

Answers from the Sahel: Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24, on His Interview with Deputy JNIM Leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa

By Paul Cruickshank

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Editor's Note: In October 2024, in a Q&A that took two years to set up, Wassim Nasr of France24 received answers from Amadou Koufa, the founder and emir of Katiba Macina, a branch of the Sahel al-Qa`ida affiliate Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). The answers were shared via an audiotape publicly posted online by the group. It was Koufa's first-ever interview by a news outlet. He is the second-highest ranking figure in JNIM. According to his designation by the United Nations, Koufa is one of JNIM emir Iyad ag Ghali's religious advisers and his principal representative in the center of Mali. France24 aired a segment on October 22, 2024, in which Nasr discussed Koufa's answers.

CTC: How did the interview with Amadou Koufa come about?

Nasr: It took me two years of discussions in order to get him to answer because he was initially not interested in answering my questions. The answers came as an audio compilation of 26 minutes and 18 seconds that was published by al-Zallaka, the JNIM media outlet, on October 21, 2024. This was the only way to be sure that it was Koufa answering with his own voice and in the name of the group and that the group took full responsibility for the answers. The next day, October 22, 2024, France24 aired a studio analysis segment focusing on the terrorism threat in the Sahel in which I described what he told me.¹ We did not publish his answers verbatim nor air them.

CTC: What for you stood out in Koufa's answers?

Nasr: Of the 17 questions I asked, Koufa replied to 14. There were some answers which were very vague, and some that were quite interesting. I asked him, "You accuse Russia and the Malian army of committing human rights abuses, but your group burned villages in Ansongo [in eastern Mali],² accusing the villagers of being supporters of the Islamic State. So how can you justify this?"

His answer, which I am paraphrasing, was interesting. He stated that generally: "We consider that we tried everything with villagers before the use of force. We try negotiations, we try to tell them to stay away from the army and from local militias. Regarding the villages in Ansongo, we said stay away from Islamic State Sahel Province and they did not answer positively our calls. We tried everything and now we consider that there is only war between

us and them.' He considered his group to be the legitimate force handling those areas.

The most important thing he said is that human rights abuses by the Russians and the Malian military in Africa have pushed Fulanis into the hands of al-Qa`ida.³ He did not say 'it's only my force of preaching.' He stated that, 'yes, of course hideous crimes created awareness and pushed them into our hands ... the Russians surpassed by far abuses committed by the French.'

Commenting on the French departure from the Sahel region, Koufa said that France's departure was "a victory given by God for mujahideen," adding "God gave the courage to their former followers and slaves [the juntas in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso] to rebel." He said that "France should stop mocking and respect the Muslims in general and in Africa in particular, if they do, they will be treated accordingly."

He stated that JNIM were still open to negotiations with the government and what he referred to as "conflict resolution." The audio recording with his answers was recorded before the group carried out an attack on a military training school and the military airport in the Malian capital Bamako on September 17, 2024, the first attack of this kind in the capital for years.⁴ Three days after the attack, on September 20, 2024, Koufa stated the same thing, in an audio tape released by the group about the need for conflict resolution.⁵

So those are the things that were in my sense the most interesting parts of what he said.

For what it's worth, he also claimed, 'We try to avoid hitting civilian targets.' But while this is the case for JNIM in urban areas—with their last significant attacks against soft targets in an urban areas being the Radisson Blu attack in Bamako in November 2015⁶ and an attack on the Aziz Istanbul café in Ouagadougou in August 2017⁷—they don't hesitate to target civilian populations in rural areas they want to control. It's clear their focus on military and hard targets in urban areas is a political choice in order to try to win the hearts and minds of the population.

Interesting enough, answering a question in which I gave the Aziz Istanbul unclaimed attack as an example, he said "mistakes can occur sometimes and we abide to compensate those mistakes." He claimed that the use of force is a kind of last resort and that "acts of war ... can be interpreted differently according to the legitimacy or not of the perpetrators."

CTC: Human Rights Watch documented a JNIM massacre⁸ of "at least 133 people in the town of Barsalogo, Burkina Faso, on August 24, 2024, largely civilians, forced [locals] to build a trench to protect the town with a military base."⁹

Nasr: After that attack, JNIM sent a response to Human Rights Watch¹⁰ justifying the attack, saying that even if those targeted were forced to dig the trench, "this would not be an excuse to



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spare them. Anyone who ... follows this regime ... deserves to be held accountable.”¹¹ They were basically saying that it was justified to kill the villagers because they could have refused to dig the trench and because “the villagers, men and women, had a history of cooperating with army in the region.” It should be noted that according to Human Rights Watch, “witnesses said that soldiers based in Barsalogo forced male residents to dig the new trench section without providing payment.”¹² It was the first time that the Shura Council of JNIM in Burkina Faso had publicly and officially answered an NGO.

Answering one of my questions, Koufa reiterated the stance of JNIM regarding NGO activities in the areas that are under the control of the group. He said they are allowed to operate as long as it does not involve “hostile activities” to the group. Such activities have included, for example, “birth control” issues that led to the banning of some NGOs in Timbuktu in August 2024.¹³

CTC: In its July 2024 report, the United Nations team monitoring the global jihadi terror threat stated that “JNIM and ISGS [the Islamic State in the Sahel] have both expanded and consolidated their areas of operation. Complete destabilization of the countries in the region in the medium-term remains a possible risk and continues to be an objective of these groups. This is accompanied by a strategy aimed at extending their influence in the northern parts of some littoral States to enhance terrorist access to resources and logistical corridors essential for their expansion.”¹⁴ What is your assessment?

Nasr: Today, there are two issues: The first issue is that the Islamic State is a real security and military threat in West Africa. But this security military threat is being mostly contained due to attrition because of the war between the Islamic State and the al-Qa`ida affiliate JNIM. The war with JNIM is also preventing the Islamic

State from recruiting beyond the three-border area between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Koufa, referring to the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), told me that ‘they had tried everything with these deviants and the only option now was war,’ especially because of ISSP’s “indiscriminate violence against civilians” in areas where the population is loyal to JNIM and beyond.

The second issue is that JNIM in the mid to long run is a political challenge, as well as a military and security threat.

CTC: This is the view that JNIM is a bigger long-term concern because they’re smarter in terms of how they deal with the population.

Nasr: Yes, they are more political when they address local players, communities, and power brokers, which makes them capable of compromise. They have already taken control or roam freely in large chunks of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso and are more and more active in northern Benin.

CTC: Could JNIM take over Bamako and Ouagadougou, the capitals?

Nasr: I don’t know if they have the capacity to handle capitals. While in theory they would like to take over these cities militarily, taking Bamako or Ouagadougou or Niamey would be very costly for them in terms of governance and management. With large segments of the population in these cities being hostile to them, it would not be easy for them. It would also be used by the juntas to regain unconditional international support. So, it does not make sense for them to take the cities from a rational point of view, but of course, you should keep in mind that we are not talking only about rational actors here and it is possible for irrational decisions to lead to gains on the ground for them.

CTC: When it comes to the littoral countries—Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast—how worried do they need to be about the threats to the north of them?

Nasr: They should be worried, but they can still avoid committing the same mistakes that were made in the Sahel countries regarding human rights abuses targeting the Fulani population, for example, regarding the situation on the border, regarding the sole choice of a military solution. The governments should avoid building up and using local militias which lead to more human rights abuses and in turn more targeting of civilians by jihadi groups.

The governments of the littoral countries should look at what was done badly in the Sahel over the last 10 years and try to find something smarter, which is the path the Ivory Coast is now taking, for example. Authorities in Abidjan started by acknowledging that the situation was getting problematic on the northern border as early as 2017, so they enhanced security and military efforts but also tackled problems between herders and farmers on which Koufa himself was trying to capitalize on by sending a number of emissaries to Ivory Coast. So, for the Ivory Coast, avoiding denial [a problem existed] was a good starting point; that was followed by measures that prevented JNIM from having a foothold in the country. It does not mean that incursions into the Ivory Coast are impossible or that JNIM operatives do not cross the border to shop or see family members, but it means that JNIM was deterred or



JNIM deputy leader Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa (center) in a video released by the group in February 2023

unable to plant the seeds of an insurgency as he did in Burkina Faso out of Mali, and out of Burkina Faso in Niger and in Benin.

CTC: What questions did Koufa not answer?

Nasr: The three questions he did not answer related to Hamas and the situation in Gaza, the Taliban, and al-Qa`ida Central. He did not want to speak about al-Qa`ida at all. He did not answer any of the questions regarding al-Qa`ida. I followed up with some local sources with knowledge of the deliberations of the group on this and they conveyed to me that his silence on al-Qa`ida had a purpose. In my assessment, Koufa's refusal to speak about al-Qa`ida was significant. I think it's very possible that JNIM is at least seriously discussing and maybe preparing to break from al-Qa`ida.

Since the last third of December, JNIM has stopped referring to AQIM and stopped directing followers to the AQIM media outlet Al-Izza. Furthermore, very interestingly on January 20, 2025, AQIM issued a communiqué regarding the Gaza war, which for the first time did not come in the form of a joint communiqué with JNIM.¹⁵

And looking back at the audio answers of Koufa, I noticed that the compilation did not start as usual with a graphic of AQ media branches nor with the regular audio of OBL, but rather only with the al-Zallaqa logo. Even the *nasheed* used in the compilation was not an al-Qa`ida *nasheed*. It looks like they might be preparing the landscape for a split with al-Qa`ida in the same way that Jabhat al-Nusra—the predecessor group of Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the group now in power in Syria—split with al-Qa`ida.

CTC: So, what we may see playing out is the events in Syria having reverberations in the Sahel because JNIM have just seen a group that split with al-Qa`ida take over the country?

Nasr: This is a very good question. In Idlib, as I observed firsthand during a visit there in 2023,¹⁶ HTS moved towards what I've called a third path—firmly away from al-Qa`ida's path, which HTS leaders such as Ahmed al Sharaa thought was leading nowhere, but



et de répondre aux questions du célèbre journaliste



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Screen captures from the audiotape released by the JNIM media outlet al-Zallaqa on October 21, 2024, containing Mohamed (Amadou) Koufa's answers to Wassim Nasr's questions. The Arabic text says, in part: "We are glad to receive the questions of the famous journalist Wassim Nasr and to answer them through al-Zallaqa media production institute, in this first interview with him."

not onto a path that can be called liberal or democratic. This was a political choice that led them all the way to power in Damascus, which would have been impossible under the banner of al-Qa`ida. We are now seeing this pragmatic Islamism play out in its rule in Syria, as I reported a week after the fall of Assad.¹⁷ This could be a blueprint for other jihadi groups, including in the Sahel. But even if AQIM and JNIM did not get involved in plotting attacks in Western countries, it should be noted that a little bit less than a decade ago, AQIM did get involved in sending relatively small amounts of money to what was then the al-Qa`ida affiliate Hurras al-Din in Syria and al-Qa`ida sympathizers in Gaza, for example. So, it's too soon to know if the internal JNIM dynamics will allow the shift away from al-Qa`ida to happen in the Sahel and if it does, would it be to the advantage of JNIM, or will it play into the hands of its deadly enemy the Islamic State? That was the gamble Ahmed al-Sharaa (then known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani) took in Syria in 2017 by forming Hayat Tahrir al Sham. The payoff took seven years to come with the group's takeover of Syria being broadly accepted by the international community. **CTC**

Citations

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- 3 Editor's Note: For more on these dynamics, see Wassim Nasr, "How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel," *CTC Sentinel* 15:11 (2022).
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- 8 For Wassim Nasr's reporting on the massacre, see Wassim Nasr, "Barsalogo massacre: Jihadist violence on the rise in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger," France24, September 3, 2024.
- 9 Editor's Note: "Burkina Faso: Massacre Shows Need to Protect Civilians," Human Rights Watch, October 29, 2024.
- 10 Editor's Note: The full response can be viewed here: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/10/JNIM%20response%20to%20HRW.pdf
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- 15 Editor's Note: Wassim Nasr, "Ceci est le 1er communiqué au sujet de Gaza depuis le 7 Octobre 2023 qui n'est pas commun avec JNIM ...," X, January 20, 2025.
- 16 Editor's Note: Paul Cruickshank and Julika Enslin, "Journey to Damascus: An Interview with Wassim Nasr, Journalist, France24," *CTC Sentinel* 18:1 (2025).
- 17 Editor's Note: Ibid.