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COMMANDERS ORGANISATION

MARCH 2026

From the Middle East to the Sahel: UAS knowledge transfer and implications for European Security

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RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

The line between regional insurgency and transnational security threat in the Sahel has become increasingly blurred, as the rapid adoption of drone technology by terrorist groups is reshaping conflict dynamics in ways that the European Union has yet to fully reckon with. The recent drone attack at the Niamey airport in Niger, claimed by terrorist group Islamic State (Egbejule, 2026), offers a window into how far this shift has already progressed. In this regard, Serwat (2026) highlights how Jihadist groups in West Africa have been increasingly employing commercially available drones, signalling a move towards low-cost aerial warfare. Since 2023, more than 100 cases have been recorded (Serwat, 2026): this emerging capability, illustrated by recent attacks on military bases and critical infrastructure, poses indirect but significant risks to European security interests. While the terrorist threat in the area still represents a concern in terms of radicalization spillover, unregulated migratory flows (Nasser, 2025) and economic implications (Horvath-Santha, 2024, p. 4), the rapid integration of drone technology by jihadist groups has introduced a more acute dimension to this threat, one that is no longer confined to the region but is increasingly relevant to European security.

This paper argues that the transfer of knowledge and operational expertise in Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) from Middle Eastern armed groups to groups in the Sahel region is reshaping regional conflict dynamics, with direct security implications for the European Union. The first section of the paper examines non-state actors and armed drone use in more general terms, situating the Middle East as the origin point of the knowledge transfer chain that now reaches into Africa. The paper then turns to two of the major terrorist groups operating in the Sahel, specifically JNIM and ISWAP, analysing their drone capabilities and operational evolution. A section focusing on the security implications for the EU will argue that Europe's response has been insufficient so far relative to the pace and sophistication of the threat. Finally, a conclusion will summarise the main findings.

Drones have become central in conflicts involving extremist groups (Military Africa, 2025). The accessibility, relatively low cost, and capacity to circumvent traditional security measures have facilitated the growing use of UAS among them (OSCE, 2025, p. 84; Allen, 2025, p. 10). Across the African continent, armed groups affiliated with or inspired by organisations such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda are among the primary adopters of drone technology (Figueiredo, 2024, p. 7). In this regard, while drone acquisition and operational deployment is rapidly accelerating in Africa, and more precisely in the Sahel region (Military Africa, 2025), the highest concentration of drone innovation and operational sophistication remains in the Middle East. Iran-aligned actors, such as the Houthis and Hezbollah, account for the large majority of global drone incidents documented since 2018 (Cubukcu & Jordan, 2025). Yemen stands out in particular, reflecting the systematic use of drones by the Houthis against domestic governmental targets (Cubukcu & Jordan, 2025). The Houthis, specifically, are at the forefront when it comes to the use of UAS in their operations (Tactics Institute, 2025) and have emerged as key innovators in drone warfare (Nevola & d'Hauthuille, 2024). The group is increasingly using jet engine-powered drones in its operations, enabling it to evade air defence systems and strike distant targets with greater precision. The affordability of these systems allows the group to launch attacks in higher volumes: specifically, it overwhelms defensive shields and successfully reaches intended targets (Mukhtar, 2025, p. 4). Hezbollah represents another central case in the regional proliferation of drone technology. With the most sophisticated drone technology among all non-state actors (Martin, 2019), the group has been deploying a diverse range of platforms for surveillance and intelligence-gathering purposes. These include commercial quadcopters and other small drones, capable of recording video and conducting reconnaissance missions (Frantzman, 2024). Beyond surveillance, Hezbollah has also employed loitering munitions and Iranian-supplied UAVs such as the Ababil and the Shahed-136, expanding its strike capabilities and operational reach (Frantzman, 2024).

Overall, the widespread availability of commercial drones has contributed to technological democratisation, enabling non-state actors to access capabilities once largely monopolised by the state (Military Africa, 2025). Moreover, these groups are not merely passive adopters of existing technologies: they are actively driving technological improvements by adapting and modifying commercially available systems, enhancing their lethality and complicating countermeasures (Pledger, 2021, p. 2). The spillover effect of technology among non-state actors in the Sahel signals a significant shift in the regional security balance: the technological advantage traditionally held by governments is being progressively challenged (Allen, 2025, p. 10). More broadly, the weaponization of civilian drones is reshaping warfare tactics, allowing terrorist organizations to bypass the conventional military superiority of the state armed forces in the region (Koné & Koné, 2025).

The channel whereby this knowledge reaches African affiliates is primarily digital. Morais Figueiredo, Associate Researcher at the Conventional Arms and Ammunition Programme of UNIDIR, observes how online platforms and encrypted social media channels controlled by IS or Al-Qaeda networks are the primary conduit through which knowledge is transmitted (ADF, 2025). Open platforms are no longer the leading tools for recruitment and coordination and have been largely replaced by encrypted messaging applications and dark web forums.

This change has made terrorist networks more resistant to governmental surveillance and counter operations: one advantage of this digital architecture is that operations continue even when the main leadership is eradicated, facilitated by the anonymity that these digital platforms provide (Tactics Institute, 2025). Yet, the knowledge transfer is not exclusively digital. As IS lost ground in Syria and Iraq, some of its fighters found their way to the Sahel (Zelin, 2024). Few in number, but carrying years of operational experience, their arrival added a dimension that digital networks alone cannot replicate, generating security threats that extend well beyond the immediate region (Zelin, 2024). The result is a decentralised but coherent system of capability diffusion, in which tactical innovations developed in Yemen or Lebanon can be adopted and adapted by groups operating in Mali or Nigeria within a matter of months.

Niamey airport attack and the major terrorist groups in the Sahel

The attack on Niamey airport draws back attention to the security threat posed by the use of drones among terrorist organizations. According to Europol (2025, p.12), the growing employment of UASs by terrorist groups raises concerns about the likelihood of future, increasingly sophisticated threats.

While the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS-Sahel) has claimed responsibility for the Niamey airport attack (International Crisis Group, 2026), Serwat (2026) and France24 (2026) note that the militants were speaking a language commonly used in the Lake Chad basin, suggesting the involvement of actors operating further east than the Sahel Province's traditional area of activity (Weiss, 2026). Considering the operational sophistication of the attack, it is more plausible that more experienced drone operators from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) were responsible for the attack (Serwat, 2026; France24, 2026). This level of operational execution requires training and accumulated knowledge, as outlined in the previous section.

JNIM

Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM), an Al-Qaeda-aligned coalition active in the Sahel, has demonstrated growing sophistication in its use of drones (Lawar, 2026), moving from passive surveillance to offensive operations (Military Africa, 2025). Since the first deployment of UAS in 2023, JNIM has expanded its operations, with Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) (Serwat, 2026) recording over 100 cases of drone violence, reaching a surge of drone attacks last year (Serwat, 2026). Specifically, throughout 2023 and 2024, the group began to use UASs to drop improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on rival and government forces (Allen, 2025, p. 10). For instance, in February 2025, small FPV drones were employed to drop IEDs made from plastic bottles onto military positions during an attack in Burkina Faso (Allen, 2025, p. 10). Beyond surveillance and reconnaissance, the group has produced high-level propaganda videos (Haugstvedt, 2021, p. 96), a strong component of their operations which was inherited from Al-Qaeda.

JNIM's drone fleet primarily relies on the DJI M30T, an advanced drone equipped with an integrated camera, ideal for nighttime surveillance and capable of dual-explosive deployment (Serwat, 2026), alongside more affordable DJI Mavic models, which cost between $500 and $700 (Lawal, 2026). The combination of high performance and low-cost drones enables the group to conduct precise aerial strikes. Drones are expendable, repeatable, and low-cost tools that allow JNIM to circumvent traditional defensive measures, creating a persistent asymmetric threat that is economically sustainable and difficult for state forces to counter effectively. Finally, devices like the DJI M30T and DJI Mavic enhance the group's precision strike capabilities thanks to multiple high-performance sensors and a single camera payload (DJI, 2022), reducing exposure to counterattacks. By integrating IEDs into their operations, JNIM has transformed commercially available UAVs into assets capable of intelligence gathering and targeted attacks.

ISWAP

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) has emerged as the most active IS affiliate in Africa to employ drone technology. According to ACLED (Serwat, 2026), the group has been involved in 16 drone incidents since 2024, of which 10 were offensive strikes while others were intelligence-gathering or surveillance operations designed to prepare ground offensives against military targets (Serwat, 2026). As a splinter faction of Boko Haram, a Nigerian jihadist militant group, the ISWAP uses UAVs in surveillance operations in Nigeria (Haugstvedt, 2021, p. 96). According to ISS researcher Malik Samuel, this reflects an interest in leveraging technology to compensate for territorial and personnel losses inflicted by the Nigerian military and internal rivalries within Boko Haram (ADF, 2025). Unlike JNIM, which relies primarily on commercially available systems adapted through field experimentation, the group has been directly drawing on tactical guidance and operational templates from the Islamic State: evidence of collaboration includes the transfer of media templates and graphics from ISIS to ISWAP and the incorporation of ISWAP into ISIS's central propaganda system, as well as advice on UAV employment. While these exchanges have not yet resulted in confirmed UAV attacks directly orchestrated by ISWAP (Haugstvedt, 2021, p. 98), the group has been using drones extensively for surveillance of Nigerian military movements, target *reconnaissance* and propaganda since at least 2020 (Kurt, 2025). Over the years, their drone operations have shown an increasing sophistication, and the group has collaborated with IS to gain tactical and operational assistance (Military Africa, 2025).

Security Implications for the EU

Today, the Sahel region has emerged as one of the most important global centres of terrorism (Soule, 2024). Concerns about terrorism, its spillover into neighbouring countries, and the entrenchment of organised crime networks managing profitable drug and human trafficking routes to Europe (Klyszcz & Marangio, 2025, p. 1) have long featured in EU assessments. Competition over critical natural resources, such as oil,

gold and uranium (Klyszcz & Marangio, 2025, p. 2), further amplifies the geopolitical weight of the region. Yet, what has fundamentally transformed the nature of the threat in recent years is not simply the persistence of insurgency, but the technological dimension driving it. Across the Sahel, terrorist groups have integrated UAS into almost every operational dimension of their activities deploying them for reconnaissance and surveillance (Haugstvedt, 2021, p. 96), propaganda dissemination (Europol, 2025, p. 11) and offensive strikes, including the dropping of explosive devices on both civilian and military targets (Koné & Koné, 2025; Kurt, 2025).

In the past, the EU's longstanding ambition to emerge as a stronger global security actor has been translated into cooperative efforts and the development of military capabilities among Member States and Regional Partners (Postma, 2018, p. 10). However, inefficiencies and fragmentation have hindered implementation (Tisserand, 2025), and the wave of military coups, or "coup belts" across the Sahel, brought to power juntas that further eroded European presence in the region (Marshall, 2025). This created space and opportunities for other actors (Klyszcz & Marangio, 2025, p. 1): in this context, Turkey has emerged as the primary supplier (All Africa, 2025) of long-range medium-altitude long-endurance (MALE) drones, including TB-2 and Akinci systems, to Central Sahel states (Klyszcz & Marangio, 2025, pp. 2-3). China competes aggressively in the same market, offering cost-effective systems with fewer regulatory constraints (Arduino, 2024). Finally, Iran is expanding its ambition in security cooperation, particularly given its interest in Niger's uranium reserves (Klyszcz & Marangio, 2025, p. 3). The convergence of these actors has not only enhanced the military effectiveness of local state and non-state actors (Schwartz et al., 2025) but has also accelerated the normalisation of drone warfare in a theatre where terrorist groups are active observers and rapid adopters. It is precisely this dynamic that makes the developments in the Sahel not just a regional security problem, but a source of technological diffusion with reach far beyond Africa. In this regard, although much of the actual drone warfare remains confined to the Sahel for now, there are serious concerns about the "know-how" spreading to terrorist groups based in Europe (Council of Europe, 2025, p. 16). For instance, the threats of drone attacks on football stadiums in 2018 (Schiltz, 2019) and again in 2022. More recently, in 2024, there was a threat of a drone strike on Paris during the 2024 Olympic Games (Courtney-Guy, 2024). In another case, three suspects linked to Hezbollah were arrested for procuring essential components for drone construction in Spain, highlighting the transnational networks that facilitate the acquisition of such technologies and their components (Europol, 2025, p. 58; Levaton, 2025). And finally, a Belgian citizen who attempted a bomb attack using drones against a prison, was later sentenced (European Commission, 2023). Individually, these episodes can be interpreted just as incidents. Collectively, however, they are evidence that the knowledge, the components and the intent are already inside Europe.

The threat has not gone unnoticed. Former EU Security Commissioner Julian King has been issuing warnings since 2019 (Schiltz, 2019), and Natalia Gherman, Executive Director of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, has reiterated them since (United Nations, 2026). The European responses have only partially adapted to this new scale, and the implications of this shift speak to the depth of the problem. The 71 million allocated to Counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems (C-UAS) capabilities (Unmanned Airspace, 2024) represents a beginning, and the European Commission's recent Action Plan (2025) addressing the growing drone threat to EU security signals a degree of renewed attention. Investments accelerated by the conflict in Ukraine could yield transferable technologies applicable to other theatres, including Africa. In this context, Europe must navigate the challenge of leading the development of drone technology while mitigating the threats posed by terrorist misuse of the technology in the region (Okpaleke, 2024).

Yet, delays in renewing investments and adapting strategies to technological realities risk undermining these very objectives. If the EU seeks to act as a credible geopolitical power, it must move beyond acknowledging regional instability in abstract terms and confront the specific technological transformation reshaping modern terrorism. The proliferation of low-cost, high-impact drone systems, whose innovation is driven by Middle Eastern groups and replicated across Africa, constitutes a local security challenge and a strategic test of Europe's capacity to anticipate, adapt and, ultimately, respond.

Conclusion

The drone threat facing Europe does not begin in Europe. It originates in the conflict theatres of the Middle East, where groups such as the Houthis and Hezbollah developed and refined non-state UAS capabilities over years of warfare. Through digital platforms and encrypted communication channels, this knowledge has travelled to affiliated groups in the Sahel, where it has been absorbed and adapted. Groups such as JNIM and ISWAP represent two distinct expressions of this process, with the former building capability through commercial acquisition and field adaptation and the latter drawing on direct guidance from the Islamic State. In both cases, drones are integrated into surveillance operations, propaganda and offensive strikes. The effects of this technological spillover are extending beyond the region and increasingly posing direct security implications for the European Union. Various incidents at the European border indicate a threat that has moved beyond the warning stage and into early operational expression. Yet, despite these signals, the institutional response remains fragmented, mostly reactive, with investments remaining modest relative to the scale of the challenge and the strategic framework still failing to address the issue directly. For the EU to act as a credible geopolitical power, it must move beyond reactive responses to more anticipatory postures.

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