



WHERE WAS GENERAL ASSIMI GOÏTA? FOUR DIFFICULT DAYS IN THE HISTORY OF MALI

Assimi Goïta is the president of Mali, that is ruled by five (self-nominated) generals who came to power by force. Goïta claimed presidency after two military coups on resp. 18 August 2020 and 24 May 2021. His speech on national TV, just after the first coup, portrayed him as a copy of Thomas Sankara, with the Baret rouge and the content of the discourse. Thomas Sankara is the charismatic revolutionary president of Burkina Faso (1983-1987), who was assassinated by his allies (from within).

Since, he has been the symbol of freedom and decolonization for many Africans. Following Sankara, sovereignty was the keyword in Goita's speech. Mali should return to the Malians. The failure of the previously elected government to fight jihadism in the country was mentioned as one of the main reasons for their coups. Last year, the junta, Goïta's team of five military, declared that elections would not take place, as the country 'was not ready for it'. He collaborates closely with the military rulers of Burkina-Faso and Niger, and together they form the Alliance des États Sahéliennes (AES). After ousting the French military (2022, 2023) and the UN mission MUNISMA (2024), the AES also left the Economic Organization of West African States (ECOWAS) that they considered as a straw puppet of 'The West'. Strong steps were taken towards a sovereign Mali. Many Malians (wanted to) believe(d) this message. After the attacks of the Jihadists starting April 25, Goita was invisible for four days. How to interpret Goïta's four days hiding from the public?

The shock

On Saturday, early in the morning Goïta must have sit straight up in his bed. His well-protected house in the military garrison city Kati, 15 kilometers from Bamako, the capital city of Mali, was under attack. The attackers were from JNIM, the organization for support of Islam and Muslims, in which five different jihadi groups have united under the umbrella of Al Qaida. The past years they controlled more and more Malian territory. Today more than two thirds of the country is affected by their attacks, blockades of cities, etc. (as can be observed on the map of Jules Dehamel based on ACLED data, <https://www.julesduhamel.com/central-sahel-conflict-map-2025-jnim-islamic-state-activity/>). It is also clear that they rule part of these areas, imposing sharia law. A previous action by JNIM already paralyzed Bamako. From September 2025 onwards they blocked routes to Bamako, as well as in cities in the center and north of the country (Segou, Mopti, Gao, etc.), and therewith frustrated fuel transport.

This action showed their daring strategy to challenge the power of the junta. In Bamako the queues at fuel stations were long, people were spending the night acquiring fuel to find their mobility back. After months of apparently hidden negotiations, the embargo was lifted from March 2026, though control of public transport continued. Women's dress was especially controlled. They have to wear a veil when they want to travel outside of Bamako. Did the lift of the embargo allow JNIM to reorganize and prepare the next step in their battle against the Malian military junta?

On April 25th, 2026, JNIM directly attacked the five top generals of the junta in Kati. Cars with suicide bombers drove into the houses of the minister of defense, Sadio Camara, and the president, Assimi Goïta. JNIM soon claimed these kamikaze actions. Camara, one of his wives and two grandchildren were killed in the action. Other ministers and high officials were seriously wounded. There is no clarity about the number of deaths or casualties. Since that day Goita disappeared for four days, reportedly being brought to safety.



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Simultaneously with the attack on Kati, Sévaré, Konna, Gao, Bamako (airport) and Kidal were also under attack. Other towns are mentioned but I could not verify the WhatsApp messages that reported on this. Most analysts are surprised about the collaboration between JNIM and FLA. FLA is the Front de Libération de Azawad, a Tuareg rebel group. Since colonial times the Tuareg fought for their independent Azawad, a large swath of desert land located in Niger, Mali and bordering Algeria, with Kidal as its capital. The Tuareg rebellion is one of the factors that led to the conflict in 2012, resulting in the occupation of Kidal and a de facto existence of Azawad.

One of the important successes of the junta was the victory over the FLA and the return of Kidal under control of Mali in 2023 putting up the Malian flag. From that day, FAMA soldiers (Forces Armées Maliennes) and their Russian allies (Wagner group, later Africa Corps) occupied the military camp that was left behind by MINUSMA. The Kidal attack on 25 April 2026 ended Goïta's dream. The FLA managed to occupy the city. On Sunday 26 April, the Russian mercenaries were allowed to leave the camp and Kidal, escorted by JNIM troops. On a propaganda video of JNIM circulating on social media, we are shown how the FAMA soldiers left the North. We see a long line of men in military attire, and two mujahedeen, Muslim fighters, in front. One of the mujahedeen shares with each what are apparently FAMA soldiers some notes of FCFA and directs them to two large trucks that will transport them away from Kidal and the territory claimed by FLA and JNIM, back home.

On Sunday 26 April, the porte-parole of the junta communicated messages from the military government to the population in social media publications and on national TV. They asked people to stay calm and vowed that the FAMA would win this battle. No word about the president.

The death of Camara is a shock for the Malian nation and for the Junta. He is thought to have masterminded the second coup d'état in May 2021. He is remembered as a strategist and hailed for his contribution to the professionalization of the Malian army. He was the architect of the collaboration with the Russians. He, himself a student from Russian military academy, is fluent in Russian. On social media, Facebook, Instagram and in my WhatsApp groups we encounter many condolences and support messages for the junta, and the hope that this will be soon under control.

But what is the situation? Can we know it?

The reality is that FLA and JNIM occupy Kidal and negotiated (with the help of Algeria?) a free passage for the Russian Africa Corps on Sunday 26 April. The FLA claims to be ruling the city and as an inhabitant of the North assured me: they will continue the occupation of the Northern cities. They claim this territory to be theirs. JNIM does not contest these claims but instead endorses them. The recapture of Kidal is also symbolic. When Goïta came to power he promised the Malians to unite the territory including the North. Kidal reconquered by the Tuareg is a great emotional loss for Goïta and may create a drop in the population's trust of the Junta.

It is suggested that these attacks on Saturday 25 April, will be a turning point in the Malian conflict. Were these attacks only a show of force? Or is it an action to claim territory, and the start to also claim Malian cities? An action to weaken the junta in power? So far, most analysts see JNIM as rural.



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One of the surprises is this collaboration between FLA and JNIM. In 2012 the conflict in Mali started with a Tuareg rebellion in the North, where, after the fall of Khadafi, Tuareg who returned from Lybia with weapons launched a rebellion. Soon also Jihadi groups, a.o. An-Sardine and MUJAO joined the fight. It was interpreted as the Jihadi hijacking the Tuareg rebellion. An-Sardine is part of, and de facto, the leading group in JNIM, a coalition of Jihadi groups founded in 2017. This time on Saturday 25 April 2026 JNIM and FLA openly declared their collaboration, and Kidal's return in the hands of the Tuareg was also celebrated by JNIM. JNIM and FLA fought together to re-occupy Kidal and Tessalit and occupy the two northern regions (Kidal and Taoudeni). The FLA flag is raised there. Other cities were attacked by JNIM alone, e.g. Gao, Mopti, Kati and Bamako.

Will their collaboration stand firm in the near future? The two groups seem to have different final goals. FLA wants to establish an independent Azawad. JNIM wants to establish a Kalifate (most likely including Azawad). On the other hand, they also have a common enemy, that is the junta, and its military regime in Mali. And they have different, complementary, assets: JNIM has more manpower, and the FLA is much better aligned politically. They need each other in this combat. Will this provide enough incentives for unity to continue operating together? Or will the different ideologies and the thirst for power divide the blocks and turn them into enemies? This question is complicated by the role of a third party: a group operating under the flag of Islamic State, who has been signaled to fight around Menaka.

Assimi's reappearance

On the fourth day after the first attacks Assimi Goita finally appeared in pictures amid Russian diplomats and military men. He was also photographed in the hospital visiting victims. These pictures were followed by a short declaration on National TV, where he mainly called victory, all is under control (while the FLA flag is flying in the regions) and people must keep faith in the capacity of the military. The showing of the unity with the Russians is a sign that this collaboration will continue.

Is Assimi Goita alone?

The death of Sadio Camara must be a blow to the junta and to Goita. They can no longer rely on his leadership in the army and will miss his good relationship with the Russians. Other members of the Junta have been wounded. Goita's disappearance for a few days led to rumors about his indecisiveness related to the loss of Camara. Some reports say there is a fissure in the military itself. Investigation into the military and their role in the JNIM successes has been started.

And what about the befriended nations from the AES? On Saturday Ibrahim Traoré, the military ruler of Burkina Faso, led the inauguration of the cultural week in Burkina Faso, while his neighbor was experiencing one of the worst attacks on the government. It is only at the end of the next day 26 April that Ibrahim Traoré released an official statement in which he expressed his support for Mali. The other AES ally General Tchiani, the military ruler of Niger only reacted on the 28th of April by presenting his condolences. What do these delayed and minimal responses mean? Does it indicate a less tight relationship within AES? In October 2023 they decided on a joint army force. But they were not ready for this event, though it seems they are mobilizing while I am writing this essay.

Other regional structures like ECOWAS and the African Union, have then already long given their condolences and condemnations of the attacks, even though the AES countries are no longer member of ECOWAS. Other international institutions such as the European Union, condemn the attacks, but are in general very quiet. The roles of Morocco and Algeria remain unclear.



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And the Russians? They have declared that they support the junta, but also that it is time for a change in strategy. Should there not be negotiations? And of course, the role of France. Messages accusing the French of supporting the FLA and JNIM to be able to return to the Sahel countries are flooding Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. To attribute this power to the French is an underestimate of the force of JNIM and FLA. JNIM and FLA have built their presence in the region over the past 14 years and depend for their functioning on tax levying with the population, cattle theft, control of gold mines, looting weapons from army stocks, etc. Furthermore, they have developed an attack strategy that has proven to be very effective. They managed to keep their troops and plans hidden until the day of the attack.

And the population?

Malians are divided about their junta. On Facebook many supportive messages for the military circulate. Assimi Goita is a hero to many Malians. In WhatsApp groups Malians discuss the attacks and also express their fear for violence and political chaos. Ethnic polarization is also part of the narratives, and the actions on the ground. In WhatsApp groups I hear a call to Fulani to stay in their homes, as it is unclear what will follow. They refer in these messages to the position of the Fulani and their presumed prominent role in the Jihadi movement, either by joining their ranks, or by financial support. Although the ranks of the Jihadi groups are populated by many different ethnic groups, this polarized position is very common. It seems to lead to real violence on the ground. The threats to innocent people, assumed to be from the North, was one of the most frightening things as a friend in Bamako confided to me. On Sunday the government announced a curfew, from 6 in the evening to 6 in the morning (for the whole country). Going to the street in this period is punished.

People are living in fear. The new embargo of Bamako that will be effectuated by JNIM from Tuesday 28 April will deepen the difficulties the four million inhabitants of Bamako are already facing: lack of electricity (only a few hours per day), no fuel for their motorcycles and cars, and rising food prices in the markets. A situation that other cities in the hinterlands of Bamako have already suffered for over the past few years.

And what next?

The political opposition in exile is working on a come-back, asking Assimi Goita to take his responsibility and leave Mali's government to a civil government. Imam Mahmoud Dicko, in exile in Algeria, is also feeding these ideas. Mahmoud Dicko envisions forming a government that can negotiate with the insurgents.

Burkina-Faso is securing its cities in the rural areas, expecting attacks soon. There are plans to add 100,000 more civilians to militia protecting the rural areas.

While I am writing this text social media report on the continuation of the battles in the North. The Tessalit airport and military base are assumingly conquered by FLA. But the truth is also that the Malian army has more sophisticated weapons, and we should not underestimate the capacity of an AES joint force with support not only of the Russians, but also of Turkey?

Social media will continue to do their work and inform the population about the successes of the army, or the opposite. Most people will prefer to listen to the victory messages, closing their eyes to the other side of the coin.

The future of Mali and AES is unclear. The great example Thomas Sankara is no guarantee for a prosperous future of the junta.