

THE IMPACT OF ARMED GROUPS ON THE POPULATIONS OF CENTRAL AND NORTHERN MALI

Necessary Adaptations of the Strategies for
Re-establishing Peace

AURÉLIEN TOBIE AND BOUKARY SANGARÉ

**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

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Abbreviations

AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
CJA	Congress for Justice in Azawad (Congrès pour la justice dans l'Azawad)
CMA	Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad)
CME	Coordination of Entente Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'entente)
CMFPR	Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements and Fronts (Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance)
COFO	Land Commissions (Commissions locales foncières)
CPA	Coalition of the Azawad People (Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad)
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali
EUTM	European Union Training Mission
FAMa	Malian armed forces (Forces armées maliennes)
FDS	Defence and Security Forces (Forces de défense et de sécurité)
GATIA	Imghad Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs alliés)
HCIM	Islamic High Council of Mali (Haut Conseil islamique du Mali)
HCUA	High Council for the Unity of Azawad (Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad)
JNIM	Group to Support Islam and Muslims (Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin)
MAA	Arab Movement of Azawad (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad)
MDP	Movement for the Defence of the Homeland (Mouvement pour la défense de la Patrie)
MINUSMA	United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
MNLA	National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad)
MPSA	Popular Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad)
MSA	Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad)
MUJAO	Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'ouest)
Platform	Platform of Movements of 14 June 2014 of Algiers (Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger)
PSIRC	Integrated Security Plan for the Centre (Plan de sécurisation intégré des régions du centre)
PSPSDN	Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in the North (Programme Spécial Pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord)
TSCTP	Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership

1. Introduction

In 2012 an insurrection by Salafist groups and groups campaigning for the independence of northern Mali (Azawad) triggered a crisis in Mali. Seven years later, the security situation in the country has not improved and is far from doing so. Many armed groups still operate in Mali, with agendas that are sometimes vague and with ambitions that are unclear. The Algiers Peace Accord signed in June 2015 permitted the establishment of two major coalitions of armed groups: the Coordination of Azawad Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA), consisting of pro-independence groups, and the Platform of Movements of 14 June 2014 of Algiers (Plateforme des mouvements du 14 juin 2014 d'Alger, known as the Platform), incorporating the pro-government armed groups. In 2017 these were joined by the Coordination of Entente Movements (Coordination des mouvements de l'entente, CME), consisting of dissident armed groups from the CMA and the Platform. In addition, jihadist armed groups have also been involved from the start of the crisis, with some controlling large swathes of Malian territory. Finally, in a context marked by the persistent weakness of the authority of the state—which is seen by many as illegitimate—other groups that are less structured or less involved in the Peace Accord continue to mobilize combatants around community interests, politico-military goals or the need for self-defence.¹ The changing alliances between the various actors in this armed mobilization and the confused nature of their claims make it extremely difficult to read the situation and to trace the conflict's different dividing lines across the regions of central and northern Mali.²

Before security operations by the Malian Government or by international forces could begin, there had to be a formal identification of these groups. Attempts at mediation and military operations were contingent on a mapping of the forces present, even if this categorization was merely artificial in nature. However, this attempt at classification, while essential for the deployment of security operations, meant that not all the armed movements were included in the implementation of the Peace Accord. A direct effect of this is that security is still not guaranteed, seven years after the onset of the crisis. Excessively rigid classifications of the armed groups as either 'pro-government'/'loyalist' or 'pro-independence'/'separatist', or even as 'community-based armed groups' or 'jihadist groups', cannot reflect the changing reality and dynamics associated with their positioning—above all, these classifications cannot reflect the way in which the groups are perceived by the populations living in contact with them at the local or community level. These categorizations are also unable to take into account the many social, economic, security and ideological dimensions of the groups' interactions with the populations. These definitions, which may be useful from the viewpoint of security on the larger scale (in relation to the Peace Accord, for example) largely disregard the ways in which these armed groups integrate with local populations and the ways in which they penetrate the local political economy. Yet these various aspects of the identity of the armed groups must guide the design and implementation of security policies: indeed, all the political actors concerned agree that security strategies must be integrated into broader responses relating to local governance and development policies, and that it is only in this way that the challenge of the long-term stabilization of Mali can be met.

¹ Charbonneau, B., *The Dilemmas of International Intervention in Mali*, Centre Francopaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix (Université du Québec à Montréal: Montreal, Oct. 2017).

² Tobie, A., 'Central Mali: violence, local perspectives and diverging narratives', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2017/5, Dec. 2017.

It is therefore a matter of urgency to identify the way in which these many armed groups are perceived at the local level, separate from the focus of global security. A detailed understanding of the political and social dimensions of the presence of these groups among populations will help to explain their ability to create links with the populations and establish their presence among them. Responses must be carefully adapted to be acceptable to the population, with the aim of reducing the impact of the presence of non-state armed groups on the overall security situation in Mali.

The weakness of the Malian state and the embedding of parastate actors

The Malian state was severely destabilized in 2012 by the insurrection led jointly by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad, MNLA) and the Salafist Ansar Dine group, and then by a military coup d'état. Since then the government has been unable to fully restore public administration over large parts of Malian territory. This has led some analysts to describe some parts of the country as 'ungoverned spaces'.³ This expression is subject to qualification, as it is now accepted that, in the absence of the state administration, the populations have turned to other 'authorities' in order to access basic services, and thus to a new offer of governance.⁴ The radical challenge posed by these actors to central governance by the Malian state has also enabled the populations of these territories to express their discontent with a state that is seen as predatory, with its imposition of taxes and duties in what is commonly viewed as an arbitrary or unjustified manner.

Although the crisis has obviously had a destabilizing effect on the public administration, it should be remembered that this administration has always coexisted with an alternative system of governance. For the communities of central and northern Mali (the regions of Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao and Mopti), the customary law administered by traditional chiefs and the religious norms governed by imams, Koranic scholars and *qadis* play key roles in the administration of justice and the maintenance of social cohesion.⁵ These different norms—official, religious and traditional—may be complementary or conflicting, and in some cases are formally expressed in national law.

In this context, some armed groups, after establishing their security role among the population, have also attempted to present themselves as social and political actors by developing normative discourses and practices. This is particularly true for jihadist groups with an explicit social and political programme—their interactions with the communities of central and northern Mali have contributed to a change in the perception of the role of the state and the customary authorities.⁶ This process is not one-way: in return, the communities in some areas have negotiated modes of interaction with these jihadist groups, leading to mutual agreement on the modalities of these groups' presence in the territory that they occupy.

³ Lloyd, R. B., 'Ungoverned spaces and regional insecurity: the case of Mali', *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol. 36 no. 1 (2016), pp. 133–41.

⁴ SIPRI et al., *Livre Blanc de la société civile pour la paix et la sécurité au Mali* [White Book of the Civil Society for Peace and Security in Mali] (SIPRI: Stockholm, Jan. 2019); and Tobie A. and Chauzal, G., 'State services in an insecure environment, perceptions among civil society in Mali', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2018/7, Dec. 2018.

⁵ The *qadis* are Muslim judges who perform civil, judicial and religious duties. They are present in northern Mali and are greatly in demand among the population, in addition to or in place of modern state justice, which is considered corrupt and sometimes illegitimate for reasons related to the memory of colonialism.

⁶ Guichaoua, Y., 'Comment le djihad armé se diffuse au Sahel?' [How armed jihad is spreading in the Sahel], *The Conversation*, 24 Feb. 2019.

The role and influence of Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin in Mali

One of these armed jihadist groups, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM, Group to Support Islam and Muslims), has drawn particular attention. Since it was created in March 2017 as a coalition of groups affiliated to al-Qaeda (Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM, Katiba Macina and al-Mourabitoun), it has led spectacular and devastating attacks on the international and national security forces. National and international actors mobilized in an attempt to weaken or eradicate this terrorist group, which was considered a threat to the peace process in Mali and to regional—and even global—stability.

However, the JNIM soon became established as a major actor. Its creation marked a radical change in the nature of the jihadist presence in Mali. Whereas its predecessors, such as AQIM, were mainly considered to have originated outside the country, the JNIM appeared to be firmly rooted in a specifically Malian narrative, making it much more difficult to eradicate using security measures alone. The ability of the JNIM to establish a support network among the local population is essential to its enduring presence despite its targeting by national, regional and international forces.⁷ The very definition of the JNIM—as a terrorist group, as a political and security actor, as drug traffickers, or as a group of bandits, according to the context or the people spoken to—indicates its multiple roles in both society and the local economy, and also in the balance of power between security actors.

The response—beyond security operations

Since 2012 the international community, regional actors and the Malian state have mobilized considerable resources to counteract the jihadist threat in Mali. Over several decades before 2012, France and the United States mobilized considerable military resources to reinforce the security system of the countries of the Sahel, particularly Mali (through e.g. the Sahel Plan and the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership, TSCTP).⁸ Since January 2013 the French forces of Operation Serval and then Operation Barkhane have led counterterrorism operations in Mali and beyond. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has reinforced its ability to obtain intelligence and confront the terrorist groups. More recently, since 2014 the G5 Sahel Joint Force has been tasked with leading operations in the areas bordering Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso to prevent the jihadist groups from exploiting the border areas for their own benefit.⁹

However, the security responses have not yet succeeded in preventing the embedding of the jihadist groups. Even worse, these military operations have not been supported by the population as a whole, and some of the security forces have also committed abuses. Re-establishment of the legitimacy of security interventions must be based on an accurate and frank analysis of the current perceptions of the role of the state among the population and the way in which this role can respond to local needs. Indeed, this phenomenon of long-term embedding of armed groups in the population is not accidental: structural, cultural and ideological factors explain how these actors

⁷ Thiam, A., *Centre du Mali: enjeux et dangers d'une crise négligée négligée* [Central Mali: issues and dangers of a neglected crisis] (Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire: Geneva, Mar. 2017).

⁸ The TSCTP and the Sahel Plan are examples of policies for securing the Sahel that are financed and initiated by international partners but that have had little effect locally, despite the finance provided.

⁹ In 2014, 5 Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) founded the G5 Sahel, an institution with the aim of strengthening cooperation of the Sahel countries in security and development, particularly around the border regions. The G5 Joint Force was set up to lead operations on both sides of common borders.



Figure 1.1. Map of Mali and its main regions

Credit: Ahlenius, H., Nordpil, 2019.

have succeeded in claiming political or social legitimacy to win the support of the population.

Methods and targets of the research

This report aims to improve knowledge of the local effect of the presence of the armed groups on the population of central and northern Mali. To do so, it analyses the interactions as a reciprocal dynamic. On the one hand, it aims to understand the strategies of these groups to obtain local support and thus establish a logistical base for their operations. On the other hand, it considers the ways in which certain segments of the population adapt to this presence in order to promote their own security, social, community or economic interests.

The framework of the analysis is therefore wide. Not only does it include the security consequences of the presence of the armed groups in a context marked by everyday instability, it also considers the economic, social and political links formed between the population and these widely varying actors, who, in the eyes of the population, cannot be reduced to the simple identity of ‘armed actors’. This report also aims to take into account a historical perspective: the armed groups have changed in the

course of their existence and may, in turn, develop political, economic, security or social rationales that evolve over time, without being confined to a stable identity.

This report is based both on a literature review of the main publications on security in Mali and in the subregion and on research in the field to collect perceptions of the various segments of the population in three areas: the towns of Djenné and Ténenkou (in Mopti region) and in Timbuktu and the surrounding areas.¹⁰ These areas were selected at a methodological framing workshop organized on 28 January 2019 to provide a comparative approach. They were analysed using tools for data collection and identification of target populations, based on precisely formulated research questions. These tools were then translated into the main local languages of Fulfulde, Bambara, and Teyaxo or Bozo.

Over three weeks between 28 February and 26 March 2019, 39 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 10 in Djenné, 10 in Ténenkou and 19 in Timbuktu (see figure 1.1).

To create a representative sample, different social and occupational categories (agriculturalists, stock farmers, political leaders, religious leaders, notables, state agents, agents of non-governmental organizations, women, young people, etc.) were interviewed. However, one limitation of this study should be highlighted: the gender factor is under-represented. The research guidelines stated that it was desirable for one-third of the interviewees to be women. However, it was only possible to interview six women, that is, 15% of all interviewees (39). This was mainly due to the socio-cultural realities of the area, which only rarely allowed an interview between a man (the delegated researcher in this case) and a woman. The average age of the interviewees was 51 years. In a context of suspicion and mistrust between communities, the field researcher also made informal observations, particularly at *grins* (places where people of the same generation gather together around tea or card tables).

This report attempts to describe and analyse the population's perceptions of the dynamics that allow the armed groups to compete with the state in various parts of Mali. It is intended to derive operational conclusions that can compensate for the deficiencies of a purely security-focused approach. It is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 first describes the presence of the armed groups and their role. The engagement of numerous security actors in Mali, and the negotiation of the 2015 peace agreement, made it necessary to identify specific, structured groups despite the fluidity of alliances dictated by community or interpersonal interests. This chapter compares these categorizations of the armed groups with the way they are actually perceived by the populations. It also highlights the strategies developed by armed groups of each category (i.e. signatories of the Peace Accord, jihadist groups and self-defence groups) to legitimize themselves among local communities. Although particular attention is paid to the jihadist groups, the artificial nature of the categorizations of the armed groups has compelled a widening of the range of the research to compare the discourses and strategies of the various actors in the armed conflict in the three areas studied.

Chapter 3 examines the social changes brought about by these groups in the localities where they operate. In addition to the various security implications, the presence of these groups and their strategies of alliance with certain groups or individuals—and their opposition to others—have a significant effect on power balances at the local level. In other words, the presence of the armed groups reinforces or weakens, depending on circumstances, the predominance of custom, religious law or other local modes of governance. The violent nature of the armed groups also changes the economic and

¹⁰ This field research was conducted by Galy Cissé, a social anthropologist and doctoral student at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands.

political relations between generations and socio-economic groups, resulting in new security, economic and social configurations in the areas studied.

Finally, the concluding chapter (chapter 4) identifies the responses made by the state and the actors intervening in Mali and highlights their shortcomings or how they fail to adapt to local contexts and realities. It ends with a number of recommendations that may make it possible to confront the security challenges facing the country in a more sustainable way.

2. The governance of armed groups in central and northern Mali

The crisis of 2012 and the role of non-state armed groups

The post-colonial Malian state was the setting for the establishment of non-state armed groups, starting with the first rebellion, called the Tuareg rebellion, in 1963. Since then, Mali has undergone four major rebellions.¹¹ These were all originally initiated by the Tuaregs in the north but progressively involved other neighbouring communities: Arab, Songhai or Fulani.¹² The most significant of these rebellions started in 2012. It is the most serious because of the unprecedented extent of the acts of violence but is also the most complex owing to the claims of the different groups involved and the hybrid nature of the violent actors (rebel groups, 'pro-independence' groups and terrorist groups). This crisis arose from the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011 and the return to Mali of former Tuareg legionnaires, originally from the north of the country. It also took place in a context of chronic weakening of the central Malian state since the 1990s and the structural adjustment plans that reduced the government's ability to implement policies for reforming state services.¹³

Following the violent conflicts of 2012 and the subsequent collapse of the Malian armed forces (Forces armées maliennes, FAMA), the armed groups leading the Tuareg rebellion were briefly able to take control of the three regions of the country that make up northern Mali (Timbuktu, Kidal and Gao), known as Azawad. In the wake of this occupation—in reaction or opposition to it—other movements of an ethnic, regional and sectarian nature also appeared. An amorphous collection of jihadist-inspired groups, politico-military groups supporting or opposing the creation of Azawad and armed groups aiming to protect criminal trafficking formed, with the goal of controlling certain territories. This situation eventually plunged the north of the country into a vicious circle of violence between rival armed groups.

Although central Mali was not entirely part of the territory of Azawad, it was not spared from this phenomenon. Since 2012, Mopti region has undergone periods of occupation by several armed groups, each one negotiating or imposing its presence by exploiting alliances or other opportunities for embedding itself.¹⁴ The confused reorganization of the local security environment caused a rise in the levels of insecurity and criminality, including robbery of traders, cattle rustling, targeted attacks on community leaders, intercommunal conflicts, and so on. In this extraordinarily fragile setting, some Malian communities chose to ally themselves with newly created groups such as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'ouest, MUJAO) to defend their interests and provide a counterweight to other armed groups considered to be competitors.¹⁵

¹¹ The first rebellion took place in the wake of independence, in 1963, under the one-party Socialist regime. It was suppressed by the FAMA. The second, launched in 1990, was led by young Tuaregs who had returned from Libya. On 23 May 2006, the third rebellion was initiated by the Democratic Alliance for Change with the aim of combining the demands of the Tuaregs of northern Mali. Finally, the fourth and most recent rebellion is that of 2012, which has not yet reached its conclusion, and eventually spread to the centre of the country.

¹² The Tuaregs name themselves Kel Tagelmust ('those who wear the veil'), Kel Tamashek ('those of the Tamashek language') or Imajeren ('the free men'). Their long turbans, dyed with indigo which rubs off on to the skin, have earned them the nickname of 'the blue men' in the West. But they are more generally called Tuaregs ('the isolated ones'), a term that the Arab Muslim conquerors gave from the 7th century onwards to these people who took refuge in the desert rather than submit.

¹³ Thioly, B., 'Mali: les Touaregs, un peuple dans la tourmente' [Mali: Touaregs, a people in turmoil], *L'Express*, 25 Jan. 2013.

¹⁴ Sangaré, B., *Centre du Mali: épice de djihadisme?* [Central Mali: the epicentre of jihadism?] (Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security: Brussels, 20 May 2016).

¹⁵ MUJAO occupied the *cercle* (district) of Douentza in Sep. 2012 to disarm a self-defence group accused of having killed a young Arab. It then established itself there until the launch of Operation Serval in Jan. 2012.

However, the territory controlled by the armed groups is constantly changing, depending on the fluctuating balance of power between the various groups, their ability to win local legitimacy and their willingness to oust competing groups in any given territory. In the absence of the state, the support of the local population and its willingness to accept the presence of an armed group are therefore crucial factors. To establish itself in the longer term, an armed group must base its dominance on a number of non-security 'services': by offering basic services to the population, by invoking a legitimacy grounded on identity with a particular community or by mobilizing a more general discourse of rejection of the state.

Categorization of the influential armed groups and their areas of intervention

To try to resolve the 2012 crisis, the negotiations that led up to the 2015 Peace Accord resulted in the formation of coalitions of armed groups. This process of formalization was considered to be essential in order to identify the parties to contact for negotiations and to define the respective positions of the various actors. Three coalitions of armed groups in the north of the country signed the Peace Accord or were included in the subsequent process: the CMA, the Platform and the CME. The first two were signatories, with the government, of the Peace Accord. The CME joined the process in 2017.

The members of the CMA are the MNLA led by Bilal ag Acherif, the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad, HCUA) represented by Alghabass ag Intalla, and the Arab Movement of Azawad (Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad, MAA) of Sidi Ibrahim Ould Sidati. The CMA has a revolving presidency. The formation of each of the CMA members is a simultaneous response to local, identity and security considerations. For example, the creation of the HCUA enabled Alghabass ag Intallah, as a leading member of the Tuareg Ifoghas tribe, to establish his legitimacy within his group and make his community stand out from other groups with a Salafist allegiance. This protected it against a confrontation with the French forces, which could not accept the establishment of openly Salafist groups.¹⁶

However, disagreements arise prompted by community concerns or when the individual ambitions of the leaders of each group cause them to seek greater visibility. Break-ups or recompositions of alliances are therefore frequent. For example, there are two breakaway groups from the CMA: the Congress for Justice in Azawad (Congrès pour la justice dans l'Azawad, CJA) led by Oumar Sididjè Traoré and a faction of the Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements and Fronts (Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance, CMFPR-II) led by Ibrahim A. Kontao.

The Platform is made up of the Coordination of Patriotic Resistance Movements and Fronts (Coordination des mouvements et fronts patriotiques de résistance, CMFPR) led by Harouna Toureh, a faction of the MAA led by Sidi Mohamed Ould Mohamed resulting from a split from the CMA, the Imghad Self-Defence Group and Allies (Groupe d'autodéfense des Touaregs Imghad et leurs allies, GATIA) led by Fahad ag Almahmoud, the Movement for the Defence of the Homeland (Mouvement pour la défense de la Patrie, MDP) led by Hama Founé Diallo, and since July 2019 the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement pour le salut de l'Azawad, MSA) led by Moussa ag Acharatoumane.

The CME consists of movements that refuse to define themselves as members of either the pro-independence camp or the loyalist camp. It was founded on 11 November

¹⁶ Maïga, I., *Groupes armés au Mali: au-delà des étiquettes* [Armed groups in Mali: beyond the labels], West Africa Report, no. 17 (Institute for Security Studies: Pretoria, June 2016), p. 3.

2017 by dissidents from the CMA and the Platform who demanded to be included in the implementation of the Peace Accord. It is made up of a faction of the Congress for Justice in Azawad (CJA2) led by Hama ag Mahmoud, the Coalition of the Azawad People (Coalition du peuple de l'Azawad, CPA) led by Med Ousmane ag Mohamedoune, a faction of the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA2) led by Ala ag Elmehdi, and the Popular Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (Mouvement populaire pour le salut de l'Azawad, MPSA) led by Boubacar Ould Taleb.

Although these movements are identified by their membership of one of the two (or three) major coalitions mentioned above and their claims to be pro-independence or pro-government, it is important to remember that many other rationales underlie their activities. The personal ambitions of the leaders of these groups should not be disregarded. Neither should the motive of territorial control by a group claiming to represent a particular community, which may, in reaction, lead to the formation of new groups by the members of competing communities. For example, the two factions of the MAA (in the CMA and the Platform) are split along tribal lines. This type of reaction extends to economic factors, notably those concerning the control of trade routes passing through northern Mali. Thus, the official demarcations between groups are not perceived so prominently within communities; considerations of personal, family or community alliances often take priority over the declared political aims of the groups.

In fact, most of the groups are characterized as much by their community or territorial allegiance as by their political choices. Recruitment takes place collectively, on a community basis, or individually. In the first case, the community contributes to the military effort by offering manpower to the armed group or a contribution in kind or of cash. In the second case, engagement with a group is the result of an individual choice, which may differ from the majority in that individual's community.¹⁷

Finally, many groups simply lie outside the frameworks for dialogue set up by the 2015 Peace Accord, including terrorist groups, self-defence militias and groups established mainly to protect interests associated with trafficking. In particular, the JNIM, which emerged in March 2017, combined various jihadist *katibas* (combat groups) that were present in northern Mali during the 2012 crisis (some of which had been established in Mali since the 1990s). It was originally perceived as primarily bringing together the rear bases of groups operating in northern Africa (in Algeria, Western Sahara and Libya). However, the presence of these groups in Mali gradually led to the growth of links between combatants and local populations. For example, several jihadist leaders have married Malian women to benefit from the networks and protection of their spouses' tribes. Over time, these jihadist groups have recruited more and more from the Malian population, as shown by the identity of the people appearing in their propaganda videos and by the language used in these messages (which was traditionally Arabic, but is now also Tamashek or Fulfulde).

Central Mali: the appearance of 'new' groups involved in local conflict dynamics

Central Mali has been increasingly affected by the conflict that originated in northern Mali in 2012. Two main categories of armed group can be discerned here: the jihadists and the self-defence groups. In Mopti region, mobilization against the state arose before the recent security crisis. Since the dictatorial regime of President

¹⁷ Bleck, J., Boisvert, M. A. and Sangaré, B., 'I joined to save my people: children and non-state armed groups in Mali', eds S. O'Neil and K. Van Broeckhoven, *Cradled by Conflict: Child Involvement with Armed Groups in Contemporary Conflict* (United Nations University: New York, 2018).

Moussa Traoré (1968–91) and also during the democratic era, state agents have been perceived as being incapable of meeting the needs of the population, or even as being predators and disrupters of the traditional economic and social balances. In addition to this rejection of the state, social pressures also undermined these customary power balances, thereby doubling the complexity of the situation. Although these conflicts of governance were formerly settled by the regular renegotiation of power relations, the rise in violence and the presence of armed groups no longer allow these kinds of transaction and rebalancing to take place easily. The jihadist groups have been able to include themselves in these social disputes in support of some of the contesting groups, which in return has led other competing groups to arm themselves in order to confront them.

A clear example of this process is represented by *Katiba Macina*, one of the Salafist jihadist groups that formed the JNIM in March 2017. Its main leader is Hamadoun Kouffa (also known as Amadou Koufa and Amadou Diallo), a Fulani from Mopti region ('Macina' is a reference to the Fulani empire of Macina, 1818–53, in what is now Mopti region). He advocates a fundamentalist Salafist form of Islam. Many young Fulani have joined this *katiba* for security and social reasons, rather than for ideological or religious motives. Thus, the researcher Boukary Sangaré considers that 'The jihadism of the Fulani in central Mali is explained by profound social changes, which underlie social unrest among certain groups and which eventually become radicalized'.¹⁸ According to him, a trend has appeared to develop over several months in central Mali: the initial, purely local, motivations for attachment to jihadist groups seem to become more ideological, a trend that results in a challenge to the Malian state and to modernity in general. Jihadist propaganda, which advocates rejection of the state and emancipation from the social hierarchies resulting from colonization, thus finds a more 'natural' reception among the agropastoral Fulani than in other ethnic groups.¹⁹

In reaction to the increase in these community demands, supported and galvanized by the jihadists, other communities have felt the need to arm themselves to defend their interests. Those known as 'self-defence groups' in the centre of the country are organized on a community basis, including the Donsos (mainly composed of Bambaras), the Dan na Ambassagou group (of Dogons) and the Sékou Bolly group (of Fulani). The first two groups represent traditional hunting societies, as shown by the names Donsos and Dan na, which mean 'hunters' in the Bamanankan and Dogoso languages, respectively. However, unlike traditional hunting groups, which are usually mainly armed with hand-made guns (Lassassi, Baikal, etc.), these two self-defence groups have military weapons. The Sékou Bolly group (named after a Fulani businessman) has formed a relatively loose alliance with the MSA and mainly consists of former MUJAO members. It was created in response to a government offer to all members of jihadist groups that wanted to join the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process in central Mali.

In most cases, the main factor in the creation of these self-defence groups is insecurity and the need to defend the interests of the ethnic or regional identity groups that they represent. Even the representatives of the state sometimes try to obtain the protection of these groups.²⁰ According to an interviewee in Djenné:

¹⁸ Sangaré (note 14).

¹⁹ Since the major droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, the Fulani have been living on the margins of Malian society, despite the development policies implemented by the state and its partners. They have been able to develop a degree of autonomy but have also accumulated frustrations and grievances against the state, which is seen as predatory. This partly explains their allegiance to the jihadist groups.

²⁰ Many of the interviewees in Djenné and Ténenkou consider that the militias benefit from the tacit support of state agents. They say that, despite measures to restrict the riding of motorcycles, which are widely used for committing attacks, the members of self-defence groups can infringe this rule in full view of all. Meanwhile, other civilians who

Officially, the Malian authorities say that they are against the presence of the hunters, but unofficially they collaborate with them. They get the hunters to escort them when they travel. Before the hunters arrived, the Prefect himself did not sleep at home, and the FDS [Forces de défense et de sécurité, Defence and Security Forces (i.e. gendarmes and national guards)] did not wear their uniforms. The Prefect, Sub-Prefect and Judge slept in the city. With the arrival of the hunters, the fear changed sides. Unofficially, the authorities are on their side and collaborate in several ways. They support them. The hunters ride motorcycles and go wherever they want, even in prohibited areas [despite the prohibition on motorcycles and vehicles in the area as part of the Dambé counterterrorism operation]. Recently, the FDS appealed to the hunters to recover its vehicle that had been captured by the terrorists during a confrontation in Matomo commune.²¹

Thus, the Malian state plays an important part in the embedding of these groups, while also losing its position as a neutral actor, which further complicates the situation.

Legitimation strategies of the armed groups

The armed groups were also able to win the trust of the population by offering a number of basic services in a context in which the state struggles to provide security, education or healthcare for the Malian population. However, as noted in a recent report by the International Crisis Group, the armed groups have, overall, provided only limited services, confined to the administration of ‘everyday’ justice or the provision of financial or logistical support to populations in difficulties.²²

The extremist groups have certainly succeeded in competing with the state among what are considered to be the most marginalized classes of the population (i.e. nomadic pastoralists, rural populations isolated from urban centres and young people). Thus, in the Inner Niger Delta, Katiba Macina has had to deal with recurrent conflicts between villages that could not be settled by official justice. It was able to recover and restore stolen cattle to their owners after *razzias* (cattle raids).²³ Encouraged by this success, the armed groups recommended non-payment of taxes and civil disobedience of Malian state law. In some parts of central Mali, the jihadists even discouraged the registration of infants in the civil registries, thus depriving them of any legal existence.²⁴

The jihadist groups—Katiba Macina, Ansar ul Islam and Islamic State among others—that operate on the Mali–Burkina Faso and Mali–Niger frontiers were even able to reactivate an anti-elite, anti-state and pro-pastoralist sentiment that existed before their arrival.²⁵ While ostensibly discussing global themes—the struggle against the supremacy of the West, solidarity with Middle Eastern movements or liberation from French influence—these groups adopt a local political discourse in line with the expectations of the population. In this way, they are able to adapt their tactics to local customs while preserving the main principles of their Salafist ideology, notably in terms of governance.²⁶

This tactical skill has appeared in different forms at different times. During the 1990s and 2000s, the presence of the armed groups was mainly motivated by the need to establish rear bases to support their aims in North Africa, mainly in Algeria and

are not members of Donsos, especially the Fulani, pay the price of this prohibition, which creates difficulties in their daily activities.

²¹ Interview with a community leader in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

²² International Crisis Group (ICG), *Speaking with the ‘Bad Guys’: Towards Dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists*, Africa Report no. 271, (ICG: Brussels, 28 May 2019).

²³ Interview with a leading citizen of Ténenkou, Mar. 2019.

²⁴ This position was adopted by the jihadists in a 2018 video, according to interviewees, in a sermon given at a Fulani village in Douentza *cercle*. The sermon, in Arabic, was translated into Fulfulde at an assembly of the whole village.

²⁵ Benjaminsen, T. A. and Ba, B., ‘Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 46 no. 1 (2016), pp. 1–20.

²⁶ Lounnas, D., ‘Al-Qaïda au Maghreb islamique et la crise malienne’ [Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Malian crisis], *Sécurité Globale*, no. 20 (Feb. 2012), pp 43–58.

Western Sahara.²⁷ Since the Malian crisis of 2012, groups such as AQIM and MUJAO have had the opportunity to widen their territorial footprint to new areas, including the urban centres of Timbuktu and Gao. This extension has induced their leaders to formulate a more precise agenda around the application of Salafist doctrine. As well as drawing up new rules for local governance, they have organized the provision of basic services. In 2013 France's Operation Serval brought these experiments in governance to an end. In central Mali, where the jihadists became established in a more localized way, through prominent individuals such as Hamadoun Kouffa, and in a more progressive way, mainly through the control of rural areas, their presence was initially based on the shortcomings of the state in resolving everyday problems.

In addition to replacing a failing state against a background of long-standing intercommunal conflicts, the armed groups were also able to exploit ideas of identity and history to further legitimize their presence. Although it tries not to admit it, Katiba Macina has positioned itself as the protector of the Fulani community from which it emerged. This clear support from the jihadists of Katiba Macina has reinforced the general sense among the other communities that the Fulani are the natural heirs of the jihadist tradition.²⁸ In fact, the jihadists have been able to exploit this idea by incorporating these identity-based and religious reference points into their message.²⁹ In February 2019 the leader of Katiba Macina, Hamadoun Kouffa, also called on the Fulani of West Africa to unite in order to ensure the triumph of jihad in the region, while mentioning these historical references at every opportunity.³⁰

The need for self-defence and the militarization of community demands

In addition to the other armed groups, community-based militias have become major actors in Mali as a result of the security crisis.³¹ Originally denoting citizens mobilized occasionally by the state to support the regular forces, the term 'militia' has now taken on a broader meaning to designate various groups operating in Mali. These armed groups have little in common and are under central command to only a small degree—they respond to local dynamics rather than to a clearly structured hierarchy. This makes them difficult to control, and attempts at mediation, which would require strong leadership on their part, only rarely succeed in effectively curbing their actions on the ground. Thus, their local power combined with the weakness of their leadership has led these militias to engage in predatory behaviour.³² It also means that there is no clear political agenda on which to base negotiations that could lead to their disarmament.

For instance, the Dogon militia Dan na Ambassagou ('the hunters who trust in God') on the Dogon Plateau and of the Donsos, who are traditional hunters, in the Niger Bend region of Mali were created to make up for the inability of the FAMA to protect the

²⁷ Pernin, C. and Sayad, H., 'Le Sahel: terrain de jeu d'Al-Qaïda au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI)', *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, no. 255 (July–Sep. 2011).

²⁸ Historically, the Fulani were the founders of theocratic empires in sub-Saharan Africa (the Sultanate of Sokoto, the Fulani empire of Macina and the Imamate of Futa Jallon), and the promoters of the project to Islamize 'pagan Africa'. The Fulani are therefore still seen as the progenitors of Islam in Africa.

²⁹ Oumar Ba-Konaré, D. A., 'Entre faux djihadistes et faux chasseurs traditionnels, les civils piégés dans le centre du mali' [Between fake jihadists and traditional fake hunters, civilians trapped in central Mali], *The Conversation*, 22 Oct. 2018.

³⁰ Roger, B., 'Mali: Amadou Koufa, le visage peul d'Al-Qaïda' [Mali: Amadou Koufa, the Fulani face of al-Qaeda], *Jeune Afrique*, 20 Nov. 2018, accessed 20 Apr. 2019.

³¹ Tounkara, A., 'L'émergence de groupes d'autodéfense au centre du Mali: violence et déficit de l'État' [The emergence of self-defense groups in central Mali: violence and state deficit], *Preva-Net*, 4 Feb. 2019.

³² Debos, M., 'Milices et sous-traitance de l'insécurité', eds B. Badie and D. Vidal, *État du Monde 2015 : Nouvelles Guerres* [State of the World 2015: New Wars] (La Découverte: Paris, 2014).

communities.³³ These groups were not necessarily formed in a total security vacuum: they are supported or tolerated by the authorities, and sometimes they even replace the FDS and the justice services.³⁴

Poorly trained and led, these militias also commit serious abuses against communities considered to belong to the enemy camp. A MINUSMA report records human rights violations committed by the Dozo traditional hunter group in the village of Koumaga (Djenné *cercle*) on 23–25 June 2018. This attack followed many others committed by the same Dozos against civilians since early 2018. Members of the Fulani community, who are accused of complicity with the armed groups, have been systematically targeted. They paid a high price in the Koumaga attack alone, with 24 civilians killed, including 5 children, and 3 people abducted.³⁵ A massacre at Ogossagou on 23 March 2019 caused the death of 157 people, while reprisals have targeted Dogon villages in a cycle of violence in which civilians have been the main victims.

As shown above, community-based groups have been created in response to security, political and economic considerations. But once they are created, these groups eventually reshape these considerations and militarize them. Consequently, the use of violence becomes systematic, triggering a vicious circle of communities arming themselves and the demand for protection.

Perceptions of armed groups by the populations of the north and the centre

When the groups signing the Peace Accord are not differentiated from the terrorist groups: six of one and half a dozen of the other!

Most of the interviewees from Timbuktu found it hard to tell the difference between the groups that signed the 2015 Peace Accord and those labelled as terrorists, jihadists or drug traffickers. Thus, the distinctions drawn at the international and national levels are not necessarily perceived by individuals at the local level. The Peace Accord has created ‘acceptable’ groups which, in fact, abuse their power and are not automatically legitimized in their respective localities. An imam from Timbuktu put it directly: ‘Those who are called jihadists, terrorists, rebels and so on are all bandits. It’s six of one and half a dozen of the other.’³⁶ Most of the interviewees in Timbuktu considered some members of the signatory groups to be terrorists. They also mentioned people who do not belong to any group, perhaps because they had been excluded or had grievances against the groups, but who hold weapons and commit acts of banditry.³⁷ A history teacher at a secondary school in Timbuktu agreed wholeheartedly: ‘Most of the population do not trust these armed groups. These groups do not even trust each other, so there is even less reason for people to trust them. They attack and kill each other. Why should the people have any trust in them?’³⁸

³³ After the massacre of Ogossagou in Mar. 2019, with the death of 157 Fulani civilians, the government in an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers on 24 Mar. 2019, dissolved the Dan na Ambassadorou Association that created the Dogon militia. On the ground, the militia is resisting and threatens to attack the state if an attempt is made to disarm it. Thus, it is demanding from the state an effective guarantee of protection of the populations before any disarmament initiative.

³⁴ Many of the interviewees in Ténenkou and Djenné insist that the MAFa collaborate with the traditional hunters who set themselves up as protectors of their communities against the extremist groups.

³⁵ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘Rapport sur les abus des droits de l’homme commis dans le village de Koumaga, Cercle de Djenné, région de Mopti, 23–25 Juin 2018’ [Report on human rights abuse committed in the village of Koumaga, Djenné *cercle*, Mopti region], Dec. 2018.

³⁶ Interview with an imam from Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

³⁷ Interview with a young leader from Timbuktu, Mar. 2019.

³⁸ Interview with a history teacher in Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

The delay in implementing the Peace Accord is a burden for some of the signatory armed groups that can no longer control their members. Interviewees in Timbuktu complained of the mounting insecurity and highlighted the groups waiting for the DDR process to start. The president of a women's organization in Timbuktu considered that:

The armed groups have a bad image because they have trapped people in the city against their will. Those who tried to leave and were captured have suffered all kinds of torture before reaching Douentza or Goundam. It is as though we were in a maze from which we can no longer escape . . . Boats are stopped because of the fall in the water level in the river, there are no commercial flights, vehicles are turned back, and armed attacks happen in the city centre every day. Only the Arab traders, who are armed, respond to their attackers and chase the thieves.³⁹

The 'communitization' of armed groups in central Mali

In central Mali, individual perceptions of the armed groups varied widely among the interviewees. Whether or not they can legitimately claim to represent particular communities, the leaders of the armed groups do in fact belong to specific communities, and they are identified in a corresponding way by the population. For this reason, most interviewees thought that the Katiba Macina is a Fulani jihadist group and that the Donso militia is a Bambara militia, despite these groups' efforts to convince others that they are fighting on behalf of all Malians (and the fact that the Katiba Macina, for example, does not recruit just from the Fulani). However, this 'ethnicization' of the way that these groups are perceived by individuals is progressive: at first the idea of defending the settlement or the village is dominant, and the ethnic identity only comes later. A retired official summed it up soberly but clearly: 'How groups are assessed depends on ethnic identity.'⁴⁰

It should be added that this mixture of the community identity of groups, political demands and pragmatic considerations of self-defence varies over time and is based on a balance that the armed groups themselves find difficult to manage. In 2012, when the pro-independence groups occupied northern Mali, not all Tuaregs were in favour of demanding independence for Azawad. Influential Tuareg voices such as those of Mohamed ag Hamani, a former prime minister, or Zéidane ag Sidalamine, a former presidential adviser, spoke out against the attribution of this demand to the entire Tuareg community, which they believed was unreasonable. The backlash against the pro-independence groups is what motivated the creation of GATIA and the establishment of self-defence groups representing sedentary ethnic groups (as opposed to the semi-nomadic Tuaregs), which both weakened the pro-independence groups and diversified the armed groups representing the tribes and communities. This fragmentation also played into the hands of the state, which during the rebellion of the 1990s was able to encourage the creation of identity-based armed groups in order to weaken the main groups making separatist or regionalist demands.

³⁹ Interview with the president of a women's organization in Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁴⁰ Interview with a retired official in Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

3. Social change generated by armed groups

Identity, power and resources in Mali

The question of whether the state can have an effective presence in the entire territory of Mali is regularly raised by analyses that try to explain the persistence of conflicts in Mali and the ability of non-state armed groups to embed themselves there.⁴¹ Before considering this question, it is important to first question the very definition of the state in its Malian incarnation and to identify how it manifests itself at the local level.⁴²

In fact, the Malian state is not a uniform, stable entity. Provision of its various services in areas that are difficult to access requires much effort, and so the coverage of the national territory by these services (education, healthcare, security, justice, etc.) is not easily ensured. The reforms initiated by the Malian Government in the 1990s—notably decentralization but also the reform of the Land Code and constitutional amendments—have certainly had an important effect on the perception of the presence of the state by the communities in central and northern Mali. The reforms reinforced local customary practices by integrating them into the state apparatus. They thereby reduced the legitimacy of parallel legal action for the populations that challenged these customary norms. Thus, the reinforcement of the state's capacity to acknowledge local cultural diversity was counterbalanced by its partial exclusion, since this acknowledgement provided backing for certain non-consensual customary norms.

Mali has therefore decided to operate with a hybrid system of governance: while reaffirming the primacy of the state and its essential prerogatives, it has also chosen to co-opt traditional and local authorities and subcontract the management of day-to-day affairs to them. This lies in contradiction to its slogan of unity: 'One people, one goal, one faith'.

Forms of land management, for example, are strongly based on customary norms. In central Mali, the Fulani empire of Macina founded by Sékou Amadou (a Fulani *marabout*) in the 19th century is emblematic of the territories called *leydi* (plural *leyde* in the Fulfulde language). The political and economic management of the *leyde*—including pastoral resources such as the *bourgoutières* (water meadows) that are essential for cattle feeding—has been entrusted to families (particularly the Diowros) who still hold customary power. The researchers Maria Brossier, Cédric Jourde and Modibo Ghaly Cissé have carried out a meticulous analysis of this practice.⁴³ The functions of a Diowro are concerned with land, justice, taxation and representation, and are carried out in a *leydi*.⁴⁴ In the course of the land reforms, the power of these elites was confirmed by the state, notably in 1981, which conferred an official role to enhance their traditional legitimacy.⁴⁵

This hybrid (state and traditional) resource management aims to combine the various forms of legitimacy of governance in Mali. However, the negative aspect of this practice is that, by reinforcing the power of customary elites and establishing a form of

⁴¹ Berganaschi, I., 'Collapsed, failed, criminalized? Notes on the state in Mali', *African Arguments*, 15 Aug. 2013.

⁴² Youssef, I. A. et al., 'Etude 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 the northern regions of Mali (Tombuktu, Gao, Kidal)], Report of the Presidency of Mali, Mar. 2012.

⁴³ Brossier, M., Jourde, C. and Cissé, M. G., *Relations de pouvoir locales, logiques de violence et participation politique en milieu peul (Région de Mopti): Rapport de Projet 'Stabiliser le Mali'* [Local power relations, logic of violence and political participation in Peul (Mopti Region): Report of the 'Stabilizing Mali' project], Centre Francopaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix (Université du Québec à Montréal: Montreal, May 2018).

⁴⁴ Kintz, D., 'Archétypes politiques peuls' [Peul political archetypes], *Journal des Africanistes*, vol. 55, no. 1-2 (1985).

⁴⁵ Barrière, O. and Barrière, C., *Un droit à inventer : Foncier et environnement dans le delta intérieur du Niger (Mali)* [A right to invent: land and environment in the Inner Niger Delta (Mali)] (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, IRD, Éditions: Paris, 2002).

management of these resources that is more stable and enshrined in law, negotiations about resources become more difficult for groups that are not part of this elite. Such a practice also implies that a group that claims rights to the management of these resources can appeal to history to legitimize its claim. Discourses on native versus non-native identities are then developed to make claims of relationships to the land, which may confer political rights in local governance. The armed groups operating in the areas where governance is contested have been able to insert themselves into these contested claims and to become the spokespersons for this community discourse.

In interviews carried out for this study, the importance of this historic legitimacy was clearly seen: the Fulani people in Macina who are not native to the communities in which they have settled—originating from Seeno, Nampalari, the Hayré or Tiooki—are strongly believed to be foreigners, even if they were born in Macina.⁴⁶ Moreover, in some cases, the elected leaders of their original local authorities have travelled to Macina to collect taxes from them. For example, prior to 2012 the mayor of Ouenkoro (Bankass *cercle*) would customarily travel to collect taxes from a strong Ouenkoro community in Djenné *cercle*. This non-native status means that the Fulani of this community, even though they have settled there, must always pay usage fees to access pastoral resources such as the *bourgoutières*. For such people who remain non-native despite being settled for many years, the traditional management of resources (and therefore of power), superimposed on state land law and decentralization, is a cause of marginalization. This explains why they have sought to contest a form of local governance that is considered to be discriminatory. This exclusive management of power relations and local governance, which prioritizes the ‘natives’, is used by the armed groups, in this case jihadists, to mobilize those excluded from the community and to invite them to join their ranks to fight against the status quo.

More generally, the political reforms undertaken at the national level since the advent of democracy in 1992 have had major repercussions for some traditional chiefdoms. The latter, formerly considered to hold traditional legitimacy, have progressively lost their prerogatives because of their relationships with the previous administrative and political authorities. Consequently, the electoral processes have made it possible to express opposition to these chiefdoms. In other localities, however, where the legitimate chief has died and if no consensus is reached, the legacy of the traditional chiefdom has been transferred by electoral means under the supervision of a state representative. The chiefs emerging as a result of these elections have not necessarily won a legitimacy and credibility equal to those who had obtained authority patrilineally and in accordance with tradition. In this context, the influx of armed groups has been an opportunity for the marginalized people and groups to ally with the newcomers to contest, or replace, the local authorities whose power has been questioned for some time.

State intervention: interference in local divisions by intermediary non-state security actors

The integration of informal mechanisms into managing basic state services has also taken place in the field of security. During rebellions, the Malian Government has encouraged, and even supported, the formation of militias that serve its interests in central Mali and the Gourma region. The aim of this is to win the support of auxiliaries familiar with the areas and aware of local dynamics; this has taken place since the 1990s. For example, the Ganda Koy militia, originating from the Songhai community,

⁴⁶ The Seeno, the Nampalari, the Hayré and the Tiooki are lands attached to the localities of Bankass, Nampala, Douentza and Goundam, respectively.

first emerged during the armed conflict triggered by the Tuareg rebellion of 1990. After an amnesty, the officers of the Ganda Koy, who were mainly from the ranks of the FAMa, were also reintegrated into the regular army.⁴⁷ Similarly, during the 2012 crisis, these militias were reactivated to support the failing FAMa.⁴⁸ Others have appeared, such as GATIA, that can operate in areas of major strategic importance that the regular forces find difficult to control by themselves. These militias, informal but rapidly assimilated into parastate groups, have been trained, formed and equipped by the government (often discreetly) to oppose the influence of other groups considered less favourable to the central power. These tactical alliances between state authorities and armed groups have been generally made official under the 2015 Peace Accord, which shared out assigned roles to each, as revealed by an officer of the Timbuktu prefecture interviewed for this enquiry: ‘The Peace Accord made it possible to identify the actors. In theory, each actor was given its own area of activity.’⁴⁹

The support given to certain groups (military or civilian) at the expense of others has direct consequences for the current situation in central and northern Mali. Because state support is given to groups or individuals who are primarily identified with a particular ethnic group or community, these community-based groups become the holders of official legitimacy. This further strengthens their position in the local power balance. The result is that simply belonging to a community or an ethnic group is gradually interpreted on the local security scene as signifying tacit opposition to, or support of, the state. Thus, the co-opting of informal community groups by the state authorities, which was initially a purely tactical move, has gradually come to be viewed at the local level as a biased measure by the public authorities in their attempt to strengthen certain relationships within communities.

The interviews conducted in the course of this study confirm this view. For example, the Donso movements, active in Djenné *cercle*, are considered legitimate by some inhabitants of the area simply because they conduct operations in support of the FAMa.⁵⁰ Thus, because the state is viewed locally as supporting the communities protected by the Donsos groups, when other communities mobilize against what they see as a new Donso threat, they are immediately assumed to be a new *de facto* opposition to the state.

The challenge to traditional legitimacies by the superimposition of a new external order

Relations between armed groups and the traditional chiefdoms vary from region to region. The nature of these relations is generally determined by the ideology and the political positioning of the group. The armed groups that signed the Peace Accord (the CMA and the Platform) recognize the traditional chiefs and collaborate with them, becoming involved in the local balance of power. Some leaders of these groups frequently also benefit from a traditional legitimacy. This is the case with Mohamed ag Intalla, who is Amenokal of Kidal (chief of the Tuareg Confederation) and president of the HCUA. Others, however, have been able to become heads of their communities because of the power they have acquired with the aid of the armed groups. This is the case, for example, with Moussa ag Acharatoumane, president of the MSA, who has

⁴⁷ Boisvert, M. A., ‘Failing at violence: the longer-lasting impact of pro-government militias in northern Mali since 2012’, *African Security*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2015), pp. 272–98.

⁴⁸ Chauzal, G. and Van Damme, T., *The Roots of Mali’s Conflict: Moving Beyond the 2012 Crisis* (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael: The Hague, 2015).

⁴⁹ Interview with an officer of the Timbuktu prefecture, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁵⁰ Interview with a teacher in Djenné, Mar. 2019.

been able to use his position as military chief to take the role of head of the Daoussahaq Federation in the Ménaka region.⁵¹

Since the onset of the 2012 crisis, some social groups (i.e. nomadic pastoralists and agropastoralists) in the peripheral areas of central Mali, eager for change, have committed themselves to support MUJAO to overturn the power of their traditional chiefs, whom they view as accomplices of the state administration. Many traditional chiefs have therefore been targeted in attacks by this movement in Mondoro and Douentza communes in the Hayré region. In later years, the Katiba Macina has continued these attacks targeting the former traditional authorities in the Inner Niger Delta as well as in the Hayré. For some of the population of these areas, the appearance of armed groups was therefore interpreted as a way of contesting the traditional forms of governance supported by the state apparatus.

The effects of decentralization policies and of the adoption of the Pastoral Charter on the local management of natural resources are central to understanding the attraction of the armed groups for the ‘marginalized’ when these groups challenge the established forms of governance.⁵² The Katiba Macina, in particular, has made this an essential focus of its action. Thus, a leading citizen of Ténenkou explained that ‘The jihadists have greatly changed the social norms and traditional practices. For example, the management of the *bourgoutières* in some pastoral areas is no longer controlled by the Diowros, who have been replaced by other actors (jihadists) who oppose payment for rights of precedence’.⁵³ In return, the presence of jihadists in the Inner Niger Delta has been exploited to change the power relationships between ethnicities, partly as a result of the deterioration of relations between the Diowros and the non-native Fulani clans.⁵⁴ The researcher Adam Thiam echoes this challenge to the status quo when he asserts that ‘The same desire for social advancement inspires some of the recruits of the Hamadoun Kouffa group [i.e. Katiba Macina] who mainly belong to former vassal classes . . . The egalitarian discourse of jihadism strengthens the combatants in their belief that the cause allows them to overcome sociocultural barriers and gain legitimacy.’⁵⁵

These upheavals undermine the established frameworks of coexistence within the community. According to an interviewee in Ténenkou, ‘The jihadists have ridden roughshod over all the values and traditions of the community. Their philosophies do not fit with our tradition. I no longer recognize my community. Ténenkou *cercle* has sunk into violence.’⁵⁶ Conversely, another interviewee from the same place stressed the primary responsibility of the Diowros and added: ‘It was the Diowro that drove many of the stock farmers into the arms of the men of Hamadoun Kouffa, by keeping the precedence revenue for themselves and by mistreating non-native herds passing through their land or staying there; and they were aided in this by state agents, particularly the FDS.’⁵⁷

Whether it deplors or justifies the activities of the jihadists, the population recognizes the profound social changes taking place: thus, one interviewee said that

⁵¹ The Daoussahaq community has amalgamated—either voluntarily or involuntarily—with the Tuareg community. It has been a fighting force throughout the most recent rebellions in northern Mali. In 2012, however, Moussa ag Acharatoumane, founder of the National Movement of Azawad (Mouvement national de l’Azawad, MNA), later renamed the MNLA, also fought to promote the emergence of this community. Believing himself wronged by prominent Tuareg within the MNLA, he founded and is president of the Daoussahaq Federation (combining the Daoussahaq of Mali, Niger, etc.).

⁵² The decentralization policies are enshrined in Law 96/059 of 4 Nov. 1996, on the creation of local authorities in Mali. The Pastoral Charter is set out in Law 01-004 of 27 Feb. 2001, on the Pastoral Charter in Mali.

⁵³ Interview with a leading citizen of Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁵⁴ Sangaré (note 14); and Brossier Jourde and Cissé (note 43), p. 17.

⁵⁵ Thiam (note 7), p. 23 (author translation).

⁵⁶ Interview with a religious leader in Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁵⁷ Interview with a leading citizen of Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

The conflicts or disputes in some areas are settled by the same jihadists. When there is a dispute or disagreement, instead of going to the village chief's hall [*bolongal amirou*], the people appeal to the jihadists in the areas they occupy. Precedence payments are no longer made or are made secretly. They only get tiny amounts, instead of the huge sums collected by the Diowros. If there is a problem, the populations do not ask the state for help but appeal to the jihadists in matters of justice and to the Donsos for matters concerning attacks or threats.⁵⁸

The armed groups have been able to supplant the traditional and administrative authorities through their new approaches to governance, which are more appreciated, more useful and more effective. These new configurations inevitably raise the question of the effectiveness and usefulness of the public and traditional authorities. The crisis has accentuated the errors of the state, which, in order to establish itself among the population, must demonstrate its ability and its desire to govern in a different way, without attempting to exploit one group against another to meet its immediate needs.

The reinterpretation of local divisions and cross-manipulation

The various levels of analysis and interpretation of the 'divisions' between the conflicting parties in civil war contexts have been studied by Stathis Kalyvas.⁵⁹ Describing dynamics of violence in contexts of instability similar to the Malian conflict, he has shown that local divisions preceding the crises lead to armed mobilizations and has modelled the targets and forms of violence used. However, according to Kalyvas, the aggregation of these local or micro-local conflicts is reinterpreted in a supralocal framework, around the formation of alliances and common discourses, to mobilize the necessary resources for continuing the conflict. These dynamics of mobilization appear to be particularly relevant to the current violence in Mali: supralocal 'divisions'—'the war on terror', 'pro-independence' or 'territorial sovereignty of Mali'—re-interpret the motivations of local communities in their relations with the various armed groups in conflict.

This cross-reinterpretation at different levels of analysis (local, national and in some cases international) has major consequences for the social fragmentation closer to the ground. By association, or by what might be called 'capillary action', a community perceived as being affiliated to an armed group may be classified in strategic terms (as 'pro-government' or 'anti-government') or in ideological and identity-based terms (as a 'community militia' or a 'jihadist group'), even though the impulses leading to its affiliation respond primarily, and essentially, to local or even micro-local dynamics.⁶⁰

In this framework, the so-called return of the state is necessarily problematic. However, the strategies developed to stabilize central and northern Mali primarily reaffirm the need to deploy state services. First among these are security services, to guarantee the sovereignty of Mali, followed by the basic social services and the return of development actors. This is the case, for example, with the Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in the North (Programme Spécial Pour la Paix, la Sécurité et le Développement du Nord, PSPSDN), implemented in 2011, or, since 2017, the Integrated Security Plan for the Centre (Plan de Sécurisation Intégré des Régions du Centre, PSIRC).⁶¹ The problem is that, in reality, the legitimacy of this 'return' of the state has been thoroughly discredited by the interlinking of cross-legitimations and by the different levels of analysis detailed above. Since this deployment of security

⁵⁸ Interview with an imam of Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁵⁹ Kalyvas, S., 'The ontology of 'political violence': action and identity in civil wars', *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Sep. 2003), pp. 475–94.

⁶⁰ Tobie (note 2).

⁶¹ These two relatively similar strategic plans combine security approaches with the deployment of agents of the FDS and unite developmental approaches with the return of basic social services. In fact, in both cases, the security approach has been given priority over development work.

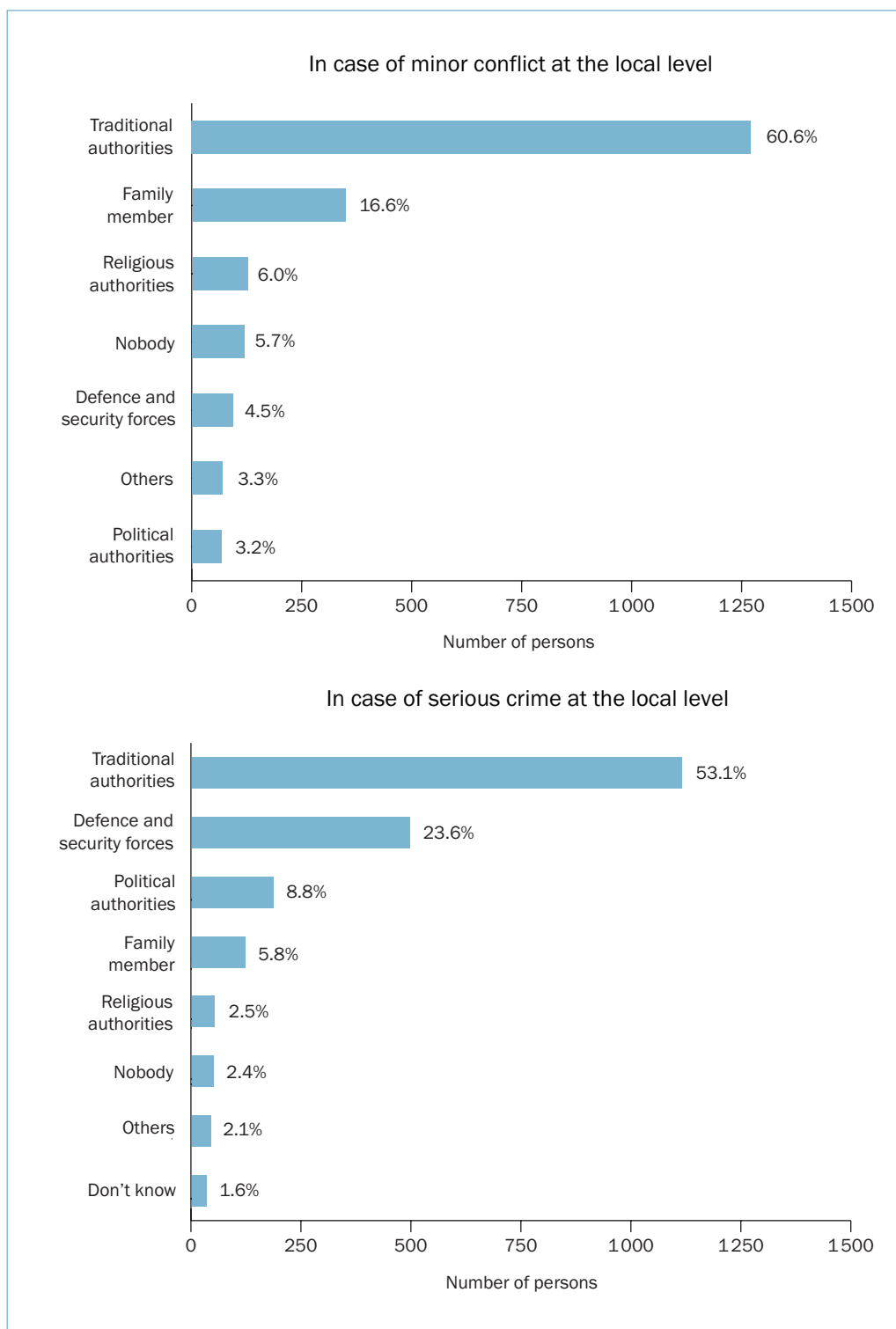


Figure 3.1. Authorities consulted by the populations in case of conflict

Source: Tobie, A. and Bodian, M., *Les indicateurs de sécurité et de développement (ISD) au Centre du Mali* [The security and development indicators in central Mali] (SIPRI/Point Sud: Stockholm/Bamako, Apr. 2019).

forces takes place in a context of deep divisions, it may be interpreted as the expression of support for the existing local powers (which may be contested, sometimes violently) or for certain communities seen as more pro-government. In reaction, other armed actors may offer protection to communities that feel threatened by this intervention, reigniting the vicious circle of security instability.

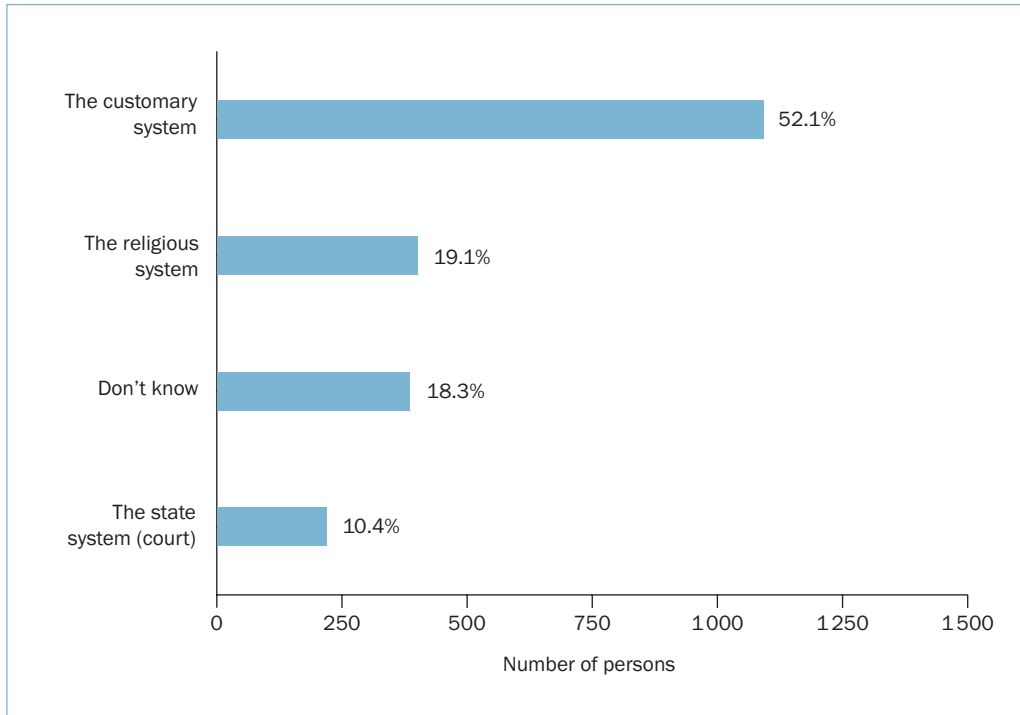


Figure 3.2. Perceptions of the most impartial system of justice

Source: Tobie, A. and Bodian, M., *Les indicateurs de sécurité et de développement (ISD) au Centre du Mali* [The security and development indicators in central Mali] (SIPRI/Point Sud: Stockholm/Bamako, Apr. 2019).

When populations turn to armed groups instead of the state

Data collected by SIPRI from 2097 people in each of the *cercles* of the Ségou and Mopti regions shows that, for the populations concerned, non-state actors are present to a much greater degree than any other security actor (National Guard, Gendarmerie, police, customs, FAMa or international forces) in central Mali. These actors are also considered to be the most effective.⁶²

Outside the realm of simple security, the SIPRI data indicates that, when conflicts arise, the populations never turn first to the representatives of the state (see figure 3.1). To the question ‘In case of a minor conflict, who would you consult first?’, 60.6 per cent of interviewees named the traditional authorities, far ahead of family members (16.6 per cent), religious authorities (6.0 per cent), the FDS (4.5 per cent) and the political authorities (3.2 per cent). In case of serious crime, most would turn to the traditional authorities (53.1 per cent), ahead of the FDS (23.6 per cent) and the official political authorities (8.8 per cent). The responses from men and women were generally similar.

Finally, the SIPRI questionnaire asked the respondents to say which system of justice seemed most impartial to them. First named was the customary justice system, at 52.1 per cent, followed by religious justice, at 19.1 per cent, with the official state justice system supported by only 10.4 per cent of respondents (see figure 3.2).

These findings reinforce the idea that the state, when its representatives are insufficiently present, is not considered to be capable of intervening and does not have the legitimacy to do so. Even worse, the intervention of state agents in local conflicts

⁶² Tobie, A. and Bodian M., forthcoming, SIPRI, 2019. According to this forthcoming study, the security actors with the strongest presence in Mopti and Ségou regions are, in order of importance, the ‘non-state actors’, the National Guard, the FAMa, the water and forestry agents, the Gendarmerie, the customs and the police. The classification according to an assessment of their effectiveness is generally similar (although the Gendarmerie is considered to be relatively effective).

is experienced as an element that disrupts dispute-resolution mechanisms.⁶³ In this context, the establishment of armed groups makes it possible to either strengthen or challenge the various authorities (state, customary or religious), allows mobilization in favour of social change, and permits the establishment of a mode of governance or protection considered to be more legitimate or more effective, according to local divisions. For one stock farmer in Djenné, the jihadists became popular ‘by denouncing the [official] justice system and the FDS who, by their harmful actions, became the enemies of many in the community, without any distinction of ethnicity or origin. If you had no money, or no relative in a high place in the upper levels of the government, it meant that your rights would be completely ignored by the judges’.⁶⁴

Socio-economic effects of the presence of armed groups

The presence of non-state armed groups in the north has seriously destabilized the formal economy. However, the populations whose precarious economic position is considerably worsened by the chronic insecurity are also hostile to the return of agents collecting duties and taxes on behalf of the state. Their presence is perceived as an impediment to the criminal economy in which many armed groups are involved, but from which the populations may hope to benefit for their survival.⁶⁵ The markets in the large northern towns are supplied with essential provisions from Algeria and Mauritania, including sugar, flour, dates, milk, drinks, semolina, oil and fuels. Cigarettes and petroleum products are imported without being declared. The populations of the north have a positive perception of this traffic; moreover, they do not consider it illicit. Without these provisions from neighbouring countries—which are less expensive than in the south of the country, which is free of insecurity—life in the north would be unendurable.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, the presence of the armed groups (jihadist and militia) in central Mali has dampened economic development. In normal times, the urban commune of Djenné would receive 19 million CFA francs annually in local development duties and taxes. In 2018, according to the interviewees, the state revenues in the region amounted to only 300 000 CFA francs. All the economic activities of the commune have experienced a slowdown. The decree forbidding the use of motorcycles, which are often used by armed bands to commit their abuses, is largely responsible for this economic crisis. The ban affects the whole population, which uses this means of transport for travel to the markets and the fields, or for accessing basic services that are often located far from where they live.⁶⁷

The situation is similar in the commune of Ténenkou. According to a local elected official, ‘Since 2012 no tax has been paid in Ténenkou *cercle*. The mayor’s offices no longer operate. In some communes, the salaries of local authority agents are more than 36 months in arrears’.⁶⁸ The inability of the local authorities to pay their officers’ salaries regularly could lead to social discontent that would aggravate the crisis in the region. Finally, the Fulani stock farmers avoid going to the fairs in large urban centres for fear of being killed or abducted by the Bambara or Dogon hunters. The Bambaras,

⁶³ E.g. in Koro *cercle*, after violence between Dogon and Fulani groups, a local mediation process recommended that the security forces should avoid deploying in the area in order to avoid exacerbating tension. See United Nations, Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, S/2017/811, 28 Sep. 2017, p. 9.

⁶⁴ Interview with a stock farmer in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁶⁵ Le Cam, M., ‘Au Mali, des signataires de l’Accord pour la Paix accusés de terrorisme’ [In Mali, signatories of the peace agreement accused of terrorism], *Le Monde*, 28 Aug. 2018.

⁶⁶ Dougnon, I. and Sangaré, B., *Conflictualité locale et demande de justice au Mali* [Local conflict and the call for justice in Mali], Mali National Report (Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue: Geneva, 2015).

⁶⁷ Interview with a commune councillor in Djenné, Mar. 2019.

⁶⁸ Interview with local elected official of Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

the Bozos and the Dogons also avoid going to places that they assume are controlled by the jihadists, in case they are attacked. In the communes of Kewa in Djenné *cercle* and Togue Mourari in Diafarabe *cercle*, the departure of the Bozos, who are traditionally fishermen, has led to a shortage of fish at the markets, resulting in an unprecedented explosion in prices. Extortion and arrests, based on community membership, by the FDS as well as by members of the non-state armed groups are discouraging the population from going to the markets: ‘The inhabitants are the victims of attacks, theft and robbery in the town centre and sometimes in the daytime’; ‘All the shops, even the Orange Money [money transfer services], close at 8 p.m.’⁶⁹

While the relations between armed groups and traffickers of every kind are widely known, experts disagree on the question of whether these relations are structural and strategic or whether, as noted by Timothy Wittig, the interaction between drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism is simply a function of the politico-economic dynamics of the specific region.⁷⁰ For his part, Wolfram Lacher attributes the increasing presence of AQIM, MUJAO and other groups in northern Mali to the development of a highly lucrative kidnapping industry. He notes that ransom payments appear to be the most important source of finance for the terrorist groups in the Sahel region.⁷¹

Security effects of the presence of armed groups

After the occupation of the northern regions and the military defeat in 2012, the protection and security of people and their property could no longer be guaranteed by the state administration. This provided an opportunity for various groups to offer their services. After the signing of the 2015 Peace Accord and the progressive return of the state, the FDS has been partially redeployed in these regions, but without covering the territory in an effective way. Following several unsuccessful attempts to bring back state control, Kidal region remains under the sole control of the CMA. Under the Peace Accord, joint patrols of the operational coordination mechanism (a combination of troops from the groups signing the Accord with state forces) are operating in Gao region to secure the populations and their property and to combat terrorism. These measures are also intended to improve confidence among the elements of the various groups that will all be required, eventually, to add their forces to the regular army and form a unified body.

These armed groups are therefore officially entrusted with a new role in securing the region, granted by the Peace Accord and supervised by the state. However, this new official legitimacy is viewed by some elements as a *carte blanche* to commit abuses against and steal from the civilian population. In Timbuktu *cercle*, the people interviewed for this study considered that the Peace Accord has contributed to these groups’ sense of impunity. An imam reported:

After that, we lost our security and the actors do not conceal themselves anymore. They are members of the signatory movements. At 10 kilometres, any driver who is not a ‘red skin’ [i.e. the ‘black’ population] is robbed and has his vehicle and property taken away. If it’s public transport, the passengers are robbed and lose all their property, but the vehicle is left for them. These acts take place without any retribution or condemnation, and even without any explanation. The authorities never mention these acts, which are almost a daily occurrence on the Timbuktu–Goundam and Timbuktu–Douentza routes.⁷²

⁶⁹ Interviews conducted in Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translations).

⁷⁰ Wittig, T., *Understanding Terrorism Finance* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2011), p. 33.

⁷¹ Lacher, W., *Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region*, Carnegie Papers (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, Sep. 2012).

⁷² Interview with an imam in Timbuktu, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

However, against the backdrop of this unification of the security services, the security situation has undergone a serious deterioration in the centre of the country in recent years. Since 2015, the Katiba Macina has evicted the FDS and the administration from several localities. There have been several attacks against civilians and targeted assassinations. It is said that this situation has led communities to develop self-defence strategies manifested by the proliferation of community armed groups in central Mali.⁷³ Thus, on the Dogon Plateau, Dan na Ambassagou positions itself as a protector of the Dogon populations. It leads reprisal attacks against Fulani civilians in response to attacks on Dogon villages. According to an interviewed retired soldier, ‘The hunters [members of the Dogon ethnic group] are accepted by the population because they protect them. Before the action of the hunters and before the arrival of the soldiers, the jihadists did whatever they wanted’.⁷⁴ However, this self-defence strategy has the effect of poisoning relationships and causing intercommunal confrontations. In the Inner Niger Delta, the Donso militia lays down the law and poses as the protector of the Bambaras and Bozos. Another resident of Djenné stated that: ‘I do not believe the Donsos played a peacekeeping role. They only made the situation worse. The jihadists committed atrocities and the Donsos commit even more.’⁷⁵ The rate of violence increases despite the primary intention of self-defence.

Evidently, the FDS can take over the security function only if it actually has the capacity to protect the communities and if the community-based militias are disarmed. If this is not the case, the populations themselves will oppose the disarming of their militia, which they primarily view as protectors. This is what happened, for example, in April 2019 in Koro, central Mali, when the inhabitants of this town opposed the army when it came to arrest a leader of Dan na Ambassagou.

Social effects of the presence of armed groups

The ‘armed professions’ have existed in Mali since the country became independent in 1960, but they have become more widespread as a result of the 2012 crisis.⁷⁶ Although enrolment in an armed group may be the expression of a social revolt, it is also, at the individual level, an opportunity for emancipation from a social and economic destiny that offers little fulfilment. Violence makes it possible to escape the established frameworks and ‘seek one’s fortune’, to the detriment of the social cohesion advocated by custom.

Generational conflict, in particular, is a major factor that may impel young people to espouse ideas of violent radicalism. The law of primogeniture, central to the customs governing social relations in central and northern Mali, is challenged because the younger generations consider it too archaic in a context of rapid modernization of society and the economy. According to them, the elders, who impose social values and practices, hold too many rights over the youth without performing their own duties towards them. But the armed groups overturn this hierarchical system, as explained by a retired teacher in Djenné: ‘The distinctive feature of the armed groups is their lack of any point of reference. They do not respect any law apart from the law of terror. It must be said, and acknowledged, that before they appeared the communities lived

⁷³ Sangaré, B., ‘Comment stopper le déferlement de violences dans le centre du Mali?’ [How to stop the surge of violence in central Mali?], Institute for Security Studies, 2 Apr. 2019.

⁷⁴ Interview in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁷⁵ Interview in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁷⁶ Debos, M., *Le métier des armes au Tchad: le gouvernement de l'entre-guerres* [The trade of arms in Chad: the government of the interwar period] (Khartala: Paris, 2013).

in perfect symbiosis, and now the ethnic groups hate each other. It was with these groups that radical Islam made its appearance in the central region.⁷⁷

The appearance of these new social ‘norms’ disorientates the elders, who can no longer impose customary norms based on values respected in other times: ‘I saw a case in a village that affected me deeply, where the son called his father a heathen because he had not paid the *zakat* [Islamic tax]. It was the arrival of the jihadists that led to this insult. Children no longer respect their parents. These are negative changes in the population that should not be encouraged.’⁷⁸

This can be liberating for some: a retired soldier in Djenné explained that, for young people, ‘belonging to this movement is a way of making yourself useful, being a man at the heart of his community’.⁷⁹ However, the presence of armed groups may also introduce new social norms that are constraining and destabilizing. In the localities controlled by jihadist groups, women, in particular, are subject to roles and behaviour considered to conform to decency as dictated by the fundamentalism of the *qadis* (Muslim judges with civil, judicial and religious functions). They are forbidden to smoke and are made to wear the veil.⁸⁰ Their movements are also controlled and they must be supervised by male escorts. Traditional social encounters such as naming ceremonies and some social ceremonies are prohibited or closely supervised. So the trap closes: because the traditional social systems allowed too little economic and social mobility, the younger generations try to liberate themselves by espousing the doctrines of the armed groups, which are themselves based on the most rigid of constraints.

⁷⁷ Interview in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁷⁸ Interview in Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁷⁹ Interview in Djenné, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

⁸⁰ International Crisis Group (note 22).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Maladapted intervention: a 'top-down' approach

The response of the public authorities to the presence of armed groups hostile to the state has mainly focused on security. The Malian defence and security forces have endeavoured to conduct operations to eradicate the jihadist threat. They have done this with training from the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), with support from the direct French operations Serval and then Barkhane, and sometimes grouped within the new subregional security apparatus of the G5 Sahel Joint Force.

In order to succeed, the government forces have also supported, or at least allowed the creation of, parastate militias. These initially appeared to serve their interests in the struggle against the armed groups and jihadist movements.⁸¹ Because these operations are based on a top-down interpretation of the situation—responding to a division guided solely by the jihadist threat, rather than by a detailed understanding of the micro-local dynamics of challenges to modes of governance or appropriation of local resources—they have masked the impact of the presence of the armed groups that responded to much greater social needs. Furthermore, because they have focused on a vague concept of jihadists as the main target of the security operation in central and northern Mali, part of the social reality has escaped the Malian authorities.

Moreover, the deployment of security forces that are sometimes poorly set up and ill-equipped on territories that they consider hostile has led to abuses documented by national and international observers.⁸² This further reinforces the lack of confidence of the populations in these forces.⁸³

During 2018 Operation Barkhane reorientated its security approach to intervene in central Mali. It conducted targeted strikes and ground operations to disorganize the structure of the jihadist armed groups in the area.⁸⁴ However, the effectiveness of these interventions was limited. The French forces were also tempted to rely on local forces to provide operational capacity, and they also had to contend with the local social realities and the modification of local balances caused by these new power relations.⁸⁵

The ineffectiveness of the forces present is highlighted by the inhabitants of the areas affected by the violence. The abuses of the FAMA and its failure to communicate with the population are criticized. The FAMA 'do not try to find out what is happening in the locality. If they had done this, the situation would have improved long ago. There have been no meetings with the people who are familiar with the problems and wish to bring about peace'.⁸⁶ Local populations also deplore the lack of operational resources of the FAMA and condemn the degree of autonomy granted to non-state armed groups that are subject to little control and do not accept the rules of engagement of the regular army.

⁸¹ In a report from 2016 the International Crisis Group (ICG) notes the concept of 'militia temptation'. ICG, *Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?*, Africa Report no. 238 (ICG: Brussels, July 2016).

⁸² Tull, D., 'Rebuilding Mali's army: the dissonant relationship between Mali and its international partners', *International Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 2 (Mar. 2019), pp. 405–22.

⁸³ Human Rights Watch, 'Mali: décès et tortures de personnes détenues par l'armée' [Mali: deaths and torture of persons detained by the army], 9 Apr. 2018.

⁸⁴ Florence Parly, the French armed forces minister, announced the death of Hamadou Koufa in a French operation in Nov. 2018, but he reappeared in a propaganda video a few months later. Ahmed, B., 'Mali: annoncé mort, le chef jihadiste Amadou Koufa apparaît dans une vidéo de propagandee', *Jeune Afrique*, 1 Mar. 2019.

⁸⁵ E.g. General Guibert, commander of Operation Barkhane, confirmed the partnership between the French Army and the MSA, despite allegations of abuses committed by this group against Fulani civilians. Macé, C., 'Au Sahel, je n'ai pas besoin de canons supplémentaires, mais il nous faut gagner en mobilité', *Libération*, 9 July 2018.

⁸⁶ Interview in Ténenkou, Mar. 2019 (author translation).

A mixed approach: development, dialogue and security

Although the security situation has progressively improved in the north since the signing of the Peace Accord in 2015, it has greatly deteriorated in central Mali, despite the implementation of the PSIRC from 2017 onwards. This plan provides for the creation of secure development and governance hubs in several localities of central Mali, with the aim of implementing a hybrid approach of development, governance and security. So far, this plan has been slow to produce the anticipated results, and its outcome is ambivalent. The following suggested responses are inevitably dependent on the provision of security, but this must be constantly supported by a detailed analysis of the sociocultural conditions of the area of intervention. These responses are therefore an extension and deepening of the philosophy found in the PSIRC.

1. Disarmament of non-state armed groups and regaining control of the security situation by the state

The series of massacres perpetrated during 2019, particularly those at Koulogon (1 January), Ogossagou (23 March) and Sobane (9 June), demonstrated the weakness of the state and its inability to ensure the security of the population. The militias and the jihadists are considered to be responsible for these attacks, and each initiated a vicious circle of revenge and reprisal. To contain the spread of violence and prevent further massacres, it is essential for the self-defence groups and militias to be disarmed. This disarmament is dependent on a change of strategy and approach by the Malian state. In disarming the militias, the state must be capable of regaining control over legitimate violence and guaranteeing the security of the population. This means that any temptation of forming an alliance with any armed group, even for limited tactical objectives, must be firmly suppressed.

2. An inclusive process of dialogue

Lessons must be learned from the dialogue initiated with the armed groups of northern Mali. The co-opting and acceptance by the Malian authorities of the local influence of the armed groups, as happened in northern Mali, have harmful consequences. The use of violence by these groups is rewarded, leaving the civilian populations at their mercy. This is why a dialogue with the armed groups is sometimes mentioned as a possible approach worth consideration—provided, of course, that it is rigorously supervised, by including representatives of the civilian population.⁸⁷ Such a debate on the suitability of using this type of dialogue is not novel: while Abdoulaye Idrissa Maiga was prime minister, in 2017, a goodwill mission was conducted by a former president of the Islamic High Council of Mali (Haut Conseil islamique du Mali, HCIM) to the leaders of violent groups (jihadists, in this case Iyad ag Ghali and Hamadou Kouffa). Nonetheless, the dialogue process must be strictly supervised, to avoid creating an ‘instability bonus’. In particular, the gains consolidated by the Peace Accord and which form the basic principles of the Malian Republic (secularism, unity, and so on) must not be subject to any kind of negotiation. In all cases, any new approach to national reconciliation could be subject to a referendum.

The possibility of a political agreement for central Mali would make it possible to accelerate the DDR initiatives: community dialogue (with the close involvement of community associations and organizations at the national and local levels), delivery of justice and basic social services, humanitarian assistance, return of displaced people,

⁸⁷ International Crisis Group (note 22).

and so on. Such a mediation between the communities, which is essential, must nonetheless be subject to the simultaneous restoration of the state's capacity to provide security and justice for the victims.

3. Involvement of citizens and refocusing of the military operations of the Malian state on the protection of the civilian population

Military operations should be reviewed and made more effective by close collaboration between the FDS and local civilian populations. However, a durable and fruitful collaboration can only succeed if it is based on the most thorough understanding of local dynamics by the FDS and on its readiness to achieve the greatest impact from its interventions by prioritizing the security of the civilian population.

4. Return of the Malian state and regaining of its authority over the whole territory of the country

The presence of a 'useful' state capable of responding to the fundamental preoccupations of its citizens—in terms of access to security and justice as well as social services such as education and healthcare—is essential for long-term stability. The resolution of the conflict is necessarily subject to the return of the state and its services (i.e. territorial control, decentralized services, the army and the police). The 'authority of the state' must signify a legitimate state that is accepted by the population and that has put the recommendations in this report into practice.

5. Making use of traditional norms and customary institutions

At the same time, there must be a consideration of how traditional mechanisms of conflict management can be used. A number of studies, particularly the studies of perceptions conducted by SIPRI in Mali, indicate that the populations rarely use Malian justice but prefer to consult a *qadi*, an imam, a village chief or similar in the first instance. For example, it might be possible to consider granting recognition to the acts of these authorities in certain cases, as has been done with marriage via the 2009 Family Code. Following the same logic, making use of initiatives, such as the local Land Commissions (Commissions locales foncières, COFO), and finding ways to make greater use of the Pastoral Charter and the national agricultural land policy appear to be good strategies—these mechanisms are participatory and make use of relationships of trust. The key to this approach must be to first clearly define the scope of competence of the various authorities, with each party working effectively in its own area of responsibility.

Beyond these programmatic considerations, but based on them, the Malian state must provide evidence of a real, long-lasting political will to regain a legitimacy that has been eroded over time. The numerous security plans have often been the subject of declarations that have been difficult to put into practice. The negotiation or good-will missions set up to respond to the threat of the armed groups have not been supported in the long term. Organizations such as the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission have not been able to demonstrate their impact on the ground, despite the efforts made.

In a complex and changing environment, any attempted solution will inevitably be imperfect. However, in order to introduce a significant degree of stability—which is an essential condition for restoring confidence among the population—the national and international programmes to respond to the instability must be backed up by power in the long term.

About the authors

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