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Beyond Jihadism: Security Concerns along Senegal's Border with Mali

Hannah Rae Armstrong

In 2025, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin's (JNIM) push into Mali's Kayes region brought extremist violence right up to Senegal's eastern border. But while the JNIM threat looms large in national and international policymaking circles, local concerns are less heeded. Residents are at least as worried by rising criminality, isolation and the devastating pollution of the Falémé River. As Dakar deploys more forces here, it is wisely investing in coordination with local communities willing to forge closer partnerships. Potential spillover risks related to factionalism highlight the need for diplomacy and tact. However, owing to an effective security response, strong social cohesion and traditions of cooperation between border communities and the state, it is likely this area will be largely shielded from jihadist destabilisation. Measures that could consolidate those strengths include close coordination with locals on river protection and clean-up measures and underpinning the security response with more robust investments in regional infrastructure.

In recent years, the diffusion of violent conflict across Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso has fuelled concerns about spillover into neighbouring coastal states. Throughout 2025, those concerns grew as the jihadist movement Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) strengthened its foothold in southwestern Mali, facing Senegal's eastern border.¹ This policy brief explores the multifaceted security threats in the Bakel department (Tambacounda region) in eastern Senegal and the state's responses, through the prism of local perceptions. It argues that effective policies have largely shielded communities from a potential spillover of jihadist insurgency, although some vulnerabilities remain. Beyond the jihadist threat, the concerns of local communities in Bakel are centred for the time being on the devastating pollution of the Falémé River, rising criminality and growing isolation. Development and security interventions seeking to secure this area can strengthen their chances of success by engaging with these concerns.

¹ See, for example, Timbuktu Institute, "Menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie, et du Sénégal", May 2025 and Matthieu Millecamps, "Jihadisme: le Sénégal est-il dans le viseur du JNIM?", *Jeune Afrique*, Apr 28, 2025

Introduction

Like West Africa's other coastal states, Senegal has long feared possible spillover effects from the Sahel. There would seem to be cause for concern. The longest section of Senegal's border with Mali runs along its eastern Tambacounda region, which is not only the country's largest region (42,000 km²) but also one of its most sparsely populated (23 inhabitants/km²),² with just under 1 million inhabitants. Access to education and economic opportunities is far more restricted here than in most other parts of Senegal: the poverty level stands at 62.8 per cent compared with 37.5 per cent for the country as a whole³ and the literacy rate is the nation's lowest (50.1%).⁴

In similarly isolated rural zones of the Sahel, cleavages splitting ethnic and caste groups have fanned the flames of war between states and jihadist extremists in recent years. In those cases, members of marginalised communities often joined or supported extremist groups not out of ideological affinity but rather to gain advantages in areas where the state was not present or effective or to fight back against persecution by the state or its proxies.⁵

Given Tambacounda's location and characteristics, it is thus not surprising that concerns over jihadist spillover have been prominent. The perspectives of Senegal's border communities, however, have been largely missing from discussions about the potential threat and how to address it. To fill this gap, we conducted interviews with two dozen key actors – including customary and elected authorities, farmers, herders, traders, civil society figures and religious leaders – in the Bakel department along Senegal's eastern border with Mali: in the town of Kidira and in the five villages of Gabou, Bélé, Laminia, Senedebou and Diboli Foulbé.⁶

Senegal's Bakel department, in the eastern part of Tambacounda, stretches north-south along the borders with Mauritania and Mali. Most of the Senegal-Mali border is demarcated by the Falémé River, a tributary of the Senegal River. The department counts roughly 200,000 people, mostly Soninke and Peul who make a living by farming, herding, fishing or mining in this semi-arid, flood-prone landscape.

Despite difficult conditions, respondents describe social cohesion and stability as relatively robust: strong relationships with the state, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms and decentralisation policies have all helped promote gradual development and prevent disputes from escalating. However, a recent gold rush severely polluted the Falémé River, upending the lives of most inhabitants, whose livelihoods depend upon the river.

In this challenging context, JNIM's unprecedented, simultaneous attacks in the Kayes region in July 2025 suddenly thrust the Bakel department onto the frontlines of war. To address the evolving threat, Senegal stepped up security efforts in the zone, deploying new units and building new infrastructure as well as investing in closer partnerships with local communities. State and local authorities worked together to protect social cohesion and shield this relatively stable zone from the turmoil that trails – and invites in – JNIM.

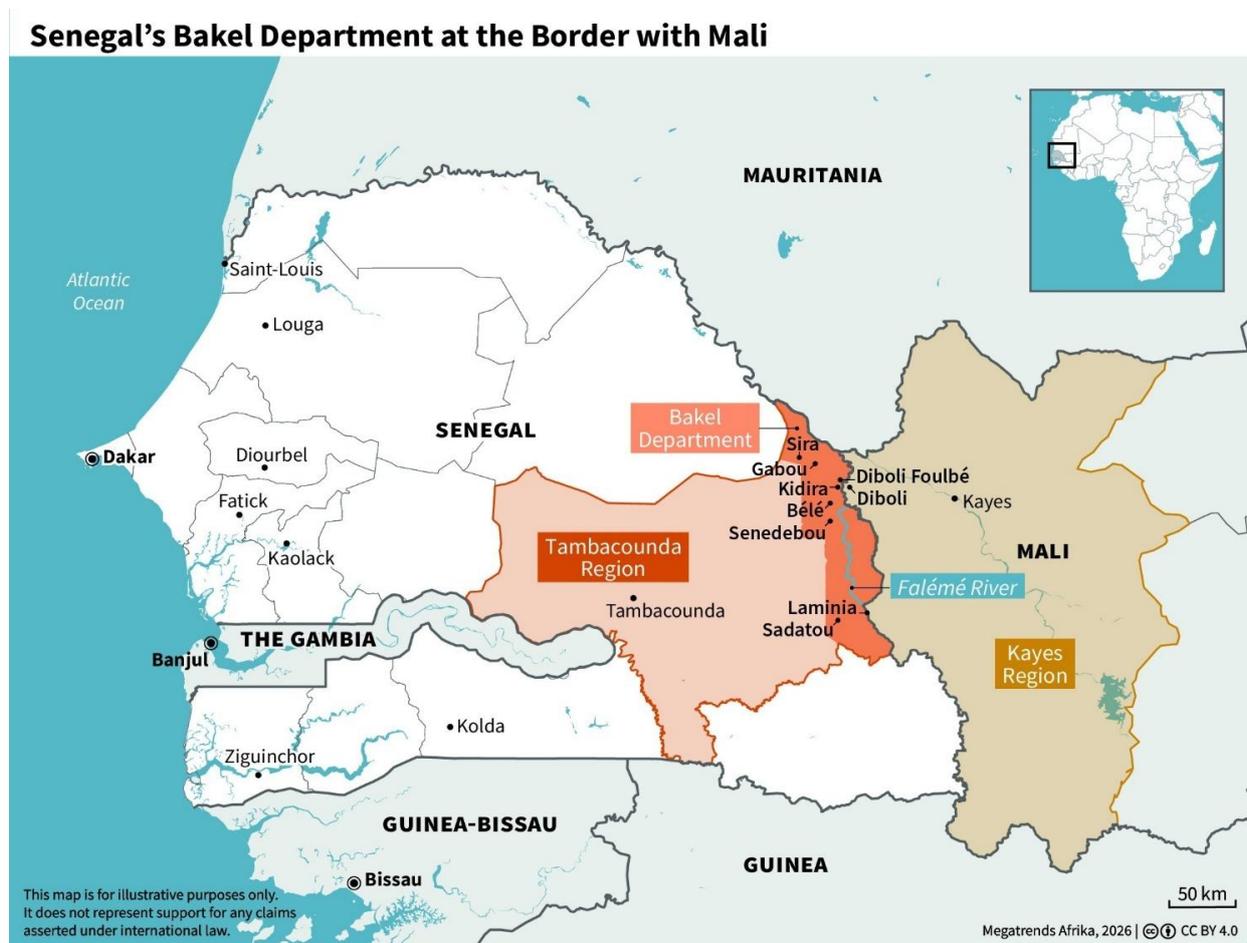
² République du Sénégal, Ministère de l'Économie du Plan et de la Coopération, « Recensement Générale de la Population et de l'Habitat », (see Tableau I-22 : Répartition par région de la densité de population), Jul 2025.

³ L'Agence nationale de la Statistique et de la Démographie (ANSD), « Enquête harmonisée sur les conditions de vie des ménages (EHCVM) au Sénégal », Jul 2024.

⁴ République du Sénégal, Ministère de l'Économie du Plan et de la Coopération, "Recensement Générale de la Population et de l'Habitat" (see note 2, Tableau II-5 : Répartition de la population), 2025.

⁵ See, for example, James Courtright, "Fulani Responses to Pastoralist Crisis and Mass Violence", *Megatrends Policy Brief 32*, *Megatrends Afrika*, Feb 11, 2025.

⁶ A researcher from the Bakel department carried out the interviews in Nov-Dec 2025. He prefers to remain anonymous.



Shifting Security Concerns at the Senegal–Mali Border

JNIM Is Drawing Nearer to Senegal

JNIM's military strategy, previously focused on Mali's north and centre, is increasingly turning towards its south and west – in 2025, nearly 20 per cent of its violent actions in that country took place there.⁷ JNIM militants seem to have succeeded in establishing logistical bases in Kayes, although, unlike in central Mali and parts of Burkina Faso, they do not control territory in Kayes region, nor do they carry much weight with local populations. Nevertheless, this expansion has allowed the group to attack state symbols and economic interests in a zone perceived until quite recently as secure and to impose blockades, especially on the capital city of Bamako. Overland trade between Dakar and Bamako is vital for both countries: nearly 70 per cent of landlocked Mali's imports and exports pass through the port of Dakar, while Mali accounts for nearly a quarter of Senegal's exports.⁸

By expanding into this zone, JNIM not only took explicit aim at Malian state, economic and security interests; it also advanced right up to the Senegalese border for the first time. The group is not powerful enough in southwestern Mali to be able to project force into eastern Senegal and is likely seeking to avoid confrontation with the Senegalese security forces,

⁷ Daniel Eizenga, "JNIM Attacks in Western Mali Reshape Sahel Conflict", *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Sep 29, 2025.

⁸ Seydou Ka, "Le Mali et le Sénégal, tous perdants", *SenePlus*, Jan, 12, 2022; World Trade Organization, WTO Tariff and Trade Data for Senegal, 2024.

which are far better trained, equipped and organised than their Malian counterparts.⁹ So far, the two sides appear keen to steer clear of direct provocation while engaging in a tit-for-tat cycle of mutual testing and warnings.

In February 2025, Senegal and Mali launched joint military patrols at the Malian border town of Diboli, just 2 km from the Senegalese town of Kidira.¹⁰ In a communiqué, JNIM warned that it considered the patrols to be a “provocation” on the part of Senegal and an attempt at “indirect aggression”.¹¹ Undeterred, Senegal’s defence minister, Birame Diop, travelled to Bamako just a few weeks later to discuss strengthening security ties with Mali’s president, General Assimi Goïta.

In July, JNIM communicated again, this time via act. Militants carried out six simultaneous attacks in the Kayes region, including a major one in at Diboli - likely targeted due to its symbolic role as the launchpad for the mixed patrols. While the attacks were, above all, a show of force against Mali, they also carried an implicit threat against Senegal.¹² For the Bakel department, the attacks marked a turning point: villagers who, until then, had felt relatively safe – not least because they enjoyed good relations with their Malian counterparts on the other side of the border – began to experience real fears.¹³ In September, JNIM militants kidnapped six Senegalese truck drivers, releasing them 24 hours later.¹⁴

These events fuelled calls to increase security in eastern Senegal amid fears of infiltration or the opening up of a new front, especially in the Bakel department.

New Pressures in Bakel

As the conflict swept towards Senegal’s eastern border, communities there experienced new types of upheaval, citing a rise in criminality and deepening isolation as particular concerns. At the same time, the region witnessed a troubling increase in the frequency of armed robberies, with three separate incidents occurring within a two-month period in late 2025. The identities of the assailants remain unknown.

On 27 October, seven masked men blocked the road between Gabou and Sira Mamadou Bocar. They targeted villagers on their way home from the weekly market, stopping motorcycles, tricycles and automobiles to steal mobile phones and cash and firing on one vehicle that had refused to stop. “We no longer feel safe. The fear is palpable”, a trader from Sira said.¹⁵ Two weeks later, armed men carried out a similar attack on the road between Samba Kontaye and Feto Golombi, again on market day.¹⁶ The attackers were not caught. On 22 December, six armed men attacked a public transport vehicle in a part of the Sadatou commune that has no mobile network coverage, stealing mobile phones and cash from passengers.¹⁷

⁹ See “Creating a Culture of Military Professionalism in Senegal”, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, Dec 6, 2023.

¹⁰ These patrols, which included units from Military Zone 4 and Groupes d’Action Rapides – Surveillance et Intervention (GARSI), were noteworthy as a rare example of an ECOWAS member state collaborating with an Alliance of Sahel States (AES) country on cross-border security.

¹¹ Audio file circulated on messaging applications in May 2025.

¹² See Mady Ibrahim Kanté and Papa Sow, “Attaques coordonnées dans l’Ouest du Mali : une nouvelle phase dans l’expansion du djihadisme ?”, *The Conversation*, Jul 29, 2025.

¹³ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

¹⁴ MSKT, “Senegal Truck Drivers Freed After Mali Jihadist Kidnapping”, *West Africa Democracy Radio*, Sept 8, 2025.

¹⁵ Interviews, Gabou, Nov 2025.

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Ousmane Ndiaye, “Insécurité à Bakel : Un véhicule de transport braqué sur l’axe Niéniekhô-Mansacounda”, *Seneweb.com*, Dec 23, 2025.

Armed robberies have long been an issue in this zone, with their frequency depending on economic conditions, the season (rainy or otherwise) and security deployments.¹⁸ But local inhabitants tend to link the recent attacks to instability in Mali, suspecting Malian nationals of committing the crimes. So far, there is no evidence to support that claim.¹⁹

For their part, herders and community leaders point to a troubling increase in cattle theft in recent months. According to them, thieves have been taking advantage of lapses in border security and lawlessness in Mali to steal animals in Senegal and sell them across the border.²⁰

As a consequence, there is a growing sense of isolation, with villagers in already remote areas feeling even more cut off from key social and economic resources. As one trader in Sira said: “People are now afraid to travel alone between two villages. Even though Sira Mamadou Bocar is only 15 km from Gabou, the capital of the commune, we feel isolated.”²¹

While the Senegalese state may have stepped up its presence in the zone, but it remains sparse in certain areas. For example, along the northern edge of the border, where the recent attacks occurred, patrols pass through just once a month and the nearest security post is 25 km from Gabou. Residents say that, despite the efforts of the security forces, many people cross informally from Mali into Senegal each day.²²

Farther south, the district of Kenieba, which lies east of the Falémé River and west of the Mali border, is cut off by its geography. NGOs have taken to calling it the “silent zone”, owing to the gaps in mobile network coverage and the lack of infrastructure.²³

In the Sadatou commune, situated at the southern tip of the Bakel department, residents describe the difficulties they encounter covering the long distance to the capital of the department on unpaved roads that are flooded for months each year.²⁴ The sick need to travel up to 300 km along such roads to reach the hospital in Kidira, for example; and villagers who need documentation, such as nationality certificates, have to go 400 km to Bakel.²⁵ In the rainy season, streams cut off the villages from the road leading to the main town, making it difficult for villagers to buy staple products like rice. In the dry season, there is a lack of security and an increasing number of criminal incidents. Villagers describe feeling forgotten, isolated and exposed.

Such isolation has security implications. In the event of a robbery or an emergency, those living in villages with poor mobile network coverage may have to walk 1–2 km to obtain a signal and be able to inform the authorities, which are often dozens of kilometres away.

Senegal's Security Response

Evolving Security Arrangements

The July 2025 attacks just across the border in the Kayes region were a turning point for Senegal. They highlighted the alarming contours of a spillover risk that had perhaps felt abstract or unreal after years of failing to materialise. But while the attacks were startling, they

¹⁸ In 2021, a businessman was killed in an armed robbery in Gabou. See “Bakel – Attaque à main armée : un commerçant abattu dans sa boutique à Gabou”, *SenTV.info*, Jan 15, 2021.

¹⁹ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

²⁰ *Idem*.

²¹ Interview, Gabou, Nov 2025.

²² *Idem*.

²³ Interview with a researcher, Dakar, Nov 2025.

²⁴ Interviews, Laminia, Nov 2025.

²⁵ *Idem*.

did not catch Senegal unawares. The country had been strengthening its preparedness for nearly a decade with new investments in security infrastructure in the region.

In 2017, Senegal launched its first Rapid Action Surveillance and Intervention Group (GARSI) unit, an elite, EU-funded entity which set up camp in Nayé in the Bele commune of the Bakel department and focused on securing isolated cross-border areas.²⁶ In 2022, a new military base was opened at Goudiry, roughly 70 km west of Kidira.²⁷ And in 2025, a new research task force was launched in Tambacounda to improve surveillance and support criminal investigations.²⁸

Months after the Diboli attack, the military held the week-long “Boundou 2025” exercise in Tambacounda. Land, river and air units were deployed in a show of preparedness.²⁹ Such manoeuvres fit the larger strategy of *maillage territoriale*, which aims at reducing regional inequalities, boosting economic development and decentralising the administration.

Strengthening Community Partnerships

Besides building brick-and-mortar infrastructure, the Senegalese security forces are also strengthening regional intelligence resources by reinforcing links with communities via customary and elected local leaders. It helps that social cohesion is relatively solid among the communities in Bakel, which have strong networks that spread across the Senegal-Mali border and often abroad into Europe.³⁰ For its part, the state has invested in policies to promote more inclusive governance and increase the involvement of communities in resource management – particularly in rural areas – amid environmental degradation and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources.³¹

Local mechanisms, such as councils of elders and women’s groups known as the *Badienou Gox*, play a key role in resolving disputes and helping avert the need for the police or gendarmerie to intervene.³² The security forces are working more closely with these individuals, offering training and outreach as well as establishing hotlines and sometimes even providing direct mobile phone numbers to encourage citizens to report suspicious activities.³³ Furthermore, villagers are able to access healthcare services at the gendarmerie bases and educational materials were distributed as part of the “Boundou 2025” military exercises. Fostering strong civil-military relations is an important step towards strengthening border security as it shores up popular support for the authorities and improves intelligence networks.

For the most part, respondents have a positive perception of the security forces. They praised their activities and said they would welcome more support – in the form of

²⁶ Despite being initially mandated to fight cross-border crime, such units were used to repress domestic protests in 2023. See Andrei Popoviciu and José Bautista, “How an EU-funded security force helped Senegal crush democracy protests”, *Al Jazeera*, Feb 29, 2024.

²⁷ “Sénégal : L’armée Renforce sa Présence près de la Frontière avec le Mali”, *Le Point Afrique*, Dec 28, 2022.

²⁸ Boubacar Agna Camara, “Tambacounda étrenne sa nouvelle brigade de recherches de Gendarmerie”, *Le Soleil*, Aug 1, 2025.

²⁹ “Tambacounda : la zone militaire No 4 lance les manoeuvres ‘Boundou 2025’”, *Dakaractu.com*, Dec 10, 2025.

³⁰ For more on the Soninke “culture of migration” – especially to France – see Sadio Traoré, “Les Modèles Migratoires Soninké et Poular de la Vallée du fleuve Sénégal”, *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, vol. 10, n°3, 1994. CERPA CERPOD ORSTOM – Migrations africaines.

³¹ See United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat), “Bridging the Divide: A Review of Urban-Rural Linkages in Senegal”, 2025.

³² Interviews with the village chief of Senedebou and the president of the *Badienou Gox*, Kidira, Nov 2025. An initiative was launched by former President Abdoulaye Wade in 2008 to boost women’s health initiatives across the territory. The *Badienou Gox* groups have since evolved to take on new roles, including in dispute resolution.

³³ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

proximity posts (*postes de proximité*) and aerial surveillance.³⁴ They also described the conduct of the military and gendarmerie units as professional and their presence reassuring.³⁵

Indeed, many are keen for the security forces to further increase their presence. Respondents said that given the vast open spaces and the difficult terrain of the region, the patrols that pass through once a month or every few months are insufficient. In November, in the wake of the armed robberies in Gabou, the departmental Development Committee held an emergency meeting attended by the sous-prefect as well as representatives of the local authorities and the Defence and Security Forces (FDS). The mayor of Gabou and other leaders called for a detachment to be stationed in the Gabou commune.³⁶

In the meantime, some areas have launched community monitoring initiatives. These include a formal Monitoring and Alert Committee in Kidira and the informal networks that have emerged in villages like Diboli Foulbé to complement and inform the work of the FDS.³⁷ And there is also an initiative to launch vigilance committees in each of the 44 villages of the Gabou commune.³⁸

Establishing More Checkpoints

The growing deployment of security forces carries some risk, however. While local perceptions of the security forces are generally positive, there are complaints about the rise in the number of checkpoints in recent months. Some local residents said they understand the need for more checkpoints in the context of surveillance and defence but cautioned that they risk becoming predatory. Those who use local transport complained of already long trips being made even longer by repeated stops, while businessmen, bus drivers and truckers said that police officers and gendarmes often impose fake fines or demand fees so that they can line their own pockets.³⁹

One Malian truckdriver who transports containers from the port of Dakar to Bamako said he has to pay 1,000 FCFA at each police and gendarmerie checkpoint or risk being fined a higher amount.⁴⁰ Until recently, there were five checkpoints between Kidira and Dakar; today, there are more than 20. “The difficulties we truckdrivers are encountering are not linked to a lack of security but rather to checkpoints operated by security agents – especially in Senegal.” Between the border and Bamako, he noted, the checkpoints are fewer – just three in all – and better organised.

A Senegalese bus driver in Bakel related a similar experience. “Since the situation in Mali has worsened, the number of passengers using public transport has contracted. Until recently, the bus station was more crowded. Drivers have to endure a lot of harassment on the roads, even if the security situation means that more checkpoints are necessary. Passengers complain about the situation, because they are losing so much time at these checkpoints. We lose hours just travelling from Ourosogui to Bakel.”⁴¹

³⁴ Interviews with village chiefs and elected leaders, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

³⁵ One municipal councillor said: “We are very satisfied with efforts to step up security, especially with more regular patrols. The gendarmes are doing excellent work and we’re grateful for that.”

³⁶ “Bakel : Le Maire de Gabou Réclame l’installation d’une Base Permanente de l’armée dans sa Commune”, *APS*, Oct 29, 2025.

³⁷ Interviews, Kidira and Diboli Foulbé, Nov 2025.

³⁸ Interviews, Gabou, Nov 2025.

³⁹ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁴⁰ Interview, Kidira, Nov 2025.

⁴¹ Interview, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

Fragility Factors

Environmental Devastation along the Falémé River

Until recently, the Falémé River formed the backbone of agriculture, herding and fishing across the Bakel department and was crucial for the livelihoods of local communities. In the early 2010s, rising gold prices led to the establishment of artisanal and semi-industrial gold mines along the entire length of the river. Since then, gold mining in the department has come to be associated with human trafficking, organised crime and the unregulated use of explosives, although the risk of those factors fuelling wider instability is relatively small and contained compared with the situation in the Kedougou region, where more than 90 per cent of the country's gold mining sites are concentrated.⁴²

At the same time, the mining-related pollution of the river has left residents facing an unprecedented environmental collapse. Mining-related practices – such as dredging, diverting water and pumping residues and heavy metals into the river – have severely polluted the Falémé, dealing a devastating blow to farming, herding and fishing.⁴³ Water that served local communities and their animals in areas unsuited for deep-well drilling has been rendered undrinkable. Increased sediment has damaged irrigation systems while chemical contamination has degraded the quality of the water for agricultural use. Fish have choked on stirred-up clay particles and herders have been forced to adapt transhumance patterns in order to seek out alternative water sources, thereby increasing the risk of tensions between farmers and herders.

“The Falémé was a vital resource,” a municipal councillor from Bele said. “Now, farmers have to rely on the rains instead of river irrigation. Many have abandoned their fields.”⁴⁴ Meanwhile, illnesses have spread and fish species disappeared. Pressures to migrate have risen, as “farming and herding were the only things keeping young people [in the department].”⁴⁵ As the damage got worse, civil society groups mobilised on both sides of the border to sound the alarm and plead for protective measures. The official responses have been very different: the Malian authorities threatened and arrested activists, which led to violence between protesters and miners, while the Senegalese authorities listened to the concerns expressed.⁴⁶

On 31 July 2024, President Faye issued a decree suspending mining operations and licensing for a two-year period on land within 500 meters of the left bank of the Falémé River.⁴⁷ By 25 June 2025, the FDS had dismantled more than 66 artisanal sites across Kedougou and Tambacounda, arresting dozens of miners and seizing equipment, generators and motorcycles. Nearly all sites are now closed, with just a few unauthorised ones remaining.⁴⁸ While it is too early to assess the ban's full environmental impact, some studies point to early signs of recovery.⁴⁹ However, some civil society actors argue that the ban did not go far enough as it failed to address the larger problem of semi-industrial actors – namely, the Chinese

⁴² Adja Khadidiatou Faye et al., “Preventing Violent Extremism in Senegal: Threats Linked to Gold Mining”, *Institute for Security Studies* (ISS), Feb 23, 2022.

⁴³ See Pierre Jacquemot, “En Afrique de l'Ouest, la Falémé menacée de mort par l'orpaillage”, *Sahelink*, Apr 2024.

⁴⁴ Interview, Kidira, Nov 2025.

⁴⁵ Interview, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁴⁶ In March 2023, mounting tensions between protesters and miners resulted in a confrontation in which goldminers reportedly fired weapons at activists. “Sauvons la Falémé !”, Apr 12, 2023.

⁴⁷ Ministère de l'Énergie, du Pétrole et des Mines, “Projet de décret portant suspension des activités minières dans la zone du fleuve de la Falémé”, Jul 31, 2024.

⁴⁸ Interview with an NGO researcher, Dakar, Dec 2025.

⁴⁹ Idem.

mining companies issued with semi-mechanized mining permits, which use heavier equipment capable of inflicting far more damage, such as industrial dredgers.⁵⁰ At the same time, the enforcement of the ban has increased hardship among those communities along the river that had benefited economically from mining activities.

The loss of livelihoods, together with the environmental degradation caused directly by the mining-related pollution, has made the region more vulnerable at a time when it needs to be strong to ward off a potential encroachment by JNIM.

Potential Cleavages Related to Ethnicity and Caste

So far, local communities in the Bakel department have been insulated from the dynamics that have tipped rural zones elsewhere in the Sahel into violence. Villagers rarely experience discrimination on the basis of ethnicity.⁵¹ “Tensions between farmers and herders exist but we resolve them peacefully, since most farmers are also herders,” a farmer and community leader said.⁵² However, there are two fragility factors related to inclusiveness that should be handled carefully and tactfully.

The first is the potential spillover of the ethnicisation of the conflict in Mali. Across the border, massacres and other atrocities committed not only by the Malian security forces but also by civilian and foreign proxies against Peul civilians have terrified many within that community. Amadou Koufa, a JNIM commander and Peul from northern Mali, has exploited such persecution to his group's advantage, depicting the Malian government as the enemy of the Peul people and appealing to Peul across the region to join the movement.

In the Bakel department, Peul villagers say that have not experienced exclusion, persecution or marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity.⁵³ But they are well aware of the serious threats that Peul elsewhere face. “The Peul, they are under attack, to tell the truth. Those who speak Pulaar, they're under threat. Just across the border,” one mayor noted.⁵⁴

In separate incidents in eastern Senegal in late 2025, two Malian citizens were arrested for the distribution of propaganda videos mobilizing against Peul persecution. In November, Hndebe Key, a Malian national, was detained in the Bele commune of the Bakel department and found to be an administrator of seven WhatsApp groups –communicating mainly in the Pulaar language – that advocated armed violence against the Alliance des Etats du Sahel (AES). Key denied having any direct links to jihadist extremist groups and said he was aiming to “unite Peul ... and raise their awareness about stigmatisation”.⁵⁵ The next month, another Malian was arrested at a weekly market in eastern Senegal on charges of “advocating terrorism” after he had been found to be the administrator of a WhatsApp group distributing videos that glorified jihadist atrocities.

The second fragility factor is the tensions surrounding caste stratification. In the Senegalese context, caste hierarchies carry the tradition of descent-based servitude. These divisions persist in various forms to this day, manifesting themselves in exclusion from or

⁵⁰ Interview with a civil society actor, Kidira, Nov 2025. See also El Hadji Top et al., “Gold Mining, Discourses, and Threats: What Is Really Damaging the Fluvial Hydrosystem of the Falémé River?”, *Journal of Political Ecology*, Vol. 31(1), 2024.

⁵¹ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁵² Interview, Diboli Foulbé, Nov 2025.

⁵³ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁵⁴ Idem.

⁵⁵ Modou Mamoune Tine, “Bakel: Hndebe Key arrêté pour apologie du terrorisme, les dessous d'un dossier sensible”, *Senenews.com*, November 12, 2025.

discrimination against within social, political and religious spheres.⁵⁶ Although caste hierarchies remain a taboo subject and were not addressed directly by those interviewed, they have recently been the cause of contained outbreaks of violence, especially around marriages and at sports events.⁵⁷ They have also fuelled disputes over religion, with Salafists appealing to caste grievances in order to influence religious beliefs.⁵⁸ Some interviewees said that caste-based tensions have declined over time but remain not insignificant, especially in Goudiry and Kidira.⁵⁹

Elsewhere in the Sahel, caste-based competition over land and water management and religious authority has driven rivals to align with or against the state in pursuit of their own claims at the local level. While discrimination along ethnic and community lines has boosted recruitment and local support for JNIM in other countries of the Sahel, there is no evidence to date of anything similar happening in the Bakel department. However, a deep social fissure remains that could be exploited if grievances are not handled carefully.

Refugee Arrivals Create New Challenges

After the July attacks in Mali's Kayes region, a "very small influx" of around 600 mostly Malian Peul fled to the Bakel department. These refugees are living not in camps but with host communities in the villages of Gabou, Guétié, Mouduiry, Marsa, Diabal and Daharatou.⁶⁰ Despite their modest number, the new arrivals highlighted a lack of preparedness and created some panic and confusion in the affected areas.

Since the Diboli attacks, refugees have come under growing scrutiny, with some residents linking their presence to the increase in crime, despite the lack of hard evidence.⁶¹ Some respondents expressed the fear that the new arrivals – most of whom are women and children – could pose an infiltration threat. "Where are the men? They're over in Mali, fighting in the war," one elected local leader noted. His concern was that the presence of refugees in his district could lead to the formation of a sleeper cell or rearguard base.⁶² Moreover, lingering memories of the repatriation of Peul during the conflict with Mauritania are fuelling fears of land expropriation at a time when resources are already strained.⁶³

Some local authorities are urging the security forces to increase the surveillance and documentation of refugees. Others, more sympathetic to the plight of the arrivals, are seeking to conceal their whereabouts amid rising mistrust. One elected local official instructed the gendarmerie to send dozens of refugees back to Mali, which was in contravention of

⁵⁶ „Sénégal : Castes et servitude par ascendance“, Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides, Mar 24, 2022.

⁵⁷ In Peul society, members of the "torodo" (noble) caste are traditionally forbidden from marrying members of the lower "teug" (blacksmith) or "mathioudo" (servile) castes. Similarly, in Soninke society, the "hooro" (nobles) are distinct from the "niaxamalani" (artisan) and "komo" (servile) castes. One village has been divided in half over the caste tensions that erupted during a wedding. See "Se marier en dehors de sa caste cela peut porter malheur!": dans l'est du Sénégal les traditions divisent encore les villages", *Jeune Afrique*, Nov 5 2025. In 2020, violence broke out in a village in Bakel between members of the "torodo" and "mathioudo" castes during a football match that the latter had won; four people sustained injuries. See Alassane Dramane, "Une affaire de castes se termine par une bagarre", *Seneweb News*, Sep 25, 2020.

⁵⁸ According to tradition, imams belong to the noble caste, although many perceive this distinction as outdated. Disputes over religious roles have fuelled the rise of Salafist Islamic ideologies in parts of the department. Interviews, Bakel department, November 2025. See also Timbuktu Institute "Menace du JNIM dans la zone des trois frontières du Mali, de la Mauritanie, et du Senegal", Apr 17, 2025 and Matthieu Millecamps, "Jihadisme: le Senegal est-il dans le viseur du JNIM?", Apr 28, 2025.

⁵⁹ Interview with a local journalist, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁶⁰ Interview with a humanitarian worker, Dakar, Dec 2025.

⁶¹ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

⁶² Interview, Gabou, Nov 2025.

⁶³ Interviews, Bakel department, Nov 2025.

national policy and protocol. There have been no other such incidents; and local officials have since received training and are supporting the ongoing registration of the refugees who have remained.

Overall, humanitarian agencies regard Senegal's policy towards the integration of refugees as very positive, especially compared with that of Mauritania, although the two countries face very different challenges – there are roughly 15,000 refugees in Senegal and more than 300,000 in Mauritania.⁶⁴ The arrival of the refugees in the Bakel department has, however, highlighted the need to strengthen preparedness and coordination – from both a security and humanitarian standpoint. Increased insecurity in Mali could lead to a significant rise in the number of refugees arriving in Senegal, which would put further strain on both the state and the host communities.

Recommendations: Strengthening Border Security

Over the past five years, Senegal has reinforced security along its border in an orderly way and largely in alignment with the needs and concerns of the population. Residents' calls for increased surveillance, including aerial, and proximity posts reflect a relatively stable harmony between their interests and those of the security forces. The irregularities at the rapidly increasing checkpoints, however, reveal a lack of discipline that, unchecked, could undermine what are generally good relations between the local communities and the security apparatus.

Security could be strengthened overall by paying more attention to calls by local communities for development and infrastructure projects, in particular schools, healthcare facilities and roads in areas – like Laminia – that increasingly find themselves cut off. European donors may have a role to play here as they transition from cooperating with central Sahel governments to working with the authorities in those areas where they fear a spillover of violent conflict could occur. Preserving and enhancing mobility and connectedness are key concerns for residents of this isolated region.

The catastrophic pollution of the Falémé River should be viewed as a matter of human security – one that must be addressed to increase border security. The nearly three-year suspension of mining activities within 500m of the left bank of the river was a positive first step, welcomed by most respondents; but further action is needed to clean up the river and protect the communities that rely on it for their livelihoods from farming, herding, fishing or mining. Moreover, the ban is a short-term measure only and will end in 2027. The central authorities should take local perspectives into account when deciding whether to extend, lift, or revise the ban. At issue here is not just cleaning up the environment but investing wisely in regional security. Community dialogue sessions, possibly with support from foreign partners such as Germany, could prove useful in harmonising the interests of artisanal miners and semi-industrial actors with those of farming and herding associations.

There is a delicate balance to be struck by states – like Senegal – that want to shield front-line communities from any escalation of violent conflict. Security must be in place but should not be heavy-handed. The judiciary must be independent and fair. Messaging sympathetic to jihadist armed violence should not be tolerated. At the same time, the right to free speech of those denouncing crimes against the Peul must be respected.

⁶⁴ Interview with a humanitarian worker, Dakar, Dec 2025.

It is likely that cross-border security cooperation between Senegal and Mali is putting the former country at higher risk of hostile action from JNIM. Nevertheless, such cooperation is an important step towards protecting the border and promoting other forms of coordination – both pragmatic and necessary – between the two neighbouring states in the wake of the diplomatic rupture between ECOWAS and the AES. Security could be further strengthened by joint efforts to track and return stolen cattle, for example. Cattle rustling in other frontier zones, such as the Burkina Faso-Ghana border, has allowed extremist groups to grow stronger and led to greater insecurity.⁶⁵ In Senegal, the annual losses from cattle theft exceed US\$3 million, according to estimates. New start-ups in that country are developing digital tracking technologies to improve livestock security.⁶⁶ Mounting a strong defence against cattle theft in the Bakel department would not only demonstrate resolve but also help protect communities at a time of increasing vulnerability.

Hannah Rae Armstrong is a senior research analyst and policy advisor working on peace and security in North Africa and the Sahel region

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SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik | German Institute for International and Security Affairs
IDOS German Institute of Development and Sustainability
Kiel Institute for the World Economy

www.megatrends-afrika.de
megatrends-afrika@swp-berlin.org

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⁶⁵ James Courtright, “How Stolen Cattle Links Ghana to the Jihadist Conflict in the Sahel”, Clingendael Institute, Jul 17, 2025.

⁶⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “With the Support of FAO, Senegal Validates Its National Cattle Identification and Tracking System (SNITB) and Focuses on Local Innovation to Strengthen Security for Livestock Farmers”, press release by the FAO Regional Office for Africa, Dec 30, 2025.



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