



INTERVIEW WITH

**ROSA
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WEST AFRICA OFFICE

ALEX THURSTON

CONDUCTED BY ARMIN OSMANOVIC

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Alex

Thurston is an Associate Professor at the School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Cincinnati. His most recent book is titled *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* (Cambridge, 2020). He regularly publishes contributions in his newsletter [*Sawahil*](#).

The interview was conducted by Armin Osmanovic, Director of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation West Africa office in Dakar.

The execution of the TikToker Mariame Cissé in northern Mali was quite shocking. Why was the young woman abducted and killed by the jihadists?

The main explanation in media reports and from local witnesses is that she was killed because of her pro-military posts, and, some reports add, because of jihadist accusations that she was informing on them to the military. Having looked through a great deal of her recent posts myself, I suspect jihadists also targeted her because of her popularity more broadly and the lifestyle she depicted — one of fun, dancing, fashion, parties, local pride, etc. That lifestyle clashes considerably, to say the least, with how jihadists demand Malian women behave.

What are the goals pursued by the JNIM jihadists in the Sahel? Is it about the fall of Bamako, or is there more to it?

I find their goals somewhat opaque. Their propaganda has long emphasized expelling foreign forces, overthrowing hostile governments, and creating their version of a pure Islamic society. But I suspect there is a mix of motivations among both leaders and fighters — some may want profit and power, others may want revenge for security force abuses, still others may have political ambitions, some may have joined for circumstantial reasons or under duress, and many are likely committed to the ideology. Clearly, some of the leaders and fighters want to keep expanding and opening new fronts, and they are working hard to push the Malian (and Burkinabè) militaries back — but for what ultimate goal, I can't say. Perhaps they do not even know themselves; the insurgency has a momentum of its own, after all.

Do you think that the jihadists might be capable of capturing Bamako?

I think they probably lack the manpower to take and hold Bamako. Some estimates put their fighting strength at around 6,000, which seems too few to defeat the Malian military outright — and then to control a city

whose population is often estimated at 3 million or more. For comparison's sake, the Seleka rebel coalition that captured Bangui in 2013 may have had 20,000 fighters or more. So JNIM might hesitate to bid for control, preferring instead to let their current fuel blockade play out further. On the other hand, sometimes when states truly disintegrate, the process can accelerate rapidly in its final stages; if the morale of the Malian military collapses, or if senior officials panic and flee, or if the civilian population grows restless, conditions could shift such that JNIM might walk in and take the city without much of a fight. At that juncture, of course, the movement would then face a whole new slate of questions and challenges.

The military juntas in the Sahel states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger appear helpless against the jihadists, who seem to be winning on all fronts. Is the “sovereignism” seen in other parts of West Africa, such as in Senegal, just an empty shell?

Yes, I think the «sovereignism» of the Sahelian military juntas has proven to be more bravado than substance so far. Expelling French forces was a reclamation of sovereignty in some ways, but real economic sovereignty remains a distant dream. In Senegal, I think the new authorities have been caught between various pressures and obstacles, including the public debt crisis and the International Monetary Fund. And perhaps President Diomaye Faye and Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko differ quite a bit in how they see their mandate and in how they envision the path toward greater sovereignty and development.

It is often said by some experts in the region that the jihadists represent a Peul (Fulani) uprising. Is that true?

No, I think they are genuinely multiethnic in character. Certainly there is a major Peul presence at both the leadership and rank-and-file levels, but there are also Tuareg, Arabs, and, as they expand south, various other ethnicities. In its propaganda about a major September 2024 attack on Bamako, JNIM was keen to highlight that one of its two front-

line commanders was Bambara, while the other was Peul. There have also been numerous Peul victims — both of the insurgency itself and of security forces and community militias, which sometimes target the Peul collectively.

Given the situation in the Sahel, which threatens to become a second Afghanistan, is there a role for the EU — or even for the former colonial power France, which managed to repel the jihadists in 2013?

If I were advising the EU or France now, I would urge them to keep their distance, diplomatically and militarily, from this conflict. EU and French interventions in Mali (counterterrorism, training, and efforts to shape governance) simply did not work in the 2010s, beyond France's initial success in defeating jihadists in early 2013. Certainly, I think all global powers should be offering humanitarian assistance to the Sahelian countries — and even fuel supplies to help them outlast this blockade — but beyond that, it's worth adopting a "wait-and-see" approach vis-à-vis the overall conflict. The government in Bamako remains hostile to France, and even if it were not, artificially propping it up would risk repeating many of the mistakes made in Afghanistan. If the government falls to jihadists, it will be a grim scenario — but it would be better to react to that situation if and when it occurs, rather than attempt to support or save a government that is ultimately quite repressive itself.