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MALI · SAHEL AIR DEFENCE · PRAEVISIO INSTITUTE

SITREP: Threats of KLM Overflights of Mali

A specific threat has been raised against KLM's Amsterdam–Accra service overflying Mali. This sitrep sets out the conflict, Russia's role in it, and why a single confirmed Pantsir-S1 at Bamako, not the low-altitude MANPADS threat the airspace restriction was built around, is now the central risk.

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ABSTRACT

A specific threat has been identified against KLM's route between Amsterdam and Accra, which overflies Mali. Mali's airspace has carried a standing restriction to FL320 and above since the escalation of the conflict, calibrated against MANPADS use by groups on the ground, principally Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and the al-Qaeda linked JNIM. Earlier warnings covering this general risk had already been issued by US intelligence-informed FAA guidance and by the French civil aviation authority, both of which flagged the presence of an advanced, radar-guided air defence system in the country well before this specific threat emerged. Since a large-scale coordinated offensive in April 2026, the Malian junta's position has become extremely difficult, and it now depends more heavily than ever on Russia's Africa Corps. This note argues that the central threat to civil traffic is not primarily misidentification by drones or the older, lower-altitude MANPADS problem in isolation, but a single system: the Pantsir-S1 air defence unit confirmed present at Bamako, last spotted on 26 June 2026. That system carries two distinct failure modes. The first is misidentification while still in Russian hands, a pattern already demonstrated twice, at Grozny in December 2024 and over eastern Ukraine in July 2014. The second, and more serious, is deliberate use should the system be captured intact by JNIM or Islamic State in a rapid, Syria-style collapse of Malian government positions. Both pathways converge on the same recommendation: KLM should either divert this routing, for instance via Niger, or maintain continuous, all-source monitoring of the military situation so that any indication of a rapid offensive against Bamako triggers an immediate reassessment of the overflight.

I

The Threat, and the Route

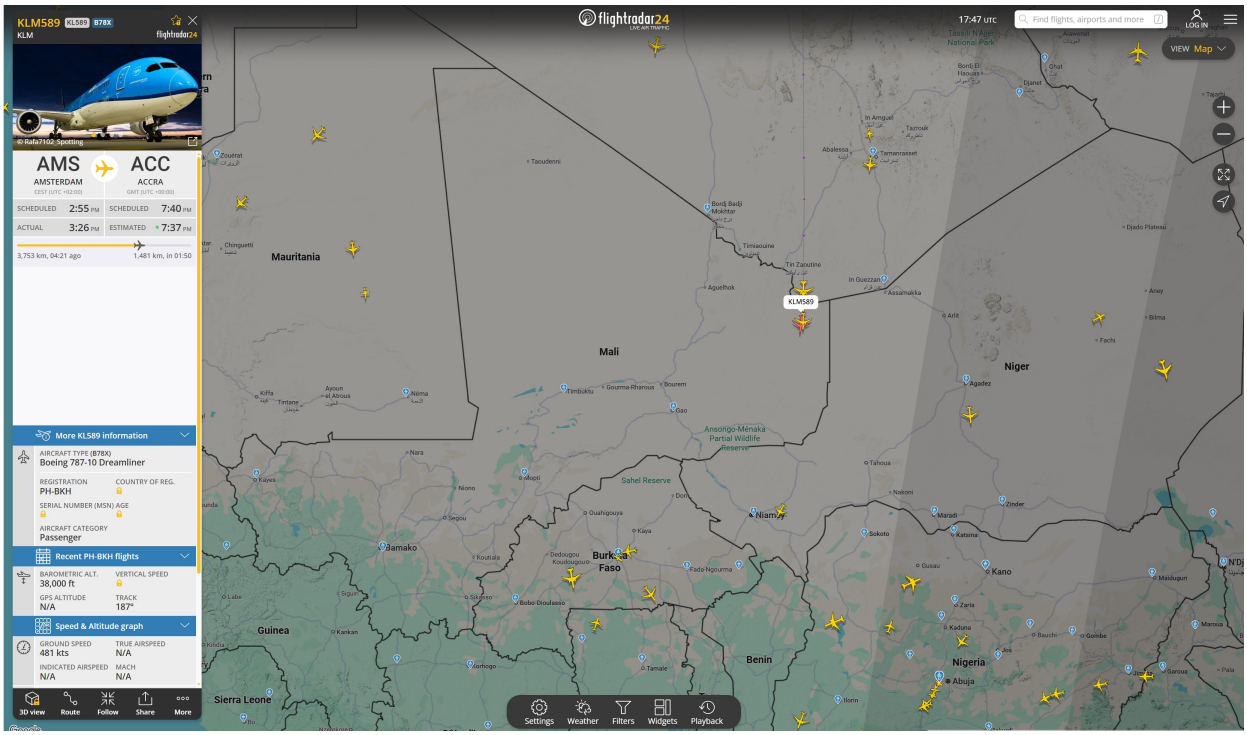
KLM operates a regular service between Amsterdam Schiphol and Accra, Ghana, a routing that crosses the airspace of Mali, jointly overseen by the Dakar (GOOO) and Niamey (DRRR) flight information regions. That airspace has carried a standing restriction to FL320 and above for some time, a threshold set well above the reach of the shoulder-fired MANPADS, man-portable air defence systems, that militant groups on the ground are known to operate, and which typically endanger aircraft only during low, slow phases of flight such as approach, landing and departure.[1] The specific MANPADS variant most consistently reported in the hands of these groups is the Russian-made 9K338 Igla-S, whose profile is set out below.[2]

9K338 Igla-S (NATO: SA-24 Grinch)

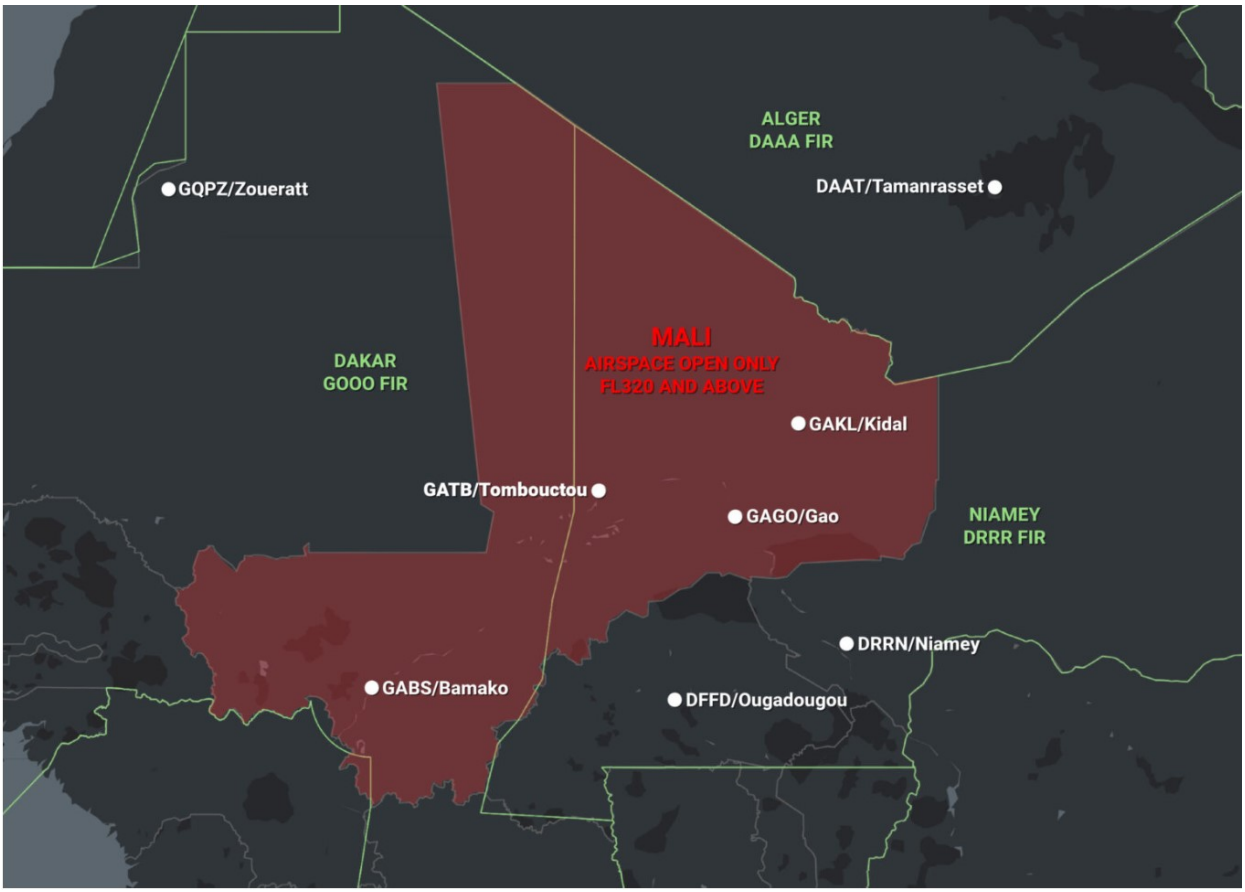
THE BASELINE THREAT

MISSILE RANGE **500m – 6 km** 9M342 missile	ENGAGEMENT ALTITUDE **Up to 3.5 km** ≈ FL115 / 11,500 ft	GUIDANCE **Dual-band IR** passive, flare-resistant seeker	WARHEAD **1.17 kg** high-explosive fragmentation
LAUNCHER WEIGHT **≈19 kg** missile + tube + grip stock	MOBILITY **Man-portable** single operator, shoulder-fired	REACTION TIME **≈5 sec** activation to launch	ROLE **Low-altitude denial** approach, landing, departure

This is the MANPADS variant most consistently reported among the militant groups active in Mali, and the weapon Mali's FL320 restriction was originally built to defeat; it is proliferated across the groups operating in the country rather than confined to a single unit. Its ceiling of roughly 3.5km, well under FL320, is why the restriction has held up as adequate against this specific threat even as the wider security situation has deteriorated. The contrast with the Pantsir-S1 discussed later in this note, radar-guided, vehicle-mounted, and reaching altitudes more than four times higher, is the reason this note treats the two systems as fundamentally different categories of risk rather than variations on the same problem.



Flightradar24 tracking of a KLM service overflying Mali on the Amsterdam–Accra routing, showing the flight path across the country's interior. Praevisio Institute.



Mali's FL320 overflight floor, in effect across the portions of the GOOO/Dakar and DRRR/Niamey FIRs overhead Malian territory. Praevisio Institute.

This restriction is not a new discovery. Earlier warnings covering the general risk picture in Mali had already been issued well before the specific threat now facing this KLM service. Concern reached the level of individual airline unions as early as March 2023, when SNPL Air France-Transavia, Air France's main pilots' union, called on its members to exercise their “right of withdrawal” and stop flying to Bamako, citing the deteriorating security situation and an FAA warning issued days earlier that referenced the Wagner Group's installation of SA-22 “Pantsir” batteries, reportedly capable of reaching a target 36 kilometres away at an altitude of 15 kilometres.[3] France's civil aviation authority, the DGAC, has separately required French carriers to remain at or above FL320 over Mali since 2018, and has repeatedly renewed that requirement as the security situation has deteriorated.[4] What has changed now is not the existence of a general threat, but its specificity: a threat has been raised against this particular KLM service, on this particular corridor, at a moment when the military situation in Mali is arguably worse than at any point since the 2021 coup. We have covered the conflict's actors and alliances in more detail in an earlier note, which readers unfamiliar with the situation should treat as background reading.[5]

Background reading: **“The Mali Conflict in Context: Actors, Alliances, and the Wider War”** — our earlier note on the parties, their alliances, and how the conflict fits into the broader Sahel and Ukraine-Russia picture.

II

The Conflict, Briefly, and Russia's Role

Mali has been governed since a 2021 military coup by a junta led by Assimi Goïta, which broke with France and turned to Russia for security support, first through the Wagner Group and now through its formal successor, Africa Corps, a paramilitary force under the direct authority of the Russian Ministry of Defence. Ranged against Bamako are two principal forces which, despite very different ideological roots, have increasingly coordinated on the battlefield: JNIM, the al-Qaeda affiliated coalition led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA), a Tuareg separatist movement pursuing autonomy for northern Mali. A separate, more sporadically active actor, Islamic State Sahel Province, operates in parallel, at times in competition with JNIM. It is this densely armed and increasingly capable insurgent landscape, not just the Malian state's own forces, that any operator now needs to think about when assessing the airspace.

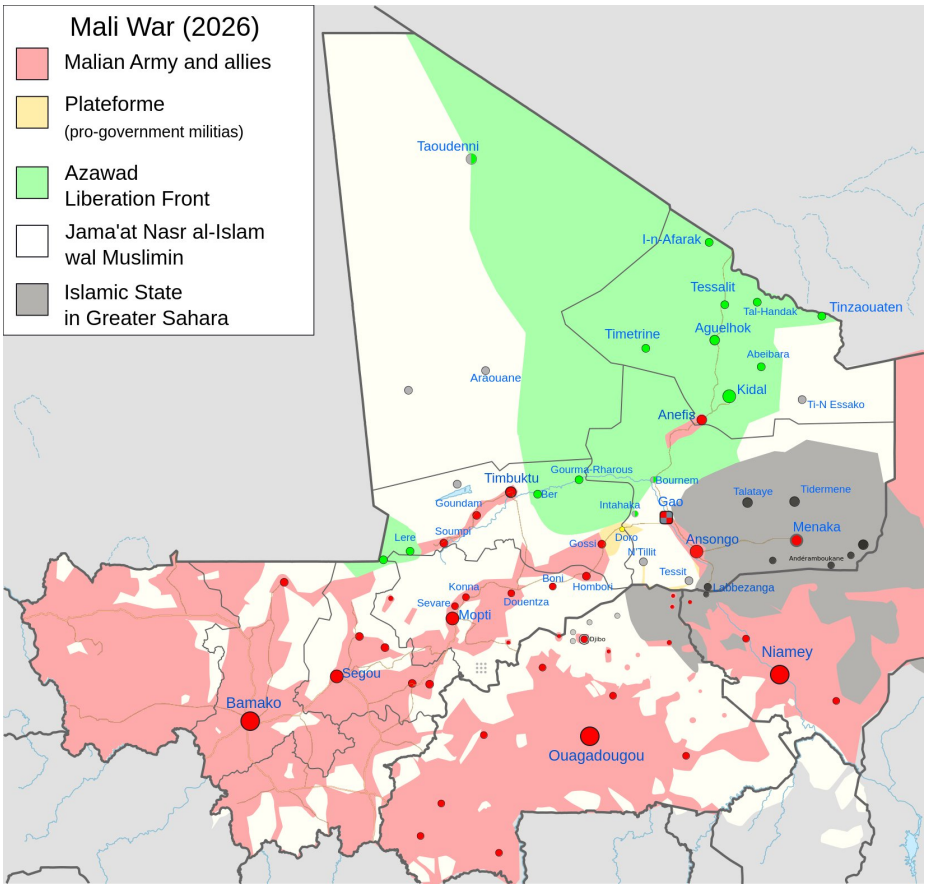
Russia's presence has deepened rather than receded through 2025 and 2026. Wagner formally withdrew in June 2025, handing its mission to Africa Corps, which Moscow has since reinforced rather than scaled back, most visibly through the deployment of a combined aviation grouping at Bamako's two airports, including Su-24M tactical bombers and roughly ten Mi-8AMTSh assault transports as of May 2026.[6] This is the backdrop against which the Pantsir-S1 discussed below is now present in-country.

III

April 2026, and the Situation as of Today

On 25 and 26 April 2026, JNIM and the FLA launched their most significant coordinated offensive of the war, striking near-simultaneously across Bamako, Kati, Sévaré, Mopti, Gao and Kidal. A suicide bombing killed Mali's

defence minister, Sadio Camara, in Kati; the FLA took full control of Kidal, a city Malian forces and Wagner had only retaken by force in November 2023; and JNIM claimed to have struck inside Bamako itself.[7] Africa Corps and Malian units, defending Kidal and Bamako's airport among other positions, were reported to lack the assets to hold every front at once, and confirmed a full withdrawal from Kidal on 27 April.[8] The same 48 hours also saw the loss of a Russian Africa Corps helicopter, reportedly downed by ground fire from a man-portable air defence system as separatist and JNIM fighters advanced on Gao and Kidal; both crew and an onboard fire team were reported killed.[9]



Territorial control in the Mali War, government/Africa Corps-held areas, JNIM presence, and FLA-held territory in the north, updated July 2026. Praevisio Institute.

As of 2 September 2026, the junta has not recovered the initiative it lost that weekend. Gao remains contested, with Malian and Africa Corps units reported holding out in fortified positions inside the city rather than controlling it outright, and JNIM's stated next objective is understood to be Gao's fall followed by pressure on Timbuktu.[10] Fuel and supply blockades imposed by JNIM around the capital since late 2025 continue to strain Bamako, and the north of the country remains a patchwork of contested towns rather than a secured government rear area.[8] The Malian government's position is, in short, considerably weaker than it was before April, and it is now more dependent than ever on the Russian forces propping it up. That dependence is the hinge on which the rest of this assessment turns.

IV

The Pantsir-S1 at Bamako

The Russian Africa Corps base adjacent to Modibo Keïta International Airport, Bamako, host to the aviation and air defence assets discussed in this note.

It has previously been reported that Russian forces operate Pantsir-S1 short-to-medium range air defence systems at Bamako airport, a capability well beyond the shoulder-fired MANPADS that have historically defined the threat picture in Mali. Our sources on the ground in Bamako have confirmed that the last spotted Pantsir-S1 unit was observed on 26 June 2026, meaning the threat should be treated as current rather than historical. The system was previously operated by PMC Wagner personnel; following the internal restructuring of Russia's Ministry of Defence footprint in Africa, Wagner has been formally replaced in this role by the Russian Africa Corps.[6]

The concern is not new, and nor is the use of deception to protect it. On 1 October 2024, when the system was still under PMC Wagner control, a security convoy transiting northern Mali passed through the village of Tin-Essako, halting briefly after militants were detected nearby. Once the militants had withdrawn, the column resumed its advance and continued into the Amshaknshar valley, where it came under attack. The aftermath was filmed and circulated by JNIM-affiliated Telegram channels, whose footage shows a mock-up Pantsir-S1, evidently positioned as a decoy to draw reconnaissance or fire away from genuine air defence assets, destroyed in the ambush and its remains subsequently recovered and displayed by JNIM forces; the image below is a still taken directly from that footage. The episode indicates that Russian forces in Mali already regarded a genuine Pantsir-

S1 as a high-value target worth actively protecting through denial and deception measures, nearly two years before the confirmed sighting of the operational system described above, and that JNIM has direct prior exposure, however partial, to the system's general profile.

Still from JNIM-affiliated Telegram footage of the aftermath: the remains of a mock-up Pantsir-S1, destroyed in the 1 October 2024 ambush near the Amshaknshar valley and subsequently recovered by JNIM forces.

A Pantsir-S1 (NATO reporting name SA-22 Greyhound), of the type reported present at Bamako.

Pantsir-S1 (NATO: SA-22 Greyhound)

REPORTED AT BAMAKO

MISSILE RANGE	ENGAGEMENT ALTITUDE	GUN ARMAMENT	MISSILE LOAD
1.2 – 20 km	**Up to 15 km**	**2× 30mm**	**12 ready**
up to ~30km, later variants	≈ FL490 / 49,000 ft	2A38M, range ≈4km	57E6 series, radar/IR guided
RADAR DETECTION	**MOBILITY**	**REACTION TIME**	**ROLE**
≈32 – 36 km	**Truck-mounted**	**4 – 6 sec**	**Point defence**
target acquisition range	Kamaz 6560 8×8 chassis	detection to launch	airbases, high-value sites

Designed as short-to-medium range point air defence for high-value sites such as airbases, the Pantsir-S1's radar-guided engagement envelope is what separates it from the MANPADS threat Mali's airspace advisories were originally built around. Its altitude ceiling is broadly consistent with the FAA's 2023 assessment that Wagner-installed batteries in Mali could in principle reach a target 36km away at an altitude of 15km, close to FL490. [3]

V

One System, Two Ways to Kill an Airliner

The reason this note treats the Pantsir-S1 as the central threat, rather than the wider MANPADS and drone environment, is that it is the only weapon system confirmed in Mali capable of reaching a civil airliner at cruising altitude in the first place. Everything else on the ground, small arms, indirect fire, shoulder-fired MANPADS, is a threat to low, slow aircraft near airports. The Pantsir-S1 is not. That single fact narrows the question to two scenarios, and it matters that both converge on the same piece of hardware.

Pathway one: misidentification while the system remains in Russian hands. This is not a hypothetical. On 25 December 2024, Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243, en route from Baku to Grozny, was struck by a missile from a Russian Pantsir-S1 during a period of drone activity over Chechnya; the system's identification-friend-or-foe process failed, the missile detonated near the aircraft, and 38 of the 67 people on board were killed when the crippled aircraft crashed attempting an emergency landing in Kazakhstan. Vladimir Putin himself later acknowledged Russian forces had accidentally downed the aircraft.[11] Independent reporting citing officials close to the investigation identified the specific unit involved as a Pantsir-S1 that had been redeployed from Syria.[12] The parallel to Mali is direct: an identical system, operated by the same chain of command, in a theatre with heavy drone activity from multiple sides and a documented history of tracking errors, is now present at Bamako. MH17, downed over eastern Ukraine in July 2014 by a different radar-guided system that mistook a civilian airliner for a military target, is the earlier and more widely known case, and both incidents point to the same underlying failure mode: Russian-operated, radar-guided systems under pressure, in contested airspace with significant unmanned traffic, misidentifying targets. Neither incident required hostile intent toward the airliner involved.

Pathway two: capture and deliberate use. This is judged to be the more serious of the two risks, precisely because it does not depend on error at all. It depends only on the military situation continuing to deteriorate for Bamako, which it has been doing since April. Should the junta suffer a sudden, decisive battlefield reversal, of the kind Syria's Assad government experienced in the space of roughly two weeks in late November and early December 2024, when a rapid rebel offensive swept from Aleppo to Damascus and government forces abandoned bases

faster than they could be defended, with tanks, aircraft and anti-aircraft systems left behind and in several cases captured on camera by advancing fighters[13], the same dynamic cannot be ruled out at Bamako or at forward Africa Corps positions in Mali. A Pantsir-S1 falling intact into the hands of an armed group would be a serious escalation under any circumstances. If it fell specifically into the hands of Islamic State Sahel Province or JNIM, both of which have already demonstrated intent and capability against aviation targets with weapons far less sophisticated, the system could in principle be used deliberately against civil traffic, including a KLM flight overflying Mali, rather than accidentally engaging it. That would represent a shift from the accidental risk described above to a genuinely terrorist one, and it is this second pathway that most directly justifies treating the current threat as more than a routine airspace advisory.

> *Both failure modes lead back to the same system. In Russian hands, the Pantsir-S1 has already shown it can kill an airliner by mistake. In the wrong hands, it would not need to make one.*

VI

Recommendations

ASSESSMENT FOR KLM OPERATIONS PLANNING

1. **Divert the routing.** The most conservative option is to reroute the Amsterdam–Accra service around Mali entirely, for example via Niger's airspace, removing exposure to both failure modes described above regardless of how the ground situation develops.

2. **If overflight continues, monitor with all-source intelligence, continuously.** Should diversion not be adopted, the flight should not be treated as cleared indefinitely on the strength of the FL320 restriction alone. Any indication of a renewed JNIM/FLA offensive against Bamako, Gao, or other positions currently held by Africa Corps should trigger an immediate reassessment of the overflight, given how rapidly the April 2026 offensive altered the map and how quickly a Syria-style collapse could put the Pantsir-S1 itself at risk of capture.

3. **Track the system, not just the ceasefire lines.** Given that both threat pathways run through this one platform, confirmation of the Pantsir-S1's location and operational status should be treated as a standing intelligence requirement, not a one-off data point from June 2026.

VII

Other Considerations

A few further points are worth flagging for operators and risk teams tracking this route. First, Mali's north has an established history of drone-borne improvised munitions from JNIM and ISSP affiliates, which primarily threatens low-altitude and airport-phase operations rather than overflight traffic, but is a relevant factor for any diversion

or alternate planning that would require a descent into GABS/Bamako, which several national authorities already advise against using even as an alternate.[1] Second, formal government-issued NOTAMs have historically lagged real-world developments on the ground in Mali by days or weeks; FL320 should be read as a floor set against yesterday's threat picture, not a ceiling guaranteed against tomorrow's. Third, ECOWAS states bordering Mali have signalled they may increase their own counterterrorism posture in response to the deteriorating picture, a secondary factor worth monitoring for any routing that clips neighbouring airspace during diversion planning.[8]

VIII

Conclusion

The FL320 restriction over Mali was designed for a threat picture dominated by shoulder-fired MANPADS, and it remains sound for that purpose. It was not designed for a radar-guided, truck-mounted system capable in principle of reaching FL490, and that system is what has changed the calculation for this specific KLM service. The Pantsir-S1 confirmed at Bamako is not a marginal addition to an already-managed risk; it is the one asset in Mali that can reach a cruising airliner at all, and it can do so through two entirely different mechanisms that do not require the same conditions to materialise. It could misidentify a civil aircraft while still under Russian control, exactly as happened at Grozny in December 2024 and over Ukraine in July 2014. Or it could be captured intact, along with the rest of Africa Corps' forward equipment, in a rapid collapse of the kind Syria experienced in under two weeks in late 2024, and then be turned deliberately against the aircraft it was never meant to be used against by design. Given that the junta's position has not stabilised since April and continues to trend in the wrong direction, we assess that the appropriate response is not to wait for either scenario to materialise before acting. KLM should divert this routing where operationally feasible, and where it is not, should commit to continuous, all-source monitoring of the military situation around Bamako, treating any sign of a rapid offensive as an immediate trigger for reassessing the flight, not a data point to be folded into the next scheduled review.

Mali KLM Pantsir-S1 Africa Corps Azerbaijan Airlines 8243 Aviation Security

Note: *This sitrep was completed on 2 September 2026 and reflects open source information available as of that date, together with unverified field sourcing on the June 2026 Pantsir-S1 sighting, which readers should treat as indicative rather than confirmed. The 1 October 2024 mock-up Pantsir-S1 incident is corroborated by footage circulated on JNIM-affiliated Telegram channels; as with any belligerent-sourced material, the footage should be read as evidence of the event it depicts rather than as an independently audited account of the wider circumstances. The threat-pathway assessment is analytical judgement, not a confirmed operational threat determination, and should be read alongside, not instead of, official NOTAMs and airline-specific security guidance. This note does not constitute flight planning, legal, or operational advice.*

FOOTNOTES

[1] Safe Airspace, “Mali,” on the FL320/FL250-260 overflight restrictions, the ASECNA AIP supplement, and national advisories against using GABS/Bamako as an alternate. safeairspace.net/mali/

[2] Al Jazeera, “Tuareg fighters claim to have shot down a Russian helicopter in Mali,” 6 July 2026, on footage released by FLA fighters purporting to show a Russian Africa Corps Mi-24 helicopter shot down near Gao, illustrative of the continued, active use of MANPADS-type systems against aircraft in Mali. aljazeera.com

[3] Le Figaro, “Sécurité au Mali : le principal syndicat de pilotes d'Air France invite à exercer un ‘droit de retrait’,” 16 March 2023, on SNPL Air France-Transavia's call for pilots to avoid Bamako flights, and the FAA's contemporaneous warning citing Wagner-installed SA-22 “Pantsir” batteries reportedly capable of reaching a target 36km away at an altitude of 15km. lefigaro.fr

[4] Icarus Jet, “The French Issue a New Overflight Safety and Conflict Zones [bulletin],” on the French DGAC's FL320 requirement for French carriers over Mali, in place since 11 January 2018 and repeatedly renewed. icarusjet.com

[5] Praevisio Institute, “The Mali Conflict in Context: Actors, Alliances, and the Wider War,” our earlier background note on the parties to the conflict. praevisio-institute.org

[6] Military Africa, “Russia establishes a combined aviation grouping in Mali,” May 2026, on the deployment of Su-24M bombers and Mi-8AMTSh transports to Bamako-Sénou and Modibo Keïta International Airport under Africa Corps, and the formal Wagner-to-Africa Corps handover. military.africa

[7] International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), “Mali: What Were the Reasons and the Consequences of the 25 April Attacks?,” on the coordinated JNIM-FLA offensive, the killing of Defence Minister Sadio Camara, and the recapture of Kidal. icct.nl

[8] Critical Threats Project, “Fall Of Kidal — What JNIM's Latest Offensive Means For Mali's Future,” on Africa Corps' withdrawal from Kidal, the strain on Malian and Russian forces across multiple fronts, and the risk of expanding ISSP activity and ECOWAS responses. criticalthreats.org

[9] Charter'97, “A Russian Helicopter Was Shot Down In Mali,” 26 April 2026, on the loss of a Russian Africa Corps helicopter to ground fire from a man-portable air defence system amid the FLA/JNIM offensive on Gao and Kidal. charter97.org

[10] Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute (BISI), “JNIM and FLA Coordinate Attacks Across Mali,” 19 May 2026, on the contested status of Gao and the assessed likelihood of a subsequent push toward Timbuktu. bisi.org.uk

[11] Wikipedia, “Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243,” on the 25 December 2024 shootdown near Grozny, the 38 fatalities, and Vladimir Putin's 9 October 2025 acknowledgement that Russian forces accidentally downed the aircraft. en.wikipedia.org

[12] Euronews, “What is the Pantsir-S1, the missile system believed to have shot down Azerbaijan Airlines 8243?,” on sourcing identifying the specific Pantsir-S1 unit involved as one redeployed to Russia from Syria. euronews.com

[13] The Media Line, “The 12-Day Revolution: How Syria's Regime Collapsed After Years of War,” on the rapid HTS-led offensive between late November and 8 December 2024, and reports of Syrian government forces abandoning positions with heavy weaponry, anti-aircraft systems and aircraft left behind. themedialine.org

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