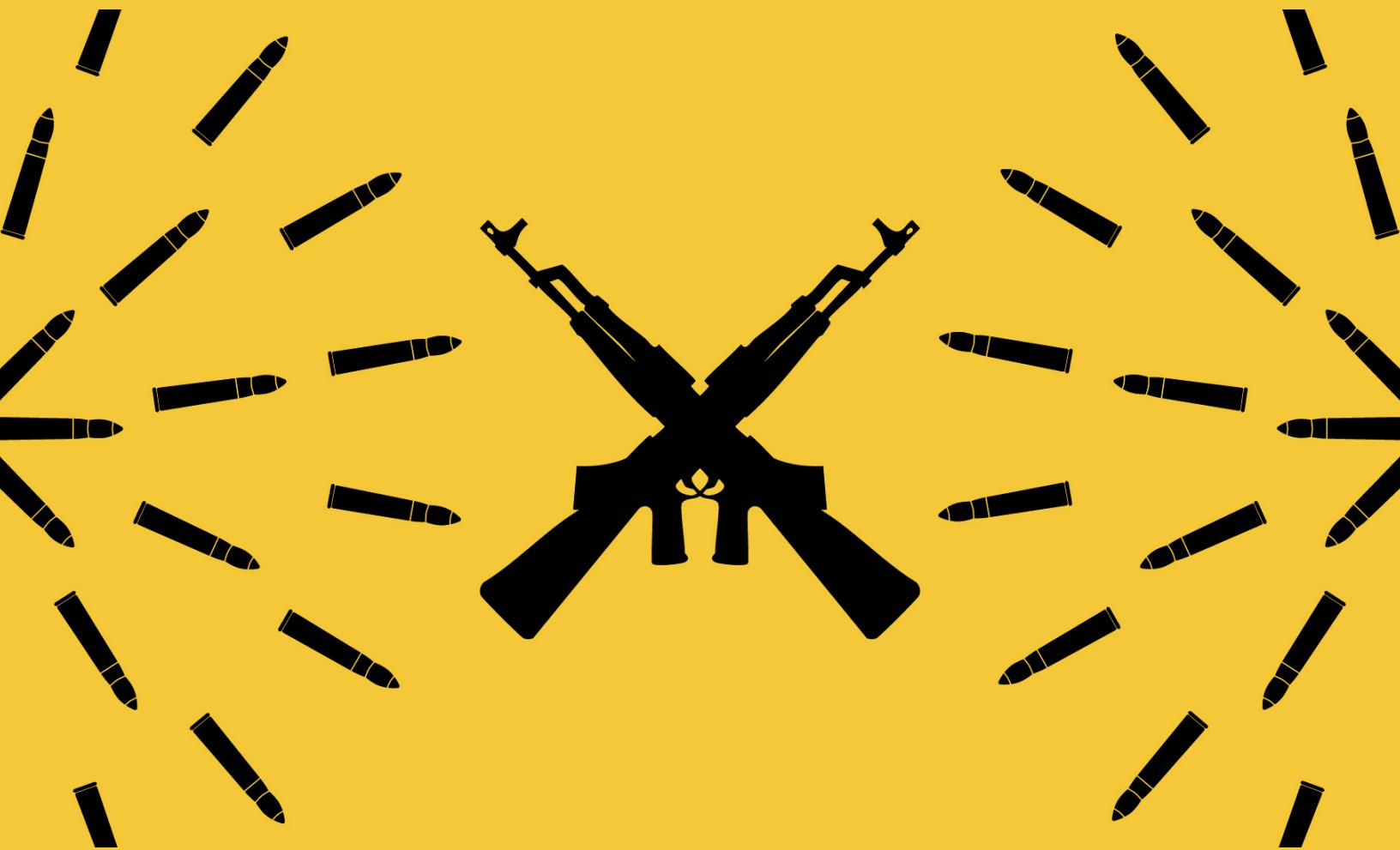


Jamestown

January 29, 2026



# Terrorism Monitor

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Lieutenant Colonel Pascal Tigri and other soldiers announced the failed coup in Benin. (Source: Daily Post Nigeria)

# Benin Coup Plot Tests Cross-Border Counterterrorism Readiness

Jacob Zenn  
January 29, 2026

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## Executive Summary

- On December 7, 2025, Nigeria and other members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) helped Benin's government thwart a military coup attempt, which the plotters justified as a response to escalating jihadist insecurity in the north.
- The intervention re-established Nigeria as a regional security guarantor and prevented Benin from falling under a junta that might have pivoted toward Russia's sphere of influence.
- Preserving Benin's stability allows for continued cross-border counterterrorism coordination with Nigeria against the expanding presence of the Group for the Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) militants in the region.

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## Brief

On December 7, 2025, Benin nearly became the latest country in Africa's expanding "coup belt" to experience an overthrow of the country's leadership ([African Business](#), December 13, 2025). During the coup attempt, soldiers under Lt. Col. Pascal Tigri's leadership seized control of the state broadcaster and claimed they had ousted President Patrice Talon from power. Like other Sahelian putschists, the coup plotters' justification highlighted their desire to quell insecurity caused by jihadist groups operating in the north of the country ([ghanaweb.com](#), December 14, 2025). The two main groups threatening Benin are Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the latter of which expanded aggressively into Nigeria through Benin in the latter half of 2025.

Nigeria's ability to deploy forces elsewhere in the region to combat terrorism, insecurity, or political conflict—as it did in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s—has declined in recent years as a result of Boko Haram's violence in the country. Nonetheless, swift Nigerian and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) military support for Benin, in response to the country's request for foreign military assistance, helped the Beninese government thwart the coup ([punchng.com](#), December 12, 2025). This did not require boots on the ground from Nigeria or other ECOWAS partners, but Nigerian air support—if not also diplomatic statements—prevented the putschists from taking over Benin's main airport and other key government and military installations ([Le Monde](#), December 14, 2025).

Nigeria's airstrikes reportedly killed several coup-plotters, immobilized their armored vehicles, and disrupted their escape routes ([X/@ZagazOlaMakama](#), December 7, 2025). These strikes re-established Nigeria's confidence

as a regional security guarantor while also defending another democracy in the region from succumbing to a junta that would likely have followed Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso into Russia's orbit ([prnigeria.com](#), December 11, 2025). Any coup and ensuing political instability, moreover, would have further increased insecurity in Benin, thereby jeopardizing Nigerian security along their porous mutual border.

The Benin–Nigeria border is the latest flashpoint in West Africa (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), October 22, 2025). JNIM has claimed responsibility for attacks on the Nigerian side of the border since November 2025. This is a notable escalation in JNIM operations, indicating that it is not only active in engaging and allying with bandits but also in carrying out larger-scale attacks, as JNIM has now documented in publicly released video and photo propaganda materials. While ISGS is yet to claim an attack in Nigeria, its Nigerian ally, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP), has done so. Both ISWAP and the late Abubakar Shekau faction, moreover, have documented their followers' presence in the region over the past five years ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 28, 2020).

Benin's ability to maintain political stability will allow it to continue counter-terrorism coordination with Nigeria, which may have collapsed under a coup regime, let alone a newfound alliance with Russia. This does not mean that threats from JNIM and ISGS will diminish, however. Importantly, preventing the coup could provide impetus for Benin and Nigeria to deepen their security partnership and reconsider new strategies to counter the hitherto seemingly inexorable expansion of JNIM and ISGS into their territories.

To read this article on the Jamestown website,

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## Brief

click [here](#).

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A Kurdish youth holds a poster of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan during Newroz celebrations on March 21, 2025, in Diyarbakir, Turkey. (Source: Getty Images)

# Kurdish Diaspora Complicates PKK's Peace Deal with Türkiye

**Jorma Arvidson**  
**January 29, 2026**

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## Executive Summary

- On November 4, 2025, Finnish authorities arrested three suspected Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) financiers during a high-level Turkish diplomatic visit, a move seemingly designed to reinforce Finland's commitment to the 2022 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) related counterterrorism memorandum.
- Despite announcing its dissolution in May 2025, PKK leadership has paused peace efforts to demand the release of the group's leader, Abdullah Ocalan,

and the ratification of amnesty legislation known as the "Homecoming Law."

- It is still unclear whether Kurdish diaspora networks will disband alongside the parent organization, while PKK commanders also warn of retained military capabilities pending Turkish political concessions.

## Extremism in Europe

On November 4, 2025, Finnish police arrested several individuals in southeast Finland on suspicion of terrorism-related offenses. Authorities later confirmed that the suspects were three Kurdish men believed to be linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). They were accused of financing terrorism by collecting money from the Kurdish community in Finland since October 2023 ([Helsingin Sanomat](#), November 11, 2025).

### Coincidental Timing?

The arrests occurred on the same day that Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan visited Helsinki for discussions with his Finnish counterpart. The timing drew attention, as Türkiye had previously delayed Finland's and Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2022–2023. At that time, Türkiye demanded stronger cooperation on counterterrorism before granting its approval (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 16, 2022).

In June 2022, Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden signed a trilateral memorandum on counterterrorism cooperation, paving the way for the Nordic countries' eventual accession to NATO ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland](#), June 29, 2022). Türkiye continued to closely monitor alleged PKK activities in Finland. In August 2024, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) and the Istanbul Police Department conducted a joint operation capturing a Finnish-Iranian national known by the alias "Naze Ad," who was reportedly a senior figure in the PKK's Finland branch ([TRT World](#), August 21, 2024).

Turkish security officials claimed that communication between PKK cadres in Finland and the group's senior leadership facilitated recruitment and financial flows. Turkish media reported that her arrest also yielded key intelligence on PKK networks in Finland

([Türkiye Today](#) August 21, 2024; [Yeni Şafak](#) August 22, 2024). In an unexpected turn, however, Turkish authorities released her a few weeks later after an Istanbul court dismissed the terrorism charges. She was subsequently deported to Finland ([YLE](#), November 7, 2024).

It is unclear whether intelligence gathered during Naze Ad's August 2024 arrest contributed to the Finnish police's ability to identify additional PKK structures in Finland. Regardless of a possible connection, the recent arrests may be interpreted as Finland demonstrating its commitment to the counterterrorism obligations outlined in the 2022 trilateral memorandum.

### PKK Waiting for Reciprocity

The PKK agreed to a ceasefire with Türkiye on March 1, 2025. This was followed by an announcement on May 12, 2025, of its full dissolution and support for political solutions. Whether these developments will influence legal proceedings in Finland against the three suspected PKK fundraisers in custody remains to be seen ([Etelä-Saimaa](#), December 8, 2025).

In early December, the jailed founder and leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, stressed his determination to see through ongoing peace efforts with Türkiye. At the same time, he urged Ankara to finalize the legal groundwork for the process. His remarks came just days after senior PKK commander Amed Malazgirt—who is based in northern Iraq's Qandil mountains—publicly stated the PKK would take no further steps in the peace process until Türkiye frees the now 76-year-old Ocalan ([Barrons](#), December 3, 2025).

Besides Malazgirt's statement, PKK commander Murat Karayılan's also caused tensions in Ankara, when he indicated that the peace process with the PKK—after initially making quick progress—is now facing challenges.

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## Extremism in Europe

Karayilan confirmed that his fighters in northern Iraq have withdrawn from Zap and Metina near the Iraqi-Turkish border. He stated that at the same time, “[the] PKK is not stupid and knows how to protect itself,” claiming that the group has the capability to shoot down Turkish armed drones ([Middle East Eye](#), December 3, 2025).

A central PKK demand revolves around the plan formulated between Ocalan and Turkish intelligence, foreseeing Türkiye's parliament ratifying laws granting amnesty to some PKK fighters so they can return to Türkiye. The draft legislation, known as the "Homecoming Law," is reportedly almost ready. The parliamentary commission drafting the law is expected to issue a report before submitting the draft to Parliament ([Middle East Eye](#), December 3, 2025).

### Conclusion

Statements by Malazgirt and Karayilan highlight the complexities surrounding the effort to end the four-decade-long PKK insurgency. PKK leaders appear to be seeking some form of reciprocity from the Turkish state after, in their view, having met all required conditions. These include officially declaring the group's dissolution, withdrawing fighters from Türkiye and its border areas, and handing over certain weapons. For Turkish and European intelligence and law-enforcement authorities, including in Finland, however, a key question will be whether PKK-linked structures within the Kurdish diaspora will follow suit and disband themselves alongside their parent organization.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, [click here](#).

Jorma Arvidson specializes on geopolitics and terrorism in the greater Middle East.



Director of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, blaming the United States, Britain, and Ukraine for the Crocus City Hall attack in 2024.  
(Source: Press Service of the President of Russia / TASS)

# Russia's FSB Exploits ISKP Threats to Pressure Central Asia

**Uran Botobekov,**  
**January 29, 2026**

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## Executive Summary

- On October 13, 2025, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) announced it foiled an assassination plot targeting a senior military officer, alleging that the plot was orchestrated by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in coordination with the Islamic State (IS).
- Since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has repeatedly made similar allegations of Western and

Ukrainian collaboration with terror groups—including after the 2024 Crocus City Hall massacre—in an attempt to discredit Ukraine and its Western partners and widen geopolitical rifts.

- Moscow further instrumentalizes terrorism narratives to position itself as Central Asia's primary security guarantor, warning regional governments against distancing themselves from Russia or aligning with the West.

## Counterterrorism

Since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has aimed to widen the geopolitical rift between the so-called Global South and the West. The Kremlin seeks to circumvent oil-related sanctions, while weaponizing threats posed by Uzbek and Tajik militants of the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) to portray Kyiv and its Western partners as complicit with global jihadi networks. This was exemplified on October 13, 2025, when Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) announced it foiled an assassination plot targeting a senior military officer, alleging that the plot was orchestrated by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in coordination with the Islamic State (IS) ([Federal Security Service of Russia](#), October 13, 2025).

### Propaganda about the Assassination Plot

Four suspects were detained in the assassination plot—three Russian nationals and one Central Asian—for allegedly planning a suicide attack in central Moscow. The operation was reportedly directed by IS member Saidakbar Gulomov from bases in Ukraine and Western Europe. The FSB also claimed Gulomov was involved in the December 2024 assassination of Lieutenant General Igor Kirillov, who headed Russia's Radiation, Chemical, and Biological Protection Troops ([Gazeta.ru](#), December 17, 2024). Wanted by both Uzbekistan and Russia, Gulomov is believed to be of Uzbek origin, but no verified links to Ukraine, IS, or ISKP have been established. Russia's accusations against Gulomov blur the line between war propaganda and legitimate counterterrorism analysis.

The FSB, which is the successor to the once-formidable KGB and remains the cornerstone of Russian President Vladimir Putin's domestic power, was the main architect and amplifier of conspiracy narratives claiming Western collaboration with ISKP to support Ukraine.

Speaking at the 57th Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Security Council session in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, on October 16, FSB Director Alexander Bortnikov asserted that Western private military companies (PMCs) were supplying ISKP with resources and facilitating the transfer of militants from the Middle East to Afghanistan to bolster ISKP ([Sputnik Uzbekistan](#), October 16, 2025). According to Bortnikov, ISKP aims to consolidate control over northern Afghanistan up to the CIS borders and has launched online propaganda in Tajik, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and, most recently, Kazakh languages.

Bortnikov further claimed that foreign intelligence services are aiding ISKP's expansion of training camps and recruitment of Central Asian and Russian nationals, allegedly to undermine the Taliban and destabilize the CIS's southern frontier. Drawing on IS's Middle Eastern experience, Bortnikov warned that ISKP seeks to infiltrate the Fergana Valley under the banner of a "global caliphate."

### Disinformation Campaigns about the Caucasus

Following Russia's failed assault on Kyiv and withdrawal from northern and central Ukraine in 2022, the FSB intensified its disinformation campaigns alleging that Central Asian and North Caucasian jihadists were fighting for Ukraine. Pro-FSB Telegram channels accused Abdulhakim al-Shishani (Rustam Azhiyev), emir of the Chechen group Ajnad al-Kavkaz, of moving over 100 militants from Idlib to Ukraine. The same channels claimed Ukraine's SBU, Turkish, and Western security services were colluding with global terrorist networks ([Directorate 4](#), November 10, 2022).

Pro-Kremlin media and military bloggers framed al-Shishani's participation on Ukraine's

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## Counterterrorism

side as evidence of CIA and European intelligence leveraging Sunni jihadi groups to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia ([Regnum.ru](#), March 19, 2024). Yet al-Shishani's own motives reflected not IS or al-Qaeda's global jihadi banner, but rather Chechen separatism and the enduring fight for Ichkerian independence. A veteran of both Chechen wars who fled to Türkiye and later Syria to escape Russian persecution, he believes that by fighting in Ukraine, he continues Ichkeria's struggle (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), May 4, 2018; [Kavkazr.com](#), December 2, 2022).

Ichkerian separatism—not the global jihad alleged by the FSB—has united former Chechen resistance fighters against Russia in Ukraine. They now serve across five formations: the Sheikh Mansur, Dzhokhar Dудayev, and Khamzat Gelayev battalions; the Mad Pack assault group; and al-Shishani's Special Purpose Force. The latter was formed by Akhmed Zakayev, who heads the Ichkerian government-in-exile ([Thechechenpress](#), March 15, 2024).

### IS and al-Qaeda's Perceptions of Russia's War in Ukraine

Both IS and al-Qaeda initially characterized Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a "Crusader-on-Crusader" war and "divine punishment," urging Muslims to remain neutral ([Al-Naba's 328th edition](#), March 3, 2022). The March 2024 Crocus City Hall attack by four Tajik ISKP militants, however, gave Moscow a new pretext to accuse Ukraine and Western intelligence of aiding global jihadi networks. Despite IS's prompt and explicit claim of responsibility through its Amaq and al-Naba publications, Bortnikov persisted in alleging that Ukraine's SBU, backed by Western intelligence—particularly the United States and United Kingdom—had orchestrated the attack ([TASS](#), March 26, 2024).

In August 2025, Russia's Investigative Committee concluded its probe into the Crocus City Hall massacre, indicting 29 suspects in a Moscow court ([Interfax.ru](#), August 4, 2025). Eighteen months after the attack, the FSB's once-blistering anti-U.S. rhetoric noticeably softened, although the so-called "Ukrainian trace" narrative endures. The Committee alleged links between ISKP operatives and Ukraine's SBU but refrained from implicating the broader West.

This recalibration reflects changing geopolitical realities under the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. Unlike the era of unwavering support for Kyiv under former U.S. President Joe Biden, the Trump administration has explored the possibility of rapprochement with Moscow, prompting a more moderate tone in the FSB's narrative ([ridl.io](#), December 3, 2025).

### Central Asian Leaders' Perceptions

The leaders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—whose citizens stand accused in the Crocus attack—condemned terrorism but refrained from blaming Ukraine or Western intelligence ([President of Uzbekistan](#); [Serep.kg](#), March 23, 2024; [President of Tajikistan](#), March 24, 2024). Their restraint underscores both their delicate balancing between Moscow and the West and their long-standing habitual acceptance of the Kremlin's manipulation of the "global jihadi threat" as a political tool to keep post-Soviet states within Russia's orbit and reinforce the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) framework. The FSB's allegations of ISKP's links to Ukraine and the West have nonetheless found little resonance among Central Asia's political elites or religious communities.

Since Putin's rise in 2000, the Kremlin has pursued a strategy of coercing states in its Central Asian "soft underbelly" by deftly exploiting the security threat posed by al-Qaeda,

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## Impending Threats

the Taliban, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan to position itself as the region's principal guarantor of stability ([rg.ru](#), March 4, 2004). Under the banner of "regional security," it expanded and modernized military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, pressured Bishkek in 2014 to close the U.S. Transit Center at Manas, and consolidated influence through the CSTO and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) ([Zvezda](#), July 13, 2018). Following the 2015 deployment of its Khmeimim Air Base in Syria, Moscow recast itself as the main bulwark against Central Asian jihadi factions affiliated with ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—amplifying the threat of returning foreign fighters to justify its regional dominance.

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and HTS's entrenchment in Syria have since exposed the manipulative nature of Moscow's security narrative. In July, Russia became the first major power and permanent UN Security Council member to formally recognize the Taliban. Putin's reception of Ahmed al-Sharaa at the Kremlin, moreover, underscored the pragmatism of his diplomacy as he shook hands with the very figure once used to intimidate Central Asian elites ([Gazeta.ru](#), September 3, 2025).

### Conclusion

Bortnikov's claims that Ukraine and Western intelligence orchestrated the 2024 ISKP attacks in Moscow revive the Kremlin's early 2000s tactic of pressuring Central Asia with the specter of jihadi incursions. Though geopolitical realities and Central Asian jihadism have evolved, the FSB's instruments of manipulation and coercive influence under Putin remain unchanged. Moscow's instrumentalization of the ISKP threat, in particular, serves a dual

purpose: to discredit Ukraine and the West while reinforcing Russia's coercive influence in Central Asia. Beneath the rhetoric lies a strategic warning to regional governments: avoid repeating the "Ukrainian mistake" and remain within Moscow's orbit.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

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Screencapture from a video released by JNIM after a raid in southern Mali.  
(Source: The Africa Report)

# Sahel's Eternal Yesterday: Chosen Traumas Sustain Jihadist Violence

Chris Mensa-Ankrah  
January 29, 2026

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## Executive Summary

- On January 13, Nigerien authorities revoked the operating licenses of dozens of fuel transporters and tanker drivers who refused to continue deliveries into Mali amid escalating jihadist attacks along the Niger–Mali corridor.
- The ongoing conflict in the Sahel is not only driven by material factors such as poverty, political instability, and military presence, but also by overlapping “chosen traumas” of past humiliations, which are reactivated by modern-day crises, thereby narrowing the political space and fueling violence.
- Counterterrorism measures that focus on force—whether they are of Western or Russian-backed origin—often fail, as they reactivate these traumas, which in turn makes jihadist narratives and recruitment stronger.
- To put an end to the cycle of violence going back to the past requires the statecraft approach to be aware of the trauma: localized reconciliation, restraint in security operations, and political processes that recognize historical memory rather than try to suppress it.

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## Counterterrorism

On January 13, Nigerien authorities revoked the operating licenses of dozens of fuel transporters and tanker drivers who refused to continue deliveries into Mali amid escalating jihadist attacks along the Niger–Mali corridor. The decision followed months of mounting pressure from Bamako, which accused regional partners of failing to uphold Alliance of Sahel States (AES) solidarity in the face of Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) attacks on fuel convoys supplying Mali’s capital ([African News](#), January 13).

The blockade itself began in September 2025, when JNIM announced a campaign to sever Mali’s strategic supply lines from Niger, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, and Guinea. Since then, more than 300 fuel tankers have been destroyed or disabled, drivers have been killed or abducted, and escorted convoys have repeatedly come under attack despite Malian military protection ([Africa Defense Forum](#), September 23, 2025; [Al Jazeera](#), November 6, 2025; [BBC News](#), November 12, 2025).

At first glance, the blockade appears to be a classic insurgent tactic: asymmetric warfare targeting logistics to undermine a militarized regime. Yet its deeper significance lies elsewhere. The crisis has reactivated unresolved historical anxieties across the Sahel: memories of state collapse, ethnic repression, abandonment, and humiliation. These memories shape how communities interpret the present and why political responses repeatedly escalate rather than stabilize.

The Sahel’s conflict cannot be understood or resolved without grappling with these collective psychological dynamics. Vamik Volkan’s theory of large-group psychology examines how overlapping chosen traumas among states, ethnic communities, and armed actors generate a persistent “eternal yesterday,” trapping the region in cyclical violence and empowering

jihadist movements. The past has not been just one day but rather an endless repetition, which has looped the region in the winding road of violence and nourished militant Islamic groups

### **Chosen Trauma and Time Collapse in the Sahel**

Volkan defines his theory of a chosen trauma as a collective psychological image of a historical event involving loss, humiliation, or a similar experience that has become the core of the group’s identity and is passed down from one generation to the next ([Volkan, 1997](#)). [1] Such traumas are not created; they are, instead, remembered, ritualized, and politicized in ways that give them particular significance. The result is a time collapse in which the past and the present merge emotionally, and political behavior becomes reactive, absolutist, and resistant to compromise when contemporary stressors resemble or resonate with the original wound.

The Sahel is an area where this phenomenon is likely to occur. The region forms a belt that runs from Mauritania to Chad and includes countries whose borders were drawn by external powers, which influenced their post-colonial histories through rebellions and repression, and where public loyalty to the government remains relatively weak. In 2012, jihadist insurgencies marked the beginning of new violence on top of the already existing grievances. These insurgencies have continued till the present day. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded that the political violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger remained at very high levels in 2024, with the instability spreading and the death toll running into thousands due to the increased militant activity ([ACLED](#), December, 12, 2024). Rather than replacing older conflicts, jihadism has created new ones.

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## Counterterrorism

### Tuareg Chosen Trauma: Suppression, Betrayal, and Kidal

The Tuareg communities' memories—particularly in northern Mali—have a historical background marked by cycles of revolt, repression, and unfulfilled political agreements. The traumatic experience was the 1963–1964 uprising, known locally as Alfellaga, against the newly independent government of Modibo Keïta. The uprising was put down with tremendous cruelty: the destruction of villages, the massacre of civilians, the poisoning of water sources, and the arrest or extradition of tribal leaders by neighboring countries such as Algeria and Morocco. Tuareg oral history continues to recount these events ([CRU Report, 2015](#)).

A series of rebellions in the 1990s—culminating in the Tamanrasset Accords and subsequent uprisings in the mid-2000s—called for decentralization, development, and political inclusion. The implementation of the accords remains very low and selective, thereby solidifying the trauma. Kidal gradually became not only a strategically important town but also a symbolic place where the Tuaregs' dignity, autonomy, and empty promises were stored ([Sahel Research Group, March 2014](#)).

Tuareg rebels saw the late 2023 Malian forces' return to Kidal with the support of Russia not as the beginning of law and order but as the repetition of a history of repression. The reports of human rights abuses against civilians during the operations that followed, which were documented by Human Rights Watch, reactivated past traumas and created even more alienation among the people. As a result, some groups within the population began to resort to tactical, non-ideological collaboration with jihadist actors, viewing it as the only option ([Mali; ACLED, December 12, 2024; Human Rights Watch, World Report 2025](#)).

### Mali's Foundational Wound: The Loss of the North (2012)

Political and military leaders in Mali regard the 2012 insurgent outbreaks not only as a military defeat but also as a generational trauma ([mouryyaniger.com](#), November 14, 2023). [2] State authority over the northern part of the country crumbled fast after the Tuareg-led rebellion, and soon, the advances of the jihadists shattered the myth of the post-colonial era of unity. In a matter of weeks, the Malian army deserted the military posts they occupied in Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, which resulted in a coup in Bamako and the division of the country into two parts: the north and the south ([Al Jazeera, March 22, 2012](#); see [Hot Issue, March 23, 2012](#) [allafrica.com](#), March 24, 2012; [United Nations Security Council](#), November 28, 2012).

France's Operation Serval—which aided the Malian government—retook the lost territories of the north in 2013, but the mental trauma, nonetheless, remained. The Malian state perceived 2012 as a year of suffering, during which both insiders and outsiders contributed to the downfall beyond the limits of forgiveness. In response to this trauma, the Malian government's political responses are as follows: sovereignty must be proclaimed at any cost, and negotiating with the northern tribes is tantamount to the loss of the entire nation ([Al Jazeera, September 6, 2024](#)).

This situation became evident in 2023–2024, when the Malian junta withdrew from the Algiers Peace Accord and launched military operations to retake Kidal from the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA). Although it was labelled a restoration of law and order, the campaign rekindled the 2012 experiences in Bamako and the north alike. By 2025, the violence from jihadists increased

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## Counterterrorism

correspondingly with the progress of the state forces, as JNIM roused the bitterness of the north and presented itself as the only power that could ever protect the south from being re-occupied ([ACLED](#), September 21, 2023).

The fuel blockade has brought this wound to the surface again. The Malian government—which has lost two-thirds of its territory in recent years—now struggles to secure its economic lifelines. Public discourse in Bamako is increasingly framed in existential terms, thereby narrowing the space for pragmatic de-escalation as the siege mentality intensifies.

### Fulani Trauma: From Marginalization to Massacre

The Fulani (Peulh) pastoralists of central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger are the community that most clearly demonstrates the deliberate exploitation of trauma as a tactic. The ever-strained relations over land use, movements of herding, and political sidelining grew even more dramatic after 2015, when jihadist factions that had implanted themselves in the already state-deficient and competition-ridden areas of the Fulani turned them into battlegrounds.

Violent conflicts have come to define the memory of the Fulani people. The massacre at Ogossagou in 2019, where more than 160 Fulani non-combatants fell victim to Dogon militias, is drawn as a trauma, widely interpreted as a state's failure to protect, if not cooperation in violence ([International Crisis Group](#), March 25, 2019; [Human Rights Watch](#), Mali, March 18, 2020).

The Moura killings of March 2022, during a joint operation by Malian forces and Russian auxiliaries, have intensified the views of state-sponsored persecution. Reports from Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group

characterize these occurrences as amongst the most lethal instances of civilian casualty in Mali, thus reinforcing the Fulani belief of being collectively targeted ([International Crisis](#), March 19, 2019; [Human Rights Watch](#), April 5, 2022).

According to ACLED data, between 2018 and 2025, thousands of civilians were killed each year in the violence that was either communal or state-related in the central Sahel area, with the Fulani communities suffering the most ([ACLED](#), October 8, 2025). These communities have used these developments as proof of an anti-Fulani identity campaign to justify the jihad as a form of self-defensive struggle rather than an ideological one (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), November 7, 2025).

In this situation, time collapse is evident. The contemporary security operations are viewed through the histories of extermination that have been narrated over time, and this makes it socially dangerous and mentally unfeasible to dissociate from violent groups. Violence is therefore constantly reproduced through both the collective memory and the material incentives.

### Military Trauma and the Politics of Humiliation

The armed forces in the Sahel region are not merely neutral tools of state policy; rather, they are traumatized institutions. Over the years, a combination of battlefield defeats, inadequate equipment, and enduring corruption has fostered widespread humiliation among junior officers and other ranks. The military coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) can be seen as part of the process where the military tried to regain their lost honor through an expression of disgruntlement

## Counterterrorism

towards the civilian leaders who were viewed as corrupt, inefficient, and detached from the soldiers' suffering ([DW](#), August 19, 2020; [X/@olivier\\_salgado](#), May 25, 2021; [Le Monde](#), September 30, 2022; [New Afrique](#), July 27, 2023).

This humiliation can be understood as a form of institutionalized trauma. The series of defeats, from the collapse of the northern part of Mali in 2012 to the still ongoing ambushes in central areas, was experienced as collective shame. The junior officers paid the price on the front lines, while the senior elites reaped the benefits of corruption, creating a narrative of betrayal that was shared in the barracks' culture and public discourse. The coups were psychological "cleansing" events, interpreted as necessary breaks to regain power, dignity, and the national objective.

This reasoning is evident in the junta's statements and actions. In Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta's coup followed protests against corruption and security issues under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. The military presented itself as the only protector of sovereignty ([International Crisis Group](#), December 3, 2024; [Africa is a Country](#), October 27, 2025). In Burkina Faso, Captain Ibrahim Traoré's 2022 counter-coup was marked by decisive action and rejected what he considered weak, foreign-influenced embellishments ([Le Monde](#), May 25, 2024). The 2023 coup in Niger was a clear indication that top military officers were dissatisfied with President Mohamed Bazoum's approach to security and regarded him as a figure dependent on external actors (International Crisis Group, [October 4](#), 2023; [May 22](#), 2025).

The expulsion of French forces and the rejection of UN missions further illustrate this search for psychological redemption. Operations Barkhane and MINUSMA increasingly symbolized neo-colonial humiliation—foreign troops operating

on sovereign territory with limited accountability and contested effectiveness ([Benbere](#), November 8, 2019; [Mali Actu](#), January 12, 2023). Their removal enabled junta leaders to present themselves as sovereign avengers restoring national pride, a narrative reinforced by public celebrations during the French withdrawal ([Benbere](#), December 31, 2022).

According to ACLED data, between 2018 and 2025, thousands of civilians were killed each year in the violence that was either communal or state-related in the central Sahel area, with the Fulani communities suffering the most ([ACLED](#), October 8, 2025). These communities have used these developments as proof of an anti-Fulani identity campaign to justify the jihad as a form of self-defensive struggle rather than an ideological one (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), November 7, 2025).

Russian security partnerships served as an alternative symbolic framework of a different nature. Through the Wagner Group deployments—later formalized under Russia's Africa Corps—Moscow provided unconditional military assistance framed as respect for sovereignty and equality (see [EDM](#), July 16, 2025). This pivot reframed Sahelian militaries from humiliated dependents to assertive actors choosing their alliances ([The Sentry](#), August, 2025)

This redemption proved illusory, however. Russian-linked operations have been implicated in serious violations, the most notable being the Moura massacre, which has been documented by both Human Rights Watch and UN experts as one of the conflict's worst atrocities ([Human Rights Watch](#), April 5, 2022). ACLED data connects Malian and Russian forces with over 1,400 civilian deaths between 2024 and mid-2025 ([ACLED](#), July 4,

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2025; [Africa Defense Forum](#), November 12, 2025). These abuses create new communal traumas, especially among the Fulani and Tuareg groups, thus reinforcing the jihadist recruitment narratives and eroding the legitimacy the juntas sought to restore.

In effect, the military trauma of the Sahel region operates as a self-reinforcing loop: humiliation leads to coups and shifts in alliances; brutal counterinsurgency tactics create new civilian traumas; and these traumas ultimately empower jihadist actors. If these institutional and societal wounds are not dealt with through the means of accountability, restraint, and inclusive political processes, the cycle of humiliation and violence will continue.

### Matrix for Sahelian Trauma

Historical Trauma → Time Collapse → Militarization → Civilian Harm → Recruitment → Insurgency → New Trauma ↴

## Conclusion

The Jihadist insurgency in the Sahel—represented by JNIM's tight control over Mali's supply routes since September 2025—is not just a matter of combating violent extremism. It is a confrontation with historical traumas ([African Centre for Strategic Studies](#), December 17, 2025).

Volkan's notion of "chosen trauma"—collective, mythologized memories of historical loss, humiliation, or victimization transmitted across generations—helps explain much of the region's apparent political and strategic irrationality. Societies trapped in this framework live in an "eternal yesterday," where unresolved past wounds dictate present behavior. In the Sahel, these wounds include the Tuareg repression dating back to 1963, the 2012 collapse of the Malian state, Tuareg repression dating back to

1963, Fulani massacres since 2019, and military humiliation under corrupt civilian regimes. Together, they foster reactive absolutism, render compromise synonymous with betrayal, and lock actors into cycles of retaliation that empower jihadists rather than resolve conflict ([Security Council Report](#), April 2025; [ACLED](#), December 11, 2025).

This produces a self-reinforcing dynamic. State military operations reactivate ethnic memories of repression, driving tactical—often reluctant—alliances with jihadist groups. Jihadist recruitment then exploits narratives of persecution to radicalize youth. Brutal counterterrorism campaigns, including Russian-backed operations implicated in mass civilian abuse, generate new traumas that feed the next round of insurgency. The failure is therefore not merely tactical or operational; it is psychological and structural, creating an impasse in which negotiation, reconciliation, or power-sharing becomes emotionally and politically impossible ([R4 Sahel](#), January 1).

### Why the Cycle Persists

Approach	Intended Goal	Actual Effect
Military offensives	Restore state control	Reactivates ethnic trauma
Russian-backed force	Sovereign redemption	Mass abuses → backlash
Drone strikes	Precision targeting	Civilian fear & radicalization
Aid without reconciliation	Stabilization	Dependency & resentment
Suppression of memory	National unity	Deepened fragmentation

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Failure to acknowledge and resolve historical issues will entrench a permanent conflict system in the Sahel, continuing to be a source of instability for the region and contributing to the decay of governance and the prolongation of humanitarian crises ([Africa News Room](#), January 8).

### Notes:

[1] Volkan, Vamik D. (1997). *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

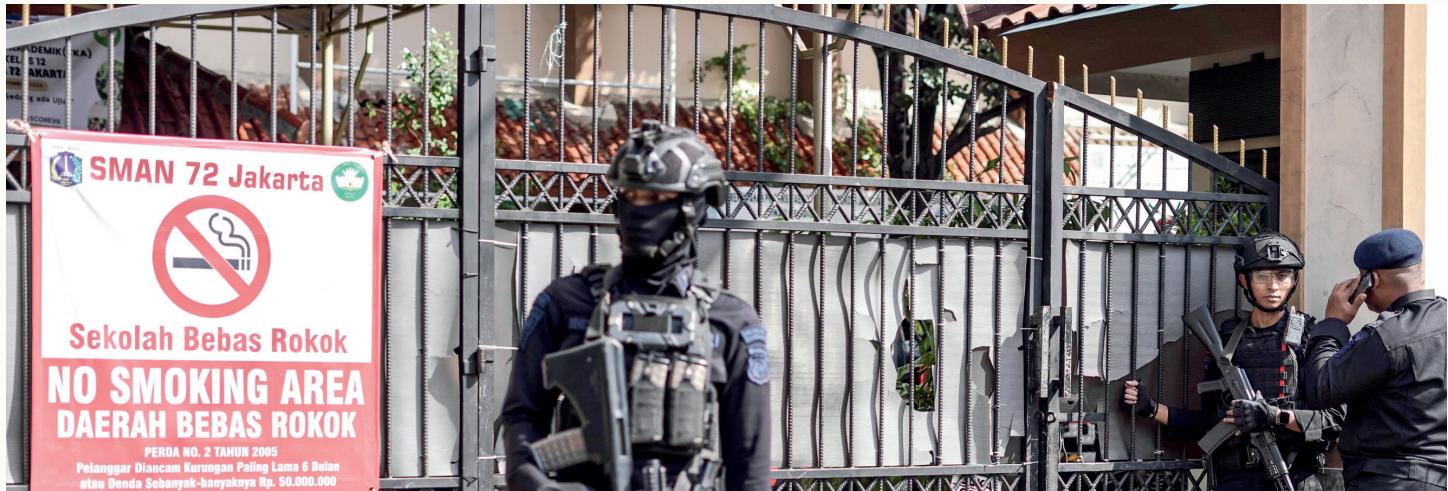
[2] Boisvert, Marc-Andre (2019). *The Malian Armed Forces and its discontents: civil-military relations, cohesion and the resilience of a postcolonial military institution in the aftermath of the 2012 crisis*. Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia.

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

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## Militant Ideology



Indonesian police stand guard outside of SMAN 72 after the bombing.  
(Source: Xinhua)

# SMAN 72 School Bombing in Indonesia

**Adlini Ilma Ghaisany Sjah and Saddiq Basha**  
**January 29, 2026**

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## Executive Summary:

- On November 7, 2025, a student bombed a North Jakarta high school with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), injuring 96 individuals in an attack stylistically mimicking the 2019 Christchurch shooting.
- Indonesian authorities classified the act as “memetic violence” rather than terrorism, noting the suspect was driven by the nihilistic True Crime Community (TCC) subculture instead of specific ideological goals.
- This incident highlights the convergence of non-ideological violent subcultures and extremist ecosystems, which accelerates radicalization and increases the global risk of copycat attacks in diverse cultural contexts.

## Militant Ideology

On November 7, 2025, a 17-year-old Indonesian student bombed his high school, SMAN 72, in North Jakarta. Authorities have not categorized the case as “terrorism,” but rather “memetic violence.” The authorities based this categorization on the attacker’s apparent non-ideological, but copycat-style, in which he drew inspiration from both far-right extremists—such as the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooter Brenton Tarrant and the 2017 Quebec City mosque shooter Alexandre Bissonnette—as well as several school shooters ([Kompas](#), November 11, 2025). The incident nonetheless illustrates how far-right online ecosystems influence other violent online subcultures.

In this case, the suspect’s involvement in the True Crime Community (TCC)—a non-ideological subculture associated with nihilistic, misanthropy-driven violence—was a significant driver behind the attack ([Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), May 8, 2025). Although the case replicated FRE violent aesthetics rather than their ideological motivations, it demonstrates how such cross-subcultural interactions can amplify the spread of far-right extremist content. Such content, including the glorification of killers, increases the risk of future copycat attacks in completely different cultural, religious, and ideological contexts.

### Emulating Brenton Tarrant?

Similar to Tarrant and Bissonnette, the suspect, identified by police only as FN, chose his school’s mosque as the target of the attack. [1] FN had prepared seven improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and two airsoft guns for the attack, but only detonated four of the IEDs ([Indonesian National Police](#), November 2, 2025). Two IEDs were first detonated inside the mosque during Friday prayers before the remaining two devices were detonated in the school’s waste area, injuring 96 individuals ([Indonesian National](#)

[Police](#), November 12, 2025). [2]

Police later revealed that FN had relied on online bombmaking tutorials, reportedly using potassium chloride, nails for shrapnel, and soda cans as casings. While the airsoft guns were not used—FN was reportedly immobilised shortly after the fourth explosion—the rifle appeared to be a tribute to Tarrant. For example, it bore white paint-pen inscriptions of far-right attackers’ names, symbols, and phrases, which mirrored those on Tarrant’s weapon ([Kompas](#), November 8, 2025).

### Digital Footprints

The far-right influence in this case appears to be limited to aesthetic elements. In contrast, the suspect’s broader patterns of behaviour point more strongly toward the influence of the TCC subculture. Though the attack was not classified as terrorism—due to the absence of a clearly articulated ideological goal—police stated that FN had drawn inspiration from seven extremist figures ([Indonesian National Police](#), November 28, 2025). Indonesian police specifically mentioned Brenton Tarrant, Alexandre Bissonnette, and Dylann Roof, as well as school shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, Vladislav Roslyakov, and Natalie Lynn Samantha Rupnow.

The suspect’s purported TikTok account contained several references that appear in both far-right and TCC online spaces ([YouTube/@NusantaraTVOfficial](#), November 13, 2025). Elements of the former can be seen in the suspect’s repost of Christchurch attack-related memes, as well as Tarrant’s own posts featuring the neo-Nazi Sonnenrad and the ‘OK’ hand gesture associated with “white power.” These memes, however, appeared alongside a variety of content unrelated to the far-right. Notably, the post where FN made the ‘OK’ hand gesture

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resembles images posted by the Abundant Life Christian School and Antioch High School attackers, who are both venerated within the TCC community. This suggests FN may have intended his attack as a tribute to those two attacks. FN's primary adherence to TCC is further indicated by his notebook, which was devoid of far-right ideological references and instead filled with expressions such as "List of the things that I hate," including outgroups often mentioned in far-right ideologies, such as "ni\*\*ers, women (but not entire), religion rapists," but also referring to general traits, such as "loud people, yappers, edgy people, bullies, cheaters, mankind." Importantly, other passages in the notebook indicated that the suspect's primary grievance was his lack of healthy relationships and friendships with other people ([YouTube/@NusantaraTVOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/@NusantaraTVOfficial), November 13, 2025).

## Convergence of Violent Online Communities

This case highlights the continued threat posed by non-ideological violent subcultures such as the TCC, which has seen a rise in linked attacks in recent years ([Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), October 2, 2025). The TCC community tends to revere notorious criminal figures. Although distinct from ideological extremist groups, TCC adherents are nonetheless influenced by ideologically motivated extremists—such as neo-Nazi accelerationists—due to shared nihilistic worldviews, aesthetic repertoires, as well as mutual glorification of past attackers ([Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#), May 8, 2025).

Following the SMAN 72 attack, FN received both praise and mockery. On TikTok, several self-identified Indonesian TCC users produced "fancam" edits of FN, while others derided his imitation of white nationalists. Conversely, at least one Indonesian far-right account depicted FN as a "saint" using the aesthetics of the neo-

Nazi accelerationist "Saints" culture. Further, the attack also inspired new Indonesian-based TCC groups on Telegram. In one group, members searched for far-right manifestos, including those belonging to Anders Breivik, who was behind the 2011 Oslo car bombing and Utøya mass shooting, and Stephan Balliet, who was the 2019 Halle, Germany Synagogue shooter. Members also shared videos of past far-right attacks alongside general gore content. Importantly, several TCC members in the group supported Tarrant's views, with one Indonesian supporter even mocking other TCC adherents as merely "edgy" people who lacked any real understanding. The group also circulated content of other extremists, including the Islamic State (IS).

## Conclusion

Nihilistic violent subcultures and ideological extremist ecosystems converge in online spaces. Both communities venerate mass violence through memes, aesthetics, and ironic posting, naturally exposing TCC members to far-right and IS content. In the case of the SMAN 72 bomber, the radicalization process did not amount to a strong ideological commitment. Repeated exposure to such content, however, can potentially create pathways for some individuals to move from nihilistic gore fascination to explicitly ideological extremism. FN—who is suspected to have only started accessing TCC groups online in early 2025—was driven enough to then search for bombmaking tutorials and plan a multi-phase attack ([Kompas](#), November 18, 2025; [Indonesian National Police](#), November 19, 2025). Both the TCC and far-right ecosystems have, independently of one another, facilitated individuals to become mass attackers. Their intersection increases the risk of such attacks in the future, not only in the West but also in virtually any country worldwide, including Indonesia.

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### Notes:

**[1]** The choice of a mosque as a symbolic target or a purely tactical choice remains under investigation, although police reportedly view it as a tactical choice for effectiveness, as most students would have been in the mosque during Friday prayers ([YouTube/@NusantaraTVOfficial](#), November 13, 2025).

**[2]** Of the 96 injured, around 66 percent suffered from hearing loss, while the remaining 30 percent (29 individuals) had burns and shrapnel wounds ([DetikNews](#), November 9, 2025).

To read this article on the Jamestown website, click [here](#).

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