Mali and Burkina Faso³⁵ underscore what is at stake: if insecurity continues unchecked, American firms face higher barriers to entry while rivals backed by Russia or China consolidate ground. Without sustained engagement in the regions where the problem is scaling—the Sahel and adjacent coastal nodes—the U.S. risks ceding economic space as the ecosystem matures.

Still, there is opportunity. By investing in counter-drone innovation, maritime security, and financial integrity, the U.S. can help secure critical trade routes, protect global supply chains, and open markets for American technology and services. Engaging early in the Sahel and West Africa allows the U.S. to contain the problem at its source and safeguard prosperity before these converging threats spread further.

POLICY PRIORITIES FOR U.S. ENGAGEMENT

To address the global threat of drone proliferation and criminal–insurgent convergence, the U.S. must act decisively. The following priorities build on our July 2025 brief, *Countering JNIM's Drone Proliferation in the Sahel*, and reflect the emerging risk of Mexican TCO expansion in West Africa. Without greater U.S. engagement, insecurity in the Sahel will continue to spread across regions, raising costs for American safety, security, and prosperity.

COORDINATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

- Establish a Standing Multi-Stakeholder Task Force, including AFRICOM, SOUTHCOM, DHS, DEA, and U.S. law enforcement, to monitor convergence trends in West Africa. This should link Sahel operations with Western Hemisphere counter-narcotics efforts, recognizing that networks moving drugs and money also move technology, operational know-how, and personnel. The mandate must explicitly cover insurgent and armed group pipelines such as JNIM, ISGS, and ISWAP, which overlap with cartel trafficking corridors and sustain global operations.

33. Eyewitness News. (2024, November 20). *Notorious Mexican Drug Cartels Extend Reach into South Africa*.

34. Armament Research Services. (2025, June 17). *Mexican Drug Cartel Use of UAV-delivered Munitions*. <https://armamentresearch.com/mexican-drug-cartel-use-of-uav-delivered-munitions/>; Kyiv Post. (2025, July 31). Latin American drug cartels send 'volunteers' to Ukraine for drone training. <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/57311>

35. France24. (2025, August 25). Washington extends offer of military support to Sahel junta regimes. <https://www.france24.com/en/americas/20250825-washington-extends-offer-of-military-support-to-sahel-junta-regimes>

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- Create a Regional Convergence and OSINT Platform that tracks both drone incidents and cartel-linked indicators, such as trafficking routes, dual-use shipments, and port infiltration. This platform would enable early detection of capability transfers—from drones to synthetic drug production methods—before they appear in the Americas.
 - Formalize AFRICOM–SOUTHCOM planning cells to model how cartel and insurgent groups collaborate once present in the same space. These cells should assess risks beyond drones, including AI tools, trafficking logistics, money laundering, and synthetic drug production, drawing on precedent AQ–cartel linkages across West Africa.

TACTICAL ADAPTATION

- Incorporate cartel and insurgent tactics into Red Team exercises, extending beyond drones to include AI-enabled routing, concealment of trafficking flows, and hybrid criminal–militant logistics. Scenarios should test how these methods could migrate into U.S. border contexts.
- Factor in the unprecedented pace of battlefield innovation. Ukraine is the first conflict where warfare technology moves directly from table-top tinkering to field deployment, refined in real time with AI-enabled training. FPV drone tactics took less than two years to move from Ukraine to the Sahel; future systems—including drone swarms and AI-enabled autonomous strike packages—will diffuse even faster. Planning must assume transfer in as little as six months once cartels and armed groups operate in the same corridors. Red Team exercises should model not only Sahel deployments, but also the implications for U.S. safety, border security, and civilian infrastructure if they appear in the Western Hemisphere.
- Develop countermeasures that are deployable both in the Sahel and the Western Hemisphere, covering drones as well as broader smuggling and port infiltration techniques. This ensures U.S. forces, partners, and agencies are prepared for cross-regional diffusion.

MONITORING & INTELLIGENCE

- Task AFRICOM and DHS to expand monitoring of dual-use technology and trafficking flows through West African ports and air corridors, prioritizing cargo and financial networks already exploited by both insurgents and cartels.
- Track cartel affiliates with combat or technical experience—including those reported in Ukraine’s International Legion—and monitor their potential movement into West Africa as an early warning of cross-theater collaboration.
- Commission an in-depth study to map out cartel–armed group linkages in the Sahel and coastal West Africa. The study should identify shared logistics nodes, financial facilitators, and operational overlaps, establishing a baseline to measure evolving collaboration and pinpointing where U.S. interdiction would be most effective.

INNOVATION AND CAPABILITY BUILDING

- Support African partners in developing counter-drone and counter-trafficking solutions interoperable with U.S. systems. This builds resilience at the source while expanding markets for American technology.
- Invest in forensic capacity to track battlefield innovation and illicit finance. Capabilities should cover not only drone modifications but also trafficking logistics, synthetic drug

production, and financial flows, improving attribution across theaters and strengthening deterrence.

CONCLUSION: A GLOBAL CHALLENGE REQUIRING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

The convergence of JNIM's drone warfare and Mexican TCO expansion in West Africa builds on over a decade of cartel-AQ collaboration—from cocaine trafficking in the 2010s to today's synthetic drug production and drone technology transfers. This global problem, concentrated in West Africa and the Sahel as hubs of tactical innovation and illicit flows, poses direct risks to U.S. safety, security, and prosperity, with potential spillover to America's borders. Under-resourcing this challenge would leave the balance of power in the Sahel and coastal West Africa to competitors, shaping global security dynamics for years to come.

KEY QUESTIONS REMAIN:

- How can the U.S. prioritize counter-drone and counter-trafficking efforts without overextending resources?
- What are the most effective ways to disrupt technology transfers between insurgents and cartels, given their established ties?
- How can we balance engagement in the Sahel with pressing domestic border security priorities?

By addressing these questions, the U.S. can develop a proactive strategy to counter this evolving threat, ensuring a safer, more secure, and more prosperous future.

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ABOUT THE POLICY CENTER FOR THE NEW SOUTH

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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All opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author.

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