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A new digital frontier has emerged in the Sahel, the 6,000-kilometre belt stretching across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. White Starlink satellite dishes now dot cities, towns, and even remote villages, promising connectivity where digital infrastructure barely exists.

Starlink, the satellite internet provider owned by Elon Musk's SpaceX, spread rapidly in response to local demand for reliable internet in areas underserved by the state. The rollout highlighted structural gaps across the region: national telecom operators relied on ageing networks, while Starlink offered high-speed broadband with global reach. Traders and entrepreneurs moved Starlink terminals across borders through informal markets, personal transport, and small-scale smuggling. As informal networks extended connectivity into rural areas, urban centres and remote villages alike became part of a de facto infrastructure shaping daily life and stoking tensions over issues of security and non-state access. Soon, schools, clinics, businesses, and even armed groups were linking into a private system with little to no state oversight.

In Niger, for example, the signal appeared before the paperwork. Terminals were running in provincial offices and schools months ahead of the government's official authorization in 2024. Mali initially granted access to Starlink before abruptly suspending it amid regulatory uncertainty, while the service is set to be approved in Burkina Faso by the end of this year. In most of these cases, authorities never formally prohibited Starlink's use, and the absence of clear regulation created a grey zone in which NGOs, journalists and traders could operate. Chad and Nigeria, by contrast, took the opposite route, openly licensing Starlink and promoting it as a tool for national connectivity.

The result is a legal patchwork across the region — a zone of digital autonomy, where the lines between communication, conflict, and control are blurred somewhere between planetary orbit and a billionaire's whims.

REDRAWING THE DIGITAL BATTLEFIELD

Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is the Sahel's most enduring jihadist organization, mainly active across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Formed in 2017 as an al-Qaeda affiliate, it has long exploited porous borders, weak governance, and local grievances to expand its base and entrench itself in territories where the nation-state has all but collapsed. The group entered a phase of rapid expansion over the past year, marked by simultaneous offensives across central Mali, the tri-border region of Chad, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic, and the northern edges of Benin and Togo.

The group's expansion can be traced to a convergence of factors. The drawdown of international forces, such as France's Operation Barkhane and the UN's MINUSMA mission, has contributed to the emergence of vast areas with weak state authority, which militants have sought to exploit. The group's gradual shift from guerrilla attacks to local governance — collecting taxes, policing trade routes, and mediating disputes — further bolstered its legitimacy in some areas. As the International Crisis Group observed in early 2025, JNIM's ability to adapt its structure and embed within local communities has allowed it to survive the kinds of counter-terror campaigns that crippled its rivals.

Technology has amplified the group's resilience. According to regional analysts, JNIM now employs commercial drones for surveillance and has experimented with improvised aerial explosives. But the more subtle shift lies in communication. JNIM's command structure, previously reliant on couriers, radio sets, and patchy mobile coverage, tended to be quite fragmented. Starlink has largely eliminated that limitation, delivering fast, affordable, and unmonitored connectivity at previously unattainable levels.

Often purchased abroad and resold domestically, terminals are trafficked through informal networks linking Libya, Nigeria, and the Sahel. A May 2025 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime documents multiple Starlink seizures in Niger's Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, both JNIM strongholds. In June 2024, *Le Monde* identified a Starlink terminal in a JNIM propaganda video filmed near Gao, while security services in Niger have since confiscated devices during counter-terror operations.

Because Starlink's registration system lacks region-specific identity verification, devices can operate far from the subscriber's declared location, effectively creating a digital grey zone beyond state visibility. Analysts warn that satellite connectivity significantly improves the logistical and command capabilities of non-state actors, a concern echoed by Sahelian intelligence officials, who argue that Starlink's encrypted, low-latency network weakens the state's ability to monitor insurgent coordination.

THE REGULATION DILEMMA

JNIM's exploitation of Starlink underscores a broader structural problem in the region: governments in the Sahel have little ability to oversee or regulate the networks on which civilians and insurgents alike depend.

Starlink's architecture places operational authority far from local reach. Its terminals must be registered in the US, from where they are also (remotely) operated, firmware updates are issued, and the network itself is ultimately controlled. While local licenses provide legal permission to operate, they do not confer real oversight. Users report that terminals remain active in many countries where Starlink lacks formal regulatory approval. Moreover, although SpaceX retains the technical ability to disable service, this rarely happens and is hard to track, leaving access — and the resulting strategic implications — largely under the control of the provider rather than local authorities.

States cannot monitor who uses the service, when, or for what purpose. This means they cannot track or prevent misuse, enabling non-state actors like JNIM to leverage encrypted connectivity to coordinate operations, move resources, and maintain communication across borders. Obtaining access would require technical cooperation from SpaceX, which, even if granted, would demand sophisticated infrastructure and personnel to monitor and analyse usage. US export controls on dual-use technology also limit what governments can legally do with Starlink terminals, creating additional barriers.

But even if such access were to be acquired, a second dilemma then emerges. For in states dominated by military regimes, control over Starlink could be mi-

sused to spy on journalists, activists, or political opponents. The same tools that could expose insurgent activity would also provide a means to suppress dissent and consolidate authoritarian power.

The result is a regulatory deadlock. The very connectivity so essential for governance, education, and commerce is simultaneously a vector for insurgent coordination and a potential instrument of authoritarian control. Thus, until a governance framework is implemented that balances technical oversight with civil protections — requiring unprecedented cooperation between SpaceX, US authorities, and local states — Starlink will remain a zone of operational ambiguity.

THE BILLIONAIRE GATEKEEPER

In the Sahel as elsewhere, Starlink operates under the authority of a single private company. While African governments can authorize its use, the network's operations remain directed from abroad, with key decisions centralized under Elon Musk's leadership. The structure gives one corporate actor and, by extension, one individual significant influence over a growing segment of the region's communications infrastructure.

Musk's record illustrates the dangers of concentrating such power in one individual. In 2022, as Ukrainian forces were retaking territory from Russia, Musk reportedly ordered Starlink service shut down in contested areas such as Kherson. At least 100 terminals were affected, disrupting communications for drones, artillery, and troops, and demonstrating that reliance on Starlink can give a private company unprecedented influence over military operations. Reuters described it as putting the outcome of a war in Musk's hands. Similar patterns can be seen in how he runs the social media platform formerly known as Twitter, where sudden policy reversals affect millions of users without accountability.

Musk's political posturing amplifies these risks: a prominent supporter of Donald Trump's 2024 re-election campaign, Musk has repeatedly used his platforms to influence media and policy debates. Characterized by libertarian impulses, selective political loyalties, and sudden reversals, Musk's behaviour makes him far from the kind of authority one would want overseeing critical infrastructure.

In the Sahel, this creates a troubling dependency, as the Ukrainian precedent de-

monstrates that unilateral service decisions by a private operator can have profound strategic consequences.

Starlink's expansion into the Sahel is not merely technological progress, as its boosters would have one believe. It is far more than that: namely, a transfer of control from public institutions to private interests. Elon Musk frames it as innovation, but the reality is that critical communications infrastructure now hinges on the whims of a single individual. What began as an engineering achievement has become an instrument of power that places the digital sky beyond the reach of the governments and populations it serves. As technology continues to outpace governance, those least protected are paying the price for this new digital order.