

# CENTRAL MALI: VIOLENCE, LOCAL PERSPECTIVES AND DIVERGING NARRATIVES

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## I. Introduction

In 2012, at the start of the crisis in Mali, violence appeared to be limited to the north of the country, in the Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal regions. Three years later, in 2015, the intensification of violence in the central regions has increasingly drawn the attention of the Malian authorities and international observers.<sup>1</sup>

Since the start of the crisis, it has been striking to see how the analyses of decision makers have often underestimated the deterioration of the situation in the centre of the country and incorrectly evaluated the capacity of the state to deal effectively with the conflicts developing there.<sup>2</sup> While it is generally accepted that the Malian political and security crisis can no longer be limited to the north of Mali, it is imperative to obtain a detailed view of the national and regional dimensions of the problem developing in the centre, and the interaction between these two dimensions of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is now evident that the security concerns in the centre are as severe and urgent as those in the north.<sup>4</sup>

The many security actors in Mali, at national, regional and international levels, have progressively engaged with this problem, extending their programmes to acknowledge the destabilization of the centre of the country.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is no established definition of 'central Mali', e.g. the Malian Government's Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (PSRIC) covers the regions of Ségou and Mopti, whereas the European Union's Programme of Support for Enhanced Security (PARSESEC) covers the regions of Mopti and Gao. For the purposes of this analysis, the paper concentrates on the Mopti region, mentioning some processes relating to frontier regions (Ségou, Koulikouro and Gao) and areas bordering on Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania.

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Central Mali: An uprising in the making?', Africa Report no. 238, 6 July 2016, <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making>>.

<sup>3</sup> Chauzal, G. and van Damme, T., *The Roots of Mali's Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis*, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit (CRU) Report (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael: The Hague, Mar. 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Tobie, A., 'A fresh perspective on security concerns among Malian civil society', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2017/2, July 2017, <<https://www.sipri.org/publications/2017/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/fresh-perspective-security-concerns-among-malian-civil-society>>; and Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Islamist group abuses, banditry surge, 18 Jan. 2017, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/18/mali-islamist-group-abuses-banditry-surge>>.

<sup>5</sup> Since the crisis of 2012, many regional and international actors have mobilized in support of the Government of Mali. In addition to the pre-existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, the

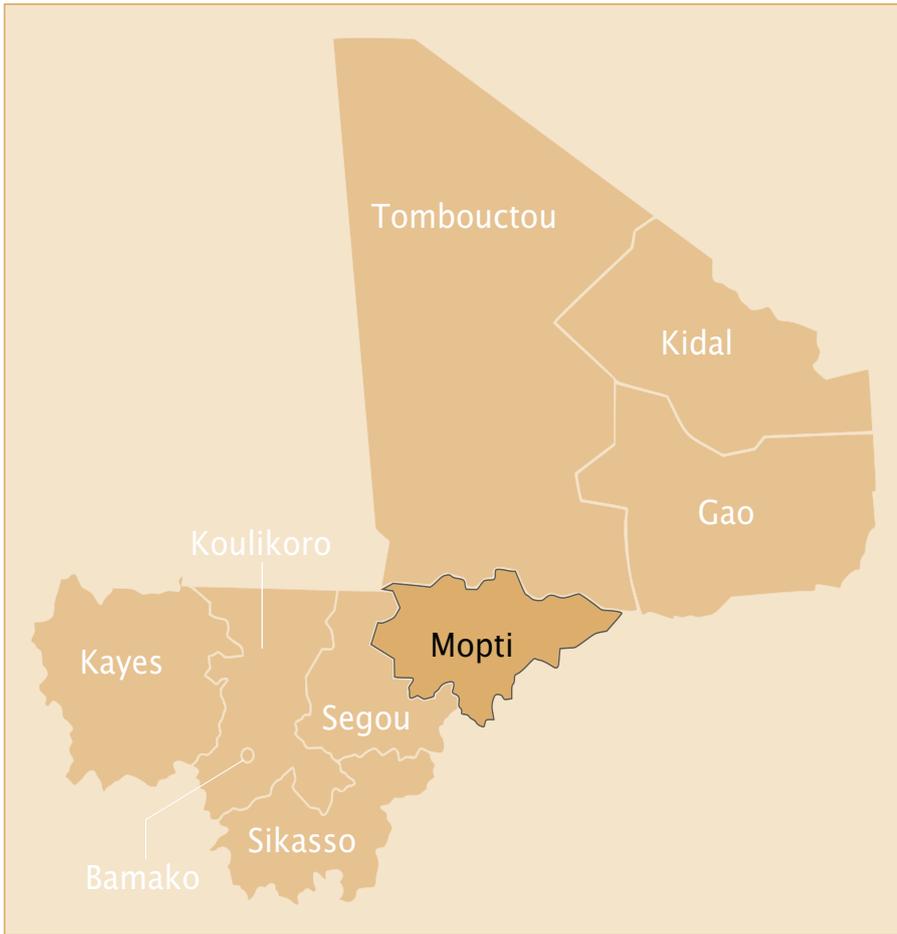
## SUMMARY

● Initially, the 2012 crisis affecting Mali was understood to be primarily focused on the northern regions of the country, as were the previous rebellions erupting at regular intervals since independence. However, since 2015, the central region of Mopti has called for attention, as it experienced a dramatic increase in the occurrence of violent acts targeting security forces, elected or traditional officials, market places or even schools.

This change in the geographic centre of the violence has led national and international security actors to re-assess their analysis on the root causes of the conflict affecting Mali. Central Mali revealed conflict dynamics that do not correspond to the usual grid of analysis applied to Mali's conflicts. The emergence of Malian jihadist actors, the intra and inter community conflict dynamics, the connection of governance, development and security concern make the design of a response extremely complex.

Based on key informant interviews, a literature review and original documentation, this paper confronts the diverging narratives on the origins and drivers of the conflict in central Mali, as well as the interactions between them.

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**Figure 1.** Map of Mali highlighting the Mopti region

The Malian Government, in particular, has announced the establishment of an Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre, PSIRC). In support of Mali, its partners in the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel)—Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad—are planning to deploy a Joint Force in the area in an attempt to strengthen the security presence. On an international level, the European Union (EU), through the Programme of Support for Enhanced Security in the Mopti and Gao regions (Programme d’Appui au Renforcement de la Sécurité dans les régions de Mopti et de Gao, PARSEC) and the Programme for Youth and Stabilization in the Central Regions of Mali (Programme Jeunesse et Stabilisation dans les région Centre du Mali, PROJES), is supporting government initiatives in the development and security sectors, while the United Nations peacekeeping mission (UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, MINUSMA)

has already redirected some of its resources towards the Mopti region.<sup>6</sup>

Other initiatives, less formal or more modest, have also been launched with the aim of opening up a political dialogue with the conflicting parties in the region, including good offices and dialogue missions, and contacts between governing elites in Bamako and community leaders in the Mopti region.

However, these acts of goodwill are no substitute for a detailed understanding of the growing conflicts in central Mali. At present, lacking a strategy based on a common understanding of the situation, the actors are veering between, on the one hand, acknowledging the concerns of communities in the centre in the context of existing peace agreements and, on the other hand, developing a specific plan for these regions to restore the legitimacy of the state among all the population.<sup>7</sup>

following special-purpose missions have been deployed: European missions for training the Malian Army and the defence and security forces (EUTM and EUCAP), mobilization of the African Union (AFISMA) and the establishment of a United Nations peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA).

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, 28 Sep. 2017, S/2017/811, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> To resolve the existing crisis, two agreements have been signed: a first agreement in Ouagadougou in June 2013 and a second one, still in force, in Algiers in May and June 2015. See Thiam, A., *Centre du Mali: enjeux et dangers d’une crise négligée* [Central Mali: The issues and risks of a neglected crisis] (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue: Geneva, Mar. 2017) (in French), p. 7; and International Crisis Group (note 2), p. iii.



There is a particular need for an accurate analysis of the rise of a jihadist phenomenon in central Mali. Despite the very high visibility of these ideological extremists, who are responsible for increasingly frequent acts of violence, it is essential to identify the reasons for their attractiveness and the political and economic dimensions of their actions, which have undeniably brought them the support of some groups within the population.

Therefore, the present dynamics of the violence in central Mali must be understood within a context that extends beyond the 2012 crisis to encompass the historical, political, economic and community conditions, and this framework should be used in order to provide the most appropriate response.

## II. Central Mali in the 2012 crisis

Although the delayed realization of the deterioration of the situation in central Mali might appear to show otherwise, this part of the country has been directly affected ever since the 2012 crisis: while the occupation of the northern cities by jihadist groups drew most of the international attention, it was these groups' assault on the city of Konna in the Mopti *cercle* that led to the French Operation Serval in January 2013 (see figure 1). The territory of Azawad, claimed by the pro-independence groups at the start of the crisis, included Gourma and the three northern regions (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal), but also part of the Mopti region (the *cercles* of Douentza and Youwarou).<sup>8</sup>

However, the security, political and social responses to this crisis, as exemplified by the Algiers agreement of 2015, were primarily concerned with the northern regions or with the whole of the national territory, without any particular attention to the needs of the central regions.<sup>9</sup>

### Competing frameworks for interpreting the conflict

In order to understand this omission, it is important to remember that the recent history of independent Mali has been marked by repeated conflicts, primarily affecting the northern regions of the country.<sup>10</sup> The view of the 2012 crisis is partially determined by this historical legacy, even if new dynamics soon proved to be incontestably present, with the involvement of jihadist movements and the regionalization of the conflict.

At first, the main armed groups identified at the outbreak of the 2012 conflict, such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, the Arab Movement of Azawad, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad, and the groups opposed to them, such as the Coordination of the Movements of Patriotic and Resistance Fronts, clearly fell within the narrative scheme of these cyclical conflicts affecting the three northern regions. The primary issue was the question of the role of the state and its legitimacy in the north-

<sup>8</sup> 'Azawad' is the name given to the northern regions by the armed pro-independence groups that led the rebellion of 2012, based on claims of the identity of these territories of northern Mali. A *cercle* is an administrative subdivision of a region.

<sup>9</sup> Tellingly, the report of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue bears the title [Central Mali: The issues and risks of a neglected crisis] Thiam (note 7) (in French). The aim of the 2015 Algiers agreement was to provide 'a final solution to the crisis affecting northern Mali, known to some parties as Azawad'.

<sup>10</sup> Since independence, there have been four rebellions in the north of Mali: in 1963, 1991, 2006 and 2012. See Chauzal and van Damme (note 3), p. 8.



ern regions of Mali. Admittedly, other factors were involved, such as the role of the various Tuareg tribes in the control of power and the importance granted to traditional authorities, but the situation was interpreted with a thematic focus on the control of resources, power and territory in the regions of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu.<sup>11</sup> Demands relating to the independence of these regions, decentralization, federalism and recognition of specific local cultural factors were the logical translation of this analytical framework, which promoted a 'North/South' reading of the conflict with little room for the expression of dynamics specific to central Mali.

However, very soon after the capture of the northern regions by Tuareg and Arab rebels and the simultaneous retreat of civil and military authorities, radical Islamist movements, some elements of which were present in Mali since the early 1990s, played a more visible part in the control of these areas.<sup>12</sup> By negotiating, or imposing, territorial control with the rebel groups, other groups such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine have added a radical extremist dimension to the existing conflict, and the views of analysts concerning the deep causes of the crisis have changed accordingly.<sup>13</sup>

This jihadist presence has contributed to the internationalization of the crisis. Alarmed by the establishment of a further Islamist sanctuary, in addition to those of the Middle East, and the potential danger of a link to the stronghold of Boko Haram in neighbouring Nigeria, international actors have progressively stepped up their security involvement in the region.<sup>14</sup> The focus on the establishment of these radical groups in the northern urban centres and their rear bases in the Sahara Desert has overshadowed the presence of these groups, which is less visible but still real, in the regions of central Mali.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, dimensions of the conflict extraneous to Mali have been taken into account in the responses of international actors such as the EU and the UN. Thus, the influence of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania on the rebel groups operating in the north of the country has been acknowledged, and their role became predominant in the negotiations leading up to the Algiers peace agreement of 2015. Algeria, in particular, has a historically

<sup>11</sup> The government's responses, supported by international backers, provide clear evidence of this orientation: the Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in northern Mali (PSPSDN, 2010), the Accelerated Development Programme for the Northern Regions (PDA/RN, 2013), the Special Development Strategy for the Development Area of the Northern Regions (ZDRN, 2015), the Special Development Strategy for the Regions of Northern Mali (SSD/RN, 2017), among others, have been established over the years.

<sup>12</sup> The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which originated in the Algerian conflicts of the 1990s, progressively established itself in northern Mali, becoming Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in 2006. While the transition indicates a stronger Malian identity, the cross-border links with Algeria remain important for the armed groups that originated from this historical background.

<sup>13</sup> MUJAO was created in 2011 in northern Mali, mainly based in the Gao region. Ansar Dine is a Salafist jihadist movement, established in 2012 by Iyad ag Ghali, a Tuareg leader from northern Mali.

<sup>14</sup> Although there has been no establishment of links between the Malian jihadists and jihadist groups following Boko Haram, the danger of this was certainly invoked in initial studies of the actors in the Malian crisis.

<sup>15</sup> Grégoire, E., 'Islamistes et rebelles touaregs maliens: alliances, rivalités et ruptures' [Islamists and Malian Tuareg rebels: Alliances, rivalries and ruptures], *EchoGéo*, July 2013, <<http://echogeo.revues.org/13466>> (in French).



important role in the control of the Tuareg rebel groups of northern Mali; the Libyan crisis also played a considerable part in the return of Tuareg combatants and the arming of the rebel groups, or jihadists, in the north of the country. In this context, the emergence of Malian jihadist groups has essentially been viewed through the prism of external influence, rather than being seen as the outcome of dynamics endogenous to Mali.

### **Has central Mali been overlooked?**

Given this context, the specific causes of the deterioration of the security situation in the centre of the country were disregarded for a long time. Since 2012, studies have understandably been focused on the north and this has had consequences for the orientation and funding of responses to the crisis.<sup>16</sup> The human resources needed for a detailed analysis of the specific situations in the centre of the country are also limited.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, for reasons of security and lack of transport infrastructure, access to some areas is difficult for researchers and the personnel of international organizations.<sup>18</sup> While a certain amount of investment has been made in travel security for the northern regions of Mali (with air links provided by the UN and secure convoys), this is less true of the central regions, which are considered to be of lower priority.

More fundamentally, the problems of interpreting the processes in play in the central area arise from the difficulty of identifying the causes of the violence and the nature of the conflicts. There is no clearly established front line, nor any clearly identified groups whose demands might offer a basis for negotiation.<sup>19</sup> Even the reality of the creation of the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) in 2015 was initially questioned, since this name was not used in the local communities. It appears that the identification of this group as the main jihadist actor in the centre was due to the need to identify an actor to explain the new outbreak of violence, rather than to the emergence of a clearly structured phenomenon at the local level.<sup>20</sup> The targets of attacks in the region also vary greatly, from traditional authorities and leading local figures to security forces, specific individuals and more recently schools, which further complicates the interpretation of these violent acts.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the attacks are not claimed in all cases and do not follow the political

<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group (note 2).

<sup>17</sup> Joint Mission Analysis Centre (JMAC), Interview with author, Bamako, Mar. 2017; the interview confirmed the insufficient capacity of international organizations for analysis of the central regions of Mali.

<sup>18</sup> MINUSMA, Interview with author, Bamako, June 2017. On the difficulty of triangulating information and developing analyses reflecting the nature of the terrain, see Bouhlel, F., Guichaoua, Y. and Jezequel, J. H., 'The stoning that didn't happen, and why it matters', *African Arguments*, 21 June 2017, <<http://africanarguments.org/2017/06/21/mali-the-stoning-that-didnt-happen-and-why-it-matters/>>.

<sup>19</sup> [Although the media coverage of the events reveals a growing insecurity, it does not give us an understanding of the true actors, their motives or the factors and consequences of this insecurity ... it is difficult to identify those responsible for the attacks, which are not always claimed, but are commonly attributed to jihadist groups], Thiam (note 7) (in French), p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Watling, J. and Raymond, P., 'Don't call it a jihadist insurgency—yet', *Foreign Policy*, 16 Dec. 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Carayol, R., 'Mali: dans la région de Mopti, "l'État ne contrôle plus rien"' [Mali: In the Mopti region, 'the state no longer controls anything'], *Jeune Afrique*, 14 Dec. 2016, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/383833/politique/mali-region-de-mopti-letat-ne-contrrole-plus-rien/>> (in French).



lines or divisions recorded locally. Finally, the involvement of jihadist groups in this violence makes any official negotiation even harder.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of these considerable obstacles, the deterioration of the situation in central Mali is clearly one of the major issues affecting the stability of the country as a whole. The reasons for the violence appear to follow a different logic from that previously identified for the north, while still drawing strength from the instability created by the conflict of 2012. The interpretation of these events must therefore be positioned in a context which is influenced by the violence of 2012, but with the addition of a detailed understanding of the dynamics that are specific to the centre.

### III. The rise of a Malian jihadist phenomenon

Violence has plagued the populations of central Mali for several years, especially in the Mopti region. Crime, in the form of thefts of vehicles or cattle and assaults on stallholders, and the settling of political scores have become increasingly common.<sup>23</sup> The increasing frequency of these attacks has been difficult to interpret. However, over time, the progressive entrenchment of jihadist groups, organizing and claiming attacks of increasing complexity, has captured the attention of observers, structuring the interpretation of this violence through the prism of a radical Islamist agenda and the rejection of the secular state. The question is whether or not this interpretation of events, focused on the radical aspect of the ideology of the actors in the conflict, truly reflects the reality in the region. It is also necessary to understand if the increasing power of the jihadist groups is related to dynamics specific to the region, or if it stems from an extension of insecurity from the north.

#### **The establishment of jihadist groups in central Mali**

Until 2015, the centre of Mali could be considered a secondary region for post-colonial violence, only suffering the effects of armed mobilization and the presence of jihadist groups in the north.

Since then, the MLF (also known as Katiba Macina), a group operating under the control of Amadou Kouffa, has progressively come to prominence in the centre of the country.<sup>24</sup> Active in the *cercles* of Douentza, Youwarou, Mopti and Tenenkou, the group mostly consists of Fulani from nomadic

<sup>22</sup> E.g. the Conference of National Entente in Mar. 2017 recommended a dialogue with radical personalities and movements, including Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa. This proposal was rejected, probably under pressure from the French, for whom any dialogue with terrorists was unacceptable.

<sup>23</sup> Traditional village chiefs, traders and local political figures have been targeted in assassinations. Sangaré, B., 'Le Centre du Mali: épicecentre du djihadisme?' [The centre of Mali: Epicentre of jihadism?], GRIP Analysis Note, Brussels, 20 May 2016, <[http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2016/NA\\_2016-05-20\\_FR\\_B-SANGARE.pdf](http://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2016/NA_2016-05-20_FR_B-SANGARE.pdf)> (in French), p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> Amadou Kouffa comes from the Mopti region. A successful preacher and a member of the Dawa (a proselytizing organization of Pakistani origin), he allied himself with MUJAO and Ansar Dine in the crisis of 2012. After a long period of silence, he reappeared in 2015 as the leader of the Macina Liberation Front, indeterminate in nature, which subsequently gained official status as Katiba Macina. Since Mar. 2017, Katiba Macina has been a member of the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, a coalition of Malian jihadist groups known by its Arabic abbreviation JNIM.



pastoral groups.<sup>25</sup> The rise of the MLF and developments in the central Mali were soon interpreted as the outcome of a ‘jihadist insurrection’ originating directly from northern Mali. Several leading authorities have even spoken of a ‘diversionary manoeuvre’ by groups in the north, who aim to open several fronts against the national and international forces.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, Kouffa’s group has become increasingly visible and active, particularly against representatives of the state and traditional authorities.<sup>27</sup> Strongly entrenched in the region, Katiba Macina has gradually become one of the key actors in the conflict affecting Mali. In spite of its importance and potential threat, the group has remained difficult to interpret in terms of communication or organization, and its political agenda is far from clear.<sup>28</sup>

### Integration into the Malian jihadist movement

The creation of the coalition Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) in March 2017, an association of armed groups in the Mopti region including Katiba Macina, has redefined the objectives of all the various jihadist groups of Mali within the framework of a global struggle extending beyond any strictly regional dynamics.<sup>29</sup>

The JNIM is internationalizing the security risks in Mali, as witnessed by the multiplication of attacks on MINUSMA and the Malian defence and security forces.<sup>30</sup> More structured than before and capable of perpetrating attacks on security forces and representatives of the state, the rhetoric used in the JNIM’s communication indicates a desire to situate the jihadist armed struggle within both a Malian and a global discourse, by calling on the various communities of Mali, particularly the Fulani, to commit the most spectacular attacks.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, the appearance of a jihadist front in central Mali could be a consequence of a strategy of permanent entrenchment by the groups previously established in the north of the country, with the instability in the Mopti

<sup>25</sup> Its area of influence does actually extend beyond these *cercles*: a video from Nov. 2017 showed a sermon of fighters allied to Kouffa in Gogui, in the Niore *cercle* of the Sahel, in the region of Koulikouro.

<sup>26</sup> Watling and Raymond (note 20).

<sup>27</sup> The Kouffa group has claimed very few attacks, although they are commonly attributed to it without any certainty as to the identity of those responsible.

<sup>28</sup> Even the group’s name, the Macina Liberation Front, has never been used by Kouffa himself. He appeared in a message sent to the Mauritanian media agency Al Akhbar in 2015, but the first official communication dates from May 2016, under the name of ‘Katiba of Macina’, affiliated to Ansar Dine. RFI, ‘Le Front de libération du Macina menace la France et ses alliés dans une vidéo’ [The Macina Liberation Front threatens France and its allies in a video], 19 May 2016, <<http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20160518-mali-terrorisme-ansar-dine-aqmi-front-liberation-macina-video>> (in French).

<sup>29</sup> In Mar. 2017, a video declaration announced the fusion of several jihadist groups in Mali under the name of Jama’at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), which can be translated as Groups to Support Islam and Muslims (GSIM). This new group combines the jihadist groups based in the regions of the north, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Dine, but also—significantly—representatives of groups from the central regions, such as the Macina Liberation Front (also known as Katiba Macina).

<sup>30</sup> Violence against the national and international security forces increased by 102 per cent in 2017, compared to 2016. United Nations (note 6), p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Statement by JNIM, Communication with author, 19 June 2017. The JNIM’s claim of responsibility for the attack on the Kangaba Camp tourist centre on 18 June 2017 clearly shows this anchoring of events in a Malian and Fulani context. Indeed, the statement makes reference to ‘our land’ and ‘the noble Fulani tribes’.



region viewed as an opportunity to strengthen their hold over a specific territory.

Other radical Islamic groups have been operating in the central regions previously, for example, MUJAO in the Douentza *cercle* during the crisis of 2012. These groups were also involved in local dynamics and careful to gain the support of certain sections of the population by adopting a discourse and operating modes compatible with the community demands in their locality. However, the fact that Kouffa has rallied to groups that traditionally operate further north certainly appears to indicate a change in the discourse: based on a geopolitical vision of combat against Western forces, rather than only on the specific dynamics of the Mopti region.

This broader focus would serve two purposes: the widening of their field of action and a strengthened Malian base for the groups traditionally entrenched in the north; and the involvement of the groups in the centre of the country in an ideological discourse extending beyond the demands of the Fulani community. Significantly, a recent audio message from Kouffa indicated a degree of distancing from the demands of the Fulani in the centre (while acknowledging their existence), and included a declaration of allegiance to the JNIM and its leader, Iyad ag Ghali.<sup>32</sup>

Despite this real development in the discourse of the groups present in the centre of the country, based on a jihadist ideology and an agenda that extends beyond the boundaries of Mali itself, the rise in violence in the centre of the country is not explained by this aspect alone. In fact, it is difficult to interpret some of the recent attacks as the result of 'jihadism'. Some local actors, representing the traditional authorities, deny the very existence of a jihadist agenda and ascribe the violent acts to simple banditry or opportunism.<sup>33</sup> A local analysis of the dynamics of these conflicts in central Mali is essential in order to go beyond the polarization of these two interpretative frameworks.

#### IV. The centre: a 'new' front in the conflict in Mali?

It is problematic to refer to a crisis 'in the centre' as if a unitary conception of the conflicts would suffice. The events in the *cercle* of Douentza differ from what is taking place in the *cercles* of Tenenkou or Youwarou. At present, the different dynamics of violence show no unifying factor such as a clear delimitation of the lines of conflict or the federalizing power of a uniform violent actor identified in a given territory (as in the example of the emergence of the groups that now make up the Coordination of Azawad Movements, or the discourse on the independence of Azawad that was able to draw demarcation lines, however artificial, between the actors in the north).

Even in geographical terms, as has been pointed out, the very concept of the centre must be treated with caution. In this conceptual framework, the region of Ségou is also increasingly involved in the violence, while the characteristics of the conflicts taking place in the Mopti region are also found, to a certain degree, in the north of Burkina Faso or in the north of the Malian region of Koulikouro. A geographical, or territorial, definition of the crisis is

<sup>32</sup> Audio statement attributed to Amadou Kouffa, Communications with author, 21 Aug. 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Leading figure in the Mopti region, Interview with author, Bamako, Sep. 2017.



therefore difficult and runs the risk of detracting from the analysis of micro-local conflict linked to the same factors.

### **The socio-economic dimensions of the conflict**

Some of these conflict factors take root in the socio-economic dimension of many local conflicts. The centre is a fertile region marked by the coexistence of ethnic groups with complementary, but occasionally conflicting, socio-economic traditions. The Fulani, semi-nomadic pastoralists, live there side by side with Tamasheq, Songhai, Bozo, Bambara and Dogon. The Bozo are traditionally fishermen, while other groups are pastoralists or agriculturalists. These activities are regulated by a set of norms and traditions that are superimposed on national laws.<sup>34</sup> However, these norms are no longer capable of regulating land management among the different communities, as their legitimacy is often contested (see box 1).<sup>35</sup> Conflicts, occasionally extremely violent, break out between the groups, often related to disputes over land management and the legitimacy of the historical agreements regulating the use of the land.<sup>36</sup>

Climate change and sociocultural developments have changed the economic activities of the various groups. Population growth, land fragmentation, herd growth and the development of intensive farming, promoted by successive governments with the support of international partners, have disrupted the application and relevance of historic norms and the balance of power between pastoralists and farmers. In particular, the pastoralists have suffered from a reduction in grazing areas, disrupting the traditional harmonization between mode of production, position in the social hierarchy and access to local power.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, the superimposition of state laws on these traditional modes of regulation has been a powerful factor in the reduction of their legitimacy. Although the state has incorporated some customary regulations into its body of law, these regulations are ipso facto becoming contestable via new avenues such as those of formal justice. The emergence of electoral competition and the (relative) authority granted by the state to a new class of local elected representatives has enabled some groups to challenge the traditional authorities who uphold the ancestral customs. While some traditional fig-

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Gremont et al., *Les liens sociaux au Nord Mali—entre fleuve et dunes* [Social ties in North Mali: Between river and dunes] (Khartala: Paris, 2004) (in French).

<sup>35</sup> Tabital Pulaaku (Fulani Association), Interview with author, Bamako, June 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Extremely violent conflicts flared up between Fulani and Dogon in the Koro *cercle* in June 2017, see Jeune Afrique and AFP, 'Mali: une trentaine de morts dans des violences entre Peuls et Dogons dans le centre du pays' [Mali: Thirty dead in violence between Fulani and Dogon in the centre of the country], 20 June 2017, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/449583/politique/mali-trentaine-de-morts-violences-entre-peuls-dogons-centre-pays/>> (in French); and between Fulani and Bambara in the Macina *cercle* in Feb. 2017, see Jeune Afrique and AFP, 'Mali: des violences entre Peuls et Bambaras font une dizaine de morts dans le sud du pays' [Mali: Violence between Fulani and Bambara savages about 10 people in the south of the country], 13 Feb. 2017, <<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/403121/politique/mali-violences-entre-peuls-bambaras-dizaine-de-morts-sud-pays/>> (in French).

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of the politics of modes of land resource management, see Bagayoko, N. et al., 'Masters of the land: Competing customary and legal systems for resource management in the conflicting environment of the Mopti region, Central Mali', Broker Online, June 2017, <<http://www.thebrokeronline.eu/Blogs/Sahel-Watch-a-living-analysis-of-the-conflict-in-Mali/Masters-of-the-land>>.

**Box 1. Bourgou pastures and land-use fees**

Bourgou pastures, fertile fields in the inner Niger delta, are an extremely important agro-pastoral resource for economic and cultural activity.

Between the communes of Diafarabe and Dialloubé, cattle are taken to the pastures on a seasonal basis in migrations that are precisely codified by tradition. These migrations are marked by festivals and cultural events, but also by economic transactions (through tax collection), and they are organized according to power relations codified between customary landowners and nomadic pastoralists.

The land-use fees collected by landowners from nomadic pastoralists are currently being contested, and the power relations inherited from the Dina of Sékou Amadou and perpetuated for centuries are now subject to question.

*Source:* Interviews with notables from the Mopti region and documents from Tabital Pulaaku, Bamako, June and Sep. 2017.

ures have successfully underpinned their local standing with an electoral mandate, on some occasions the elections have provided an opportunity to challenge the former authorities, or at least to make such challenges more visible by bringing them into the formal political arena. Among the Tuareg groups in the Kidal region, for example, some clans saw the elections as a way of challenging the traditional power of the Ifoghas.

In the wake of the 2012 crisis and the ensuing security vacuum, the trivialization of violence, the sense of impunity, the availability of firearms and the generalization of the challenge to customary norms have all been factors contributing to the violent escalation of conflict.

**A distinctive cultural and religious identity**

Largely governed by its traditional norms, central Mali has historically had a distinctive identity in terms of culture and religion.<sup>38</sup> The Fulani have always been mistrustful of the state. Convinced that they were marginalized by the establishment of a state modelled on the former colonial power, and aggrieved by the increasing power of a state administration allowing social advancement, they have felt excluded from the access to power offered by formal education and recruitment into public administration.

Reluctant to accept the formation of a state structure that challenged customary practices and altered traditional social structures established since the 19th century Macina Empire, the Fulani have therefore had little opportunity to benefit from social advancement through enlisting in the defence and security forces or participating in national politics.<sup>39</sup> The state and its administration are often seen as operating on a basis of community clientelism, and the under-representation of the Fulani, whether real or imagined, works to their disadvantage.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> On the construction of the Fulani identity as complementary or opposed to West African culture, see de Brujn, M. and van Dijk, H., *Peuls et Mandingues: dialectiques des constructions identitaires* [Fulani and Mandinka: Discourses of identity constructions] (Khartala: Paris, 1997) (in French).

<sup>39</sup> Kisal (a Fulani defence organization), Interview with author, Bamako, June 2017. However, it should be noted that some Fulani figures have achieved high office in the administration, including the former President of the National Assembly, Ali Nouhoum Diallo, and General Ila Cissé in the army.

<sup>40</sup> Tabital Pulaaku (former elected representative of the *cercle* of Tenenkou) (note 35). There is an 'animosity on the part of the actors traditionally dominant in resource management towards the Malian state, whose policies are seen as challenging ancestral equilibriums', Bagayoko, N. et al., 'Gestion des ressources naturelles et configuration des relations de pouvoir dans le centre du Mali:



There is also a distinctive religious identity. The Mopti region reflects the diversity of the interpretations of Islam present in Mali, and the Qadiriyya Sufi Brotherhood, favouring a strict interpretation of Islam, has long gained a foothold in this region. The combination of this religious identity and social structures inherited from the Macina (or Dina) Empire further reinforces the polarization among the Fulani between the secular state, considered to be a recent import, and the traditional structures that have grown out of custom, history and religion.

The Macina Empire is commonly referred to in the discourse of jihadist groups seeking a local base, for example, by the group led by Kouffa, in his audio messages, and, more recently, in the official statements of the JNIM.<sup>41</sup> This rhetoric underpins the policy of discrediting state institutions, the 'heir of the French system', and educational institutions, judged to be illegitimate because they are seen as externally imposed and incompatible with the local culture.

### **The withdrawal of the state and the emergence of parallel security systems**

Thus, the crisis of 2012 provided an opportunity for some actors to express their violent challenges to the established order, represented not only by the state, as mentioned, but also by traditional norms. In fact, the withdrawal of state agents from several areas of the centre has opened up for challenges to these state norms and traditional hierarchies. Up to this point, the state had provided a degree of stability. Electoral competition and appointments within the administration have allowed some renewal of the elite, but this has been controlled and limited in extent due to the continued clientelism within the democratic process and a tendency to uphold the existing power relations. Although the elections could have allowed a degree of renewal of the political staff, the selection of candidates has tended to favour the Fulani elite or candidates supported by them. The withdrawal of state agents has made way for radical demands and provided little protection for the formal or traditional elites challenged as a result of this democratic inertia.

The withdrawal of state agents has also destabilized all social strata: since there is no longer any effective provision of basic services by the state, numerous local organizations have taken over this provision, encouraged by the increasing security vacuum. Crisis committees have appeared, mostly on a community basis, and have organized patrols or established self-defence to provide a security presence for the members of their community.

At the height of the crisis, the government's defence and security forces ignored, or even accepted and supported, the creation of these parallel security forces, which remain in existence today.<sup>42</sup> The various communities have organized to defend themselves against multiple threats: cattle rustlers, bandits and other armed communities. These self-defence militias,

entre ruptures et continuité' [Natural resource management and power relations configuration in central Mali: between breaks and continuity], ASSN, 2017, <<http://africansecuritynetwork.org/assn/gestion-des-ressources-naturelles-dans-le-centre-du-mali/>> (in French) p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> In his messages, Kouffa opposes France as an ally of the secular state of Mali and the successors of the Dina, while praising the Dina at length, Kouffa (note 32).

<sup>42</sup> Carayol (note 21).



often based on identity, have multiplied. Examples include Ganda Koy or Ganda Izo, affiliated to the Songhai communities, and the Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie (MDP) led by Hama Founé, which incorporates some of the Fulani communities. Since 2012, the Mopti region has been the setting for the mobilization of non-state armed groups, with their training in Sévaré, and their deployment alongside state forces against the pro-independence armed groups of the north.<sup>43</sup>

This militarization of the centre's communities has persisted even after the signing of the 2015 Algiers agreement that officially ended the conflict. Still active, the groups are becoming less controllable and are encouraging communities to use armed violence in order to promote their own interests, in a process of increasing empowerment.

## V. The militarization of political and economic demands

There has been a progressive rapprochement between radical groups (Katiba Macina, Ansar ul Islam and, more recently, the JNIM) and the Fulani populations, based on intra-community divisions.<sup>44</sup> By appropriately aligning themselves with the material and security needs and political demands of these populations, the groups have upheld and strengthened the Fulani's belief that they have been abandoned or oppressed by both the central state and the traditional authorities.<sup>45</sup>

The traditionally established power relations in Fulani society are seen in all aspects of the society. The economic relations between Fulani groups (semi-nomadic pastoralism or traders) and the distribution of political responsibilities (with the traditional holders of power commonly strengthened by the democratic process) reflect the hierarchical structure of the Fulani community. The challenge to these traditionally based equilibriums, and the questioning of the status of the so-called social juniors at the bottom of the social scale, leads to constant renegotiations of these power relations.<sup>46</sup>

### **National and local interactions of power**

These political struggles for access to power are a major factor in understanding the main changes that have taken place recently in Mali, especially in its

<sup>43</sup> Thiénot, D., 'Mali: en attendant la guerre' [Mali: Waiting for the war], *Le Monde*, 7 Oct. 2012, <[http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/10/06/mali-en-attendant-la-guerre\\_1771222\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/10/06/mali-en-attendant-la-guerre_1771222_3212.html)> (in French).

<sup>44</sup> Ansar ul Islam is a jihadist group operating in the adjoining part of Burkina Faso.

<sup>45</sup> A striking example is that the annual crossing of the Niger and cattle pasturing in the bourgou pastures in 2017 was organized without any state control. The radical groups supervising the crossing abolished the fees collected by the traditional owners of the bourgou pastures. This represents a policy—in line with Salafist ideology—of abolishing hereditary rights and challenging the traditional economic and power hierarchies.

<sup>46</sup> The 'social juniors' form the set of social strata dominated by 'elites'. This social structuring may arise from, or be legitimated by, a set of traditional norms and state structures, such as those inherited from colonization. In Fulani society, the social juniors (the Rimaybe, former slaves, or Sedoobe, the semi-nomadic pastoralists) are subordinated to the elites known as the Wehebe. See Jean-François Bayart, J., *L'État au Cameroun* [The state in Cameroon] (Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques: Paris, 1979) (in French). The category of social juniors can also be extended to women or young people, sometimes called 'permanent social juniors', who have no possibility of social mobility. See Sow, N. et al., *Société et culture au Mali: Problématiques du changement* [Society and culture in Mali: Drivers of change] (International Alert: London, 2014).



central region. The introduction of electoral competition, accentuated by the state's decentralization efforts, has been seen as an opportunity to bring the Fulani's demands into the political arena. Within the Fulani communities themselves, this has also challenged the traditional relationship between the social juniors and their traditional elites.

In fact, the economic opportunities offered by development aid, with the aim of increasing agricultural productivity, access to water points or support for stock rearing, have been interpreted within the central Malian communities as benefiting certain groups rather than others. Therefore, while the economic and social aims of development policies may be presented as consensual aims at the national level, the same policies give rise to dissent at the local and intra-community level.<sup>47</sup>

This dissension within community groups is reinforced by the armed groups in central Mali, which are looking to gain a local foothold in order to legitimize their presence and enable them to obtain logistical support for their entrenchment. Due to their position in relation to the established power hierarchies and the opportunities offered by similarities of identity or ideology, these groups are close to certain strata of the population.

For example, MUJAO negotiated the conditions for its occupation of the major towns in the Douentza *cercle* in exchange for its support of nomadic pastoralists in protecting their cattle, thereby increasing the pastoralists' capacity to rebalance their influence within the Fulani hierarchy.<sup>48</sup> When MUJAO withdrew from the area, Katiba Macina sought to win the allegiance of these Fulani nomadic pastoralists. While some within the Fulani community have historically been attracted by a radical form of Islam that is potentially compatible with some aspects of the Salafism advanced by the jihadist groups, community alliances and divisions have enabled the jihadists to play on rivalries within the community to overturn its internal social hierarchies.

Faced with the rise in the power of the jihadist groups, the state, supported by its international partners, has of course attempted to regain control. Substantial operations have been launched, such as Operation Seno in October 2015. Notably, these military operations are based on information supplied by local authorities for the identification of terrorist targets, thus reinforcing the temptation for some local authorities to gain advantage by eliminating, or weakening, the groups resisting their authority, by denouncing them as belonging to terrorist groups. The security response to this mobilization, which is mainly due to social demands within Fulani society, has further reinforced the division between the state authorities and the nomadic pastoralists.

Once again, national security issues related to the anti-terrorist struggle have been reinterpreted and used at the local level to reinforce or challenge power relations within the communities in conflict.

<sup>47</sup> Bagayoko (note 40).

<sup>48</sup> [The egalitarian discourse of jihadism . . . reinforces the conviction among the fighters that the cause allows them to free themselves from socio-cultural barriers], Thiam (note 7) (in French), p. 24.



### Progressive adherence to jihadist ideology?

The ideological rapprochement, sometimes real and sometimes with ulterior motives, between majority Fulani communities in central Mali and jihadist groups can be analysed in an environment marked by increasing social challenges. In fact, Salafi-inspired jihadism fits the political, economic and security aspirations of some actors in the region.<sup>49</sup> It is also based on the frequently mobilized historical heritage of the Macina Empire, which represents the golden age of central Mali in the minds of the Fulani.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the first jihads led by the empire against the Bambara kingdoms and regional competitors are regularly mentioned in the warlike exhortations of Kouffa.

However, even if the origins of the jihadist groups' entrenchment in central Mali are undeniably due to tensions in the Mopti region, other indicators show a development towards demands and an agenda that extend beyond local dynamics. Recent attacks, symptomatic of this development, point to a rejection of the Malian state and of modernity, in a logic that bears some resemblance to that of Boko Haram in Nigeria.

For example, schools have been especially targeted, which was not the case before, while other basic services provided by humanitarian bodies in the field of health have been spared, doubtless because they have less political and ideological significance.<sup>51</sup> In 2014, 64 per cent of children from 7 to 11 years were deprived of education in the centre of Mopti, making this region second only to Timbuktu in suffering from this phenomenon.<sup>52</sup> In May 2017, 41 per cent of the schools in the Mopti region carried 'closed' signs for reasons related to insecurity.<sup>53</sup>

Having started as an alliance of convenience, based on self-defence and the promotion of micro-local political and economic interests, enrolment in radical groups is now also taking place on ideological grounds. The attraction of Salafism, with its intrinsic questioning of established social and economic roles, appears to be strengthening; the social order promoted by radical groups such as MUJAO, and then the supporters of Kouffa arguing for emancipation from traditional hierarchies ('illegitimate') and state control ('bringing foreign ways into the local culture'), find a natural echo among local populations.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Offner, F., 'Au Sahel, une paix introuvable' [In the Sahel, peace cannot be found], Mediapart, 9 Oct. 2017, <<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/091017/au-sahel-une-paix-introuvable?onglet=full>> (in French).

<sup>50</sup> Thiam (note 7), p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> Sangaré, B., 'Au Centre du Mali, les extrémistes décrètent l'école "haram"' [In the centre of Mali, the extremists decree that school is 'haram'], Sahelien.com blog, 7 June 2017, <<http://sahelien.com/blog/au-centre-du-mali-les-extremistes-decretent-lecole-haram-2/>> (in French); Dubois, O., 'Nord et Centre du Mali: guerre contre l'éducation?' [North and Central Mali: War on education?], Journal du Mali, 5 Oct. 2017, <<http://www.journaldumali.com/2017/10/05/nord-centre-mali-guerre-contre-leducation/>> (in French); and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Interview with author, Bamako, June 2017.

<sup>52</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 'Les enfants non scolarisés et déscolarisés au Mali' [Children not in school and deschooled in Mali], 2015 (in French).

<sup>53</sup> This figure represents 248 closed schools out of the 601 schools in the municipalities affected by insecurity and the 1849 schools recorded in the region. See Cluster Education Mali, 'Situation des écoles affectées par la crise sécuritaire' [Situation of schools affected by the security crisis], May 2017 (in French).

<sup>54</sup> Bouhleb (note 18).



The entrenchment strategies of the jihadist groups in general, and of the group associated with Kouffa in particular, are therefore based on competition with state services through the establishment of basic social services (justice, education, and forms of governance adapted to local norms). This is a strategy that matches the specific expectations of these populations, while linking them to a religious ideal based on an interpretation of the Koran that promotes justice and social equality.

Thus, the support for Kouffa among some Fulani groups focuses on existing demands, but reformulates them within the context of the Malian crisis. The increasing power of these jihadist groups corresponds to this double reading: on the one hand, there is the ideological attraction of an emancipatory social model; on the other hand, there is the alleged inability of the Malian state to offer a form of governance that is legitimate in the eyes of all communities.

## VI. The responses: focused too exclusively on security?

The situation in the centre of Mali is the result of factors related to governance, perceived marginalization and competing social models. The complexity and interweaving of these factors, which are often not clearly identified, and the need for action to re-establish a minimum level of security, have so far led to responses that are uncoordinated and ineffective.

### **The Malian state is perceived as ineffective and illegitimate**

The response to the increase in armed mobilization has been essentially focused on security. Faced with the rise of jihadist groups such as Katiba Macina, the state has proceeded to deploy supplementary security forces in the central region.<sup>55</sup> Lacking awareness of the complexity of the relations between armed groups and the various strata of the population, and having little inclination to adapt the assertion of state power to regional characteristics, these forces have carried out arrests in an indiscriminate way among the people.<sup>56</sup> These operations, and the acts of violence committed on such occasions, have only exacerbated the sense of marginalization and oppression among the Fulani.<sup>57</sup>

On the one hand, in terms of development, the insecurity has had a considerable effect on the presence of the state and its capacity to provide basic social services. Officials on duty in the area frequently have to flee because of threats made against them.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, the action taken against the ter-

<sup>55</sup> E.g. Operation Seno, launched in Oct. 2015, and the establishment of a regional force, the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel, to be deployed at the end of 2017 in central Mali. One of the three aims of the Joint Force is to combat terrorism.

<sup>56</sup> Dufka, C., 'Military might alone won't pull Mali from quagmire', Human Rights Watch, 19 May 2017, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/19/military-might-alone-wont-pull-mali-quagmire>>.

<sup>57</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: Unchecked abuses in military operations', 8 Sep. 2017, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/08/mali-unchecked-abuses-military-operations>>. The Malian Government rejects these allegations; see BBC World Service, "'Il n'y a aucun charnier au Mali" selon le gouvernement' ["There is no mass grave in Mali" according to the government], 27 Sep. 2017, <<http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-41414476>> (in French).

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (note 52).

rorist threat has also had an impact on the capacity of inhabitants to access markets and health centres.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, the negotiation of a peace process (in Ouagadougou in 2013, then in Algiers in 2015) has largely sidelined the communities of the centre and the armed groups operating there. Promises of recognition of new power relations by means of decentralization and the benefits of the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants, in particular, may have had an encouraging effect on some groups in the centre, acting as a kind of ‘incentive to rebellion’. Militias such as those of the Dozo (traditional mystical hunting communities, very active in the north of the Ségou region) or the community militias seeking official recognition for the Fulani of the centre have armed themselves well.<sup>60</sup> Through shows of strength or violent confrontations, they have attempted to assert their presence and the threat they pose, or to emphasize further their self-conferred role as forces of protection for their community, in order to improve their negotiating position.

However, the state’s inability to impose peace and security by force, as well as the lack of legitimacy and local acceptance of the security forces, has undermined the people’s confidence in the initiatives of the central authorities.<sup>61</sup>

### **Global political responses are still poorly coordinated**

Some political figures in the centre have carefully considered the danger of the rapprochement between marginalized populations and radical groups, and have tried to put forward local demands via political platforms. The creation of Fulani associations representing the nomadic pastoralists (such as Dewraal Pulaaku, in October 2014) and other initiatives of the same kind have had the primary aim of bringing the intra-community conflicts between nomadic pastoralists and Fulani elites into the political arena.<sup>62</sup> Receiving little attention or support, however, they have been unable to attain their objectives, instead strengthening the attraction of armed struggle for advancing people’s demands.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Faced with the insecurity and the multiplication of attacks by motorcycle riders, the government partially or completely prohibited the use of motorcycles in some *cercles* in the centre of Mali in Feb. 2017. According to a report by humanitarian non-governmental organizations, this prohibition has had negative effects on access to health services and education in the areas concerned. It is also thought to have had negative impacts in terms of security. See Terre des hommes, “Note d’analyse sur la mesure d’interdiction de circuler à motos dans plusieurs zones du centre du Mali” [Analysis note on the ban on motorbikes in several areas of central Mali], 30 Mar. 2017 (in French).

<sup>60</sup> E.g. the Mouvement pour la Défense de la Patrie du Delta Central, du Hayre et du Seno (MDP) [Movement for the Defence of the Motherland of the Central Delta, the Hayre and the Seno, MDP], led by Hama Founé, and the National Alliance for the Protection of the Fulani Identity and the Restoration of Justice (Alliance nationale pour la sauvegarde de l’identité peule et la restauration de la justice, ANSIPRJN).

<sup>61</sup> E.g. in the *cercle* of Koro, following violence between Dogon and Fulani groups, local mediation advised the security forces against deployment in the area in order to avoid exacerbating tensions. See United Nations (note 6), p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> Pulaaku, D., ‘Procès verbal du Forum local de l’Association Dewral Pulaaku du Cercle de Douentza-ADPCD sur la Paix et la Cohésion sociale’ [Proceedings of the Local Forum of the Dewral Pulaaku Association of the Douentza-ADPCD Circle on Peace and Social Cohesion], 20 Oct. 2014 (in French).

<sup>63</sup> Leader of an armed group in the Timbuktu region, Interview with author, Bamako, Mar. 2017.



On the national level, the government appears to have understood the limits of an exclusively security-focused response. Regroupment camps for ex-combatants have recently been announced for the central region, in the *cercles* of Douentza, Tenenkou and Koro. These camps, together with others established in collaboration with MINUSMA for the northern regions under the DDR programmes, appear to have the primary aim of disarming the self-defence militias. However, they could also offer a real alternative to individuals wishing to detach themselves from radical groups, by offering them a possible way in to the DDR process.<sup>64</sup>

At the same time, a dialogue has been opened by the Malian Government on the links between security and development, through the launch of the PSIRC. However, this initiative must learn the lessons of previous attempts to combine a security approach with development policy.<sup>65</sup> The PSIRC, controlled by the Ministry of Security, appears to make specific proposals on the redeployment of Malian security forces, but without any real communication plan at the local level, and without any clearly identifiable strategy of economic and social reconstruction.

A process of reflection has been initiated to find a better way of combining security and development programmes. Yet these initiatives appear to be poorly coordinated: in fact, the deployment of the G5 joint force, planned for the last quarter of 2017, still aims to impose a security interpretation of the situation and to combat terrorism in the area, whereas other initiatives emphasize opening a political dialogue with the key actors in the centre of the country.<sup>66</sup>

Consequently, the High Islamic Council of Mali has been mandated for a good offices mission, with the aim of identifying points for negotiation. Although the involvement of such religious figures should arguably be treated with caution, it is considered beneficial by the parties concerned in the centre of Mali. The fact of religion is a reality: Islam is a strong marker of identity for local populations, and has an ideology that allows challenges to the traditional or state forms of governance. Therefore, a dialogue using 'facilitatory' religious factors to develop responses relating to new forms of governance seems appropriate.

The opening of a dialogue appears to be supported by the government, in terms of the DDR, the formulation of strategic security and development plans, and dialogue missions entrusted to leading figures. Although these developments are encouraging, the strategy of the Malian Government needs to be more coherent and offer solutions that deal with security, political and social issues simultaneously, in close collaboration with local actors and their demands.

<sup>64</sup> Leading figure in Bamako, Local authority in Douentza and MINUSMA (RSS and DDR units), Interviews with author, Bamako, June 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Notably, the controversial experience of the Special Plan for Security and Development in the North (PSPSDN) that was drawn up in 2011. See Ag Youssef, I. et al., 'Étude sur les stratégies de développement économique et social des régions Nord du Mali (Tombouctou, Gao, Kidal)' [Study on strategies for economic and social development of Northern Mali (Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal)], Mar. 2012 (in French).

<sup>66</sup> Hickendorff, A., Tobie, A. and van der Lijn, J., 'Success of Joint Force Sahel depends on local actor engagement', SIPRI, 18 Aug. 2017, <<https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2017/success-joint-force-sahel-depends-local-actor-engagement>>.



Thus, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the aspirations of the people who are either actors or victims in the central Malian conflict, in order to comprehend the sources of violence and be able to respond effectively. The state's ability to act as a legitimate arbitrator in local conflicts, capable of supporting the negotiation of agreements between communities in the centre, and responding to the needs expressed by the various strata of the population in terms of basic social services, will be of primary importance for a return to stability in the regions concerned.



## Abbreviations

DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
EU	European Union
G5 Sahel	Group of Five for the Sahel
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wal-Muslimeen
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
MLF	Macina Liberation Front
PSIRC	Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions (Plan de Sécourisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre)

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# CENTRAL MALI: VIOLENCE, LOCAL PERSPECTIVES AND DIVERGING NARRATIVES

AURÉLIEN TOBIE

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