

WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS

The Impact of Terrorism on Malian Youth

IN COLLABORATION WITH





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Foreword

Since 2012, Mali has faced significant instability, increasing episodes of violence and ongoing tensions generated by separate but interlinked issues, including scarcity of resources, long-standing intercommunal tensions, poor governance and weak provision of services. In such a context, various armed and terrorist groups have established their presence in Mali, initially in the north of the country but with a clear shift towards the centre and the south in recent years. The institutional fragility, increased availability of weapons, effects of climate change on a traditional pastoral and agricultural economy, porousness of borders, and existing forms of informal trade have facilitated dangerous collaboration between terrorist and organised crime groups. Their presence has progressively exacerbated tensions among different ethnic groups and communities, as demonstrated by a serious upsurge of violence and ethnically targeted killings in central Mali.

Young Malians are among the most affected by the precarious situation. The general sense of insecurity and instability, exacerbated by a lack of economic opportunity, limited mobility and poor governance, have created an environment adverse to psycho-social and economic development. As a result, Malian youth are at heightened risk of engagement with criminal and violent extremist groups that seek to disseminate extremist beliefs and tap into existing grievances to gain new recruits.

While Malian youth are among the primary victims of terrorist groups' expansion, they can also play a vital role in the development and implementation of long-term solutions to the current crisis. National and international actors that want to support young Malians and encourage their contribution to building a more peaceful society should first understand how youth are impacted by the violent extremism that they witness first-hand. Listening to their views, creating space for their voices, and showcasing their experiences, as the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) have done through this report, help reinforce this new generation's role as the main driver of positive change in society.

Tackling the challenge of violent extremism, not only in Mali but across the globe, requires a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach grounded in supporting local actors and communities to address not only the effects of violent extremism, but also its root causes. Youth can and must play a vital role in this process.

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Executive summary

The present report is part of a broader project, “Mali (Dis-) Engagement and Re-Integration related to Terrorism (MERIT)”, jointly carried out by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT). Through field research and primary data analysis, UNICRI and ICCT aim to advance knowledge and awareness on the issue of violent extremism in Mali through the lenses and voices of the country’s youth. The report will explore the impact that the longstanding presence of terrorist groups has produced on the daily lives of young people in Mali. Giving voice to a representative sample, the report offers new insights on the impact of terrorism on youth, who have not been selected in virtue of their engagement in violent extremism or conflict, but whose lives have been significantly impacted by the terrorist presence in their country.

What terrorists?

The current crisis in Mali is to a large extent attributed to “terrorism”. However, in Mali the colloquial usage of **the label of “terrorist” or “jihadist” often includes all armed actors accused of committing violence against the population**, including criminal actors, self-defence militias, and (in some cases) the Malian security forces – a far more

expansive definition than the one falling under the international legal framework. Although interviewees tended to acknowledge that “jihadists” are those actors using violence for implementing an extremist political agenda inspired by a radical vision of Islam, a clear distinction between the various leaders and groups is lacking.

Impact of the presence of terrorist groups

The perception of the presence of terrorist groups in the country differs among the youth from the three locations selected for the research – namely Bamako, Mopti, and Menaka – which have experienced different levels of exposure to longstanding violence. The region of Menaka is perceived to be widely under the “control” of different terrorist groups (especially the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)

and Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Sahelian al-Qaida-affiliate). In the Mopti region, terrorist fighters do not directly occupy the main cities but use rural areas as their rear bases for organising and planning their initiatives. While the situation in Bamako is generally considered less worrying by most of the interviewees, some reported that insecurity in the capital is growing despite the presence of securi-

ty forces. The young interviewees' diverse perspectives are usually connected not only to their different geographical origins, but also to their ethnic affiliation, which reflects some persistent deeply-rooted divisions within Malian society.

Regardless of their location or other socio-economic or ethnic indicators, the impact of the presence of terrorist groups mainly affects four dimensions of Malian youths' lives:

- Terrorist organisations' presence throughout the country has first translated into **increased levels of armed violence and physical threat**, either as a classic tool of warfare directed against the enemies of the groups – including national security forces, international troops, and other armed groups and militias – or used as a means for spreading fear and establishing their control over lands and local populations, by targeting anyone opposing their rule or suspected of cooperating with state representatives, along with innocent civilians. Half of the youth interviewed as part of this study have indeed affirmed having themselves witnessed acts of violence committed by terrorist groups. In addition to killings, kidnappings, attacks and siege of villages reported by interviewees in Mopti and Menaka, the presence of terrorists has moreover led to the “militarisation” or “weaponisation” of societal conflicts and inter-community tensions, thereby further deteriorating an already fragile security environment.
- Youth's lives have also been deeply affected by terrorist groups' ability to establish **control over territories and alternative systems of local governance**. While extremist groups often rely on

local communities for the provision of food and basic goods, and the gathering of essential information, they also, in certain occasions, offer an ‘alternative’ by providing quasi-state like services – including systems of taxation and land management, as well as justice delivery – in areas where the Bamako-led government is otherwise absent. Although most of the schools and health centres have been closed or destroyed by terrorist groups, and while most of the participants agree that “terrorist governance” is worsening their life, several underline that this system appears – in some instances – more “fair” and “efficient” than the state system, in particular when it comes to justice, thanks to faster and less corrupt processes.

- The presence of terrorist groups is almost unanimously considered as having a **“devastating” economic impact** on Malian youth, notably affecting their access to job opportunities, and dramatically reducing places for economic exchanges and productive activities. These consequences result from a less secure environment, where poverty and the use of weapons are more prevalent and where national resources are used for more pressing needs (such as the allocation of funds to counter-terrorism efforts). In addition to negatively affecting macro-economic dynamics, terrorist groups also impact the economic perspectives of young Malians at the micro-level. In Mopti and Menaka, terrorists' activities and the rules they impose have generally produced a negative impact on commercial, agricultural and pastoral activities. They force local markets to close, steal the cattle from local herders, and prevent access to pasture-

lands, as these are the places where terrorists often hide and build their camps. By applying the *Sharia*, terrorist groups are moreover increasing the barriers for women to work or leave their houses to go to the market alone, which reduces families' budgets. These aspects reduce the quantity of commercial goods available and, consequently, increase their prices, a situation which could easily lead to severe consequences in exacerbating the already high levels of food insecurity.¹

→ Terrorist groups' presence has moreover had **profound social and psychological impacts** on Malian youth, whose exposure to violence often translates in feelings of fear, insecurity, injustice, but also resignation against terrorism itself. More worryingly, the presence of terrorist groups results in a widespread mistrust among people and communities, with most of the youth limiting their trust to the closest members of their social networks, in particular to family members and close friends. This tends to both reinforce existing tensions be-

tween ethnic groups and social classes, and to bolster mistrust of the state and its representatives, in particular by strengthening feelings of marginalisation or discrimination against certain communities. While this pervasive feeling of insecurity and mistrust is shared among the interviewees, without any significant geographical distinctions, youth living in areas under terrorist groups' control are moreover imposed new behaviours and social rules inspired by these groups' radical interpretation of Islam and strict application of the *Sharia*. These notably include: the ban of alcohol and cigarettes, card games and football matches; the imposition of the veil on young women who have seen their social role, their participation to politics and overall possibilities significantly limited; the closure of most of the French schools; and the interdiction of traditional practices and cultural festivities, during which *griots* (traditional musicians or poets) cannot play music anymore. Terrorist groups are thus literally 'silencing the music'.

1 World Food Programme, Country Brief, July 2020, available at: https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000118498/download/?_ga=2.153333304.1225969133.1601313207-1114742404.1601313207

Role of the youth

Although the overwhelming majority of Malian youth do not support terrorist groups, young people are not exclusively victims or passive observers of the situation they are facing: a small percentage actually play an active role in violent extremism, with higher levels of engagement being observed among those who live in areas under occupation.

While none of the participants to this study were engaged in terrorist organisations, many acknowledged that among those actively or indirectly participating in terrorist activities, some voluntarily joined the groups, while others were forced to. The interviewees report three main reasons explaining the choice of some youth to join terrorist groups: 1) personal or community protection; 2) improving one's own social status; 3) venge-

ance against (perceived or factual) injustices and threats perpetrated by the state.

In contrast, with many young people struggling to find a way to live with the dangers by which they are surrounded, some openly oppose these groups and are trying to look for and implement solutions to support peace and security. Worryingly, however, almost half of the respondents considered that it is too hard and too late for youth to act against the presence of terrorists. But among the youth active in preventing or countering the spread of violent extremism, some of the initiatives and possible solutions mentioned by respondents included: taking up arms against the terrorists by joining the army; raising awareness and creating economic opportunities; and accepting re-established state authority.



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the Operation Barkhane (a 5,000-strong French force), the *Takuba* task force (a multistate European military force), as well as the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), in 2020 Mali entered its eighth year of civil unrest and widespread violence. The progressive instability and the

increasingly high political tensions have indeed led to a new military coup d'état in August 2020 – the second in less than nine years. What was considered for years as one of the most successful and accomplished democracies on the African continent² has not been able to establish its presence or authority over the whole national territory, to gain the trust of its entire population, or to solid-

2 Zeric Kay Smith. "Francophone Africa in Flux: Mali's Decade of Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 12.3 (2001): 73-79; Freedom House, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011 - Mali", 10 November 2011, available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4ecba6492f.html>



INCREASING INSECURITY IN MALI

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ify the full legitimacy of its government.³ This enduring instability is furthering a vicious cycle of political grievances, social mistrust and armed violence, whose effects have already expanded beyond the Malian frontiers to reach neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso, and have begun to spill over into the West African coastal states.⁴

The Malian crisis started in 2012 as a Tuareg rebellion, which erupted in the northern regions as a result of longstanding grievances and ethno-geographical cleavages within Malian society. The military coup d'état carried out in March 2012 dramatically exposed the fragility of local institutions, creating the conditions for the proliferation of violent

3 Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. "Mali-MètreII: Enquête d'opinion politique « Que pensent les Malien(ne)s ? »", 2020, available at: [Http://www.fes-mali.org/images/Rapport_Final_Malimetre_NII_Site.pdf](http://www.fes-mali.org/images/Rapport_Final_Malimetre_NII_Site.pdf)

4 International Crisis Group (2019) The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa. Africa Briefing, No. 149, International Crisis Group.

extremist groups, criminal networks, and self-defence militias. As the crisis continued to evolve and expand over the following eight years, new and more troubling challenges and actors have emerged, most visibly reflected by the growing terrorist threat.

The crisis can be divided into different phases, corresponding to several distinct cycles of violence and behaviours of the armed actors.⁵ Although terrorist groups played a role in the spiral of violence in northern Mali from 2012-2013, the number of armed groups – terrorist organisations, as well as a plethora of self-defence militias and criminal enterprises – grew exponentially during the later period of the peace talks leading to the 2015 Algiers Accord. Not only did various rebel leaders create splinter groups during the peace talks, but they also built armed militias to support their claims and (allegedly) to deliver security to their supporters.⁶ Meanwhile, terrorist groups reorganised their presence in the country, and started to create new connections with leaders and populations beyond

northern Mali. This led to the emergence of new splinter groups, and in particular the first local branch of the Islamic State in 2015 – known under the name of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).⁷ Accordingly, other leaders created new branches, whose main objective was to intercept and expand pre-existing lines of ethnic, political and economic conflicts among the population. This is particularly the case of the Katiba Macina, the group led by Malian Fulani preacher Amadou Koufa, which now controls large portions of territory in the Mopti and Ségou regions in central Mali, and whose success is primarily based on its ability to instrumentally co-opt the Fulani cause.⁸

By 2016, the crisis became significantly more complex, no longer limited to the north-south cleavage that resulted in the 2012 rebellion, but instead characterised by horizontal merging of various grievances and conflicts.⁹ Often referred to as a process of “Sahelisation,” terrorist groups¹⁰ operating in Mali decisively pushed “tribalised armed pol-

5 Bencherif, Adib, and Aurélie Campana. “Alliances of convenience: assessing the dynamics of the Malian insurgency.” *Mediterranean Politics* 22.1 (2017): 115-134.

6 Modibo Ghaly Cissé. “Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis”, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 22 April 2020, available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>

7 RFI. “Mali: le groupe Etat islamique officialise sa présence au Sahel”, 31 October 2016, available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20161031-mali-groupe-etat-islamique-officialise-presence-sahel-Abou-Walid-Sahraoui>

8 Fulani are a population present throughout the whole West African region, whose main traditional economic activity is pastoralism. As the most populous ethnic group inhabiting central Mali, the Fulani have a long history of political marginalisation and socio-economic discrimination by the Malian state. During the initial years of the Malian conflict, Fulani civilians and chiefs suffered various attacks perpetrated both by the Malian army and rebel groups. The need for protection, along with the desire to seize new economic and socio-political opportunities produced by the conflict, pushed a limited number of Fulani, in particular youths and people from lower classes, into joining Katiba Macina. It should be noted that the “Fulani question” is not limited to Mali. Similar dynamics of economic marginalisation, socio-political stigmatisation and state abuses against this community can be identified both in Burkina Faso and Niger. As the case of Ansarul Islam – the group linked to JNIM that principally operates in Burkina Faso – suggests, jihadist organizations are demonstrating their ability to exploit Fulani’s grievances in the whole central Sahel. This threatens to foster a vicious cycle of repression and radicalisation, whose effects are already expanding beyond the Malian frontiers.

9 Guichaoua Yvan et Mathieu Pellerin. “Faire la paix et construire l’État. Les relations entre pouvoir central et périphéries sahéliennes au Niger et au Mali”, IRSEM, July 2017, available at: <https://www.ifri.org/fr/publications/publications-ifri/articles-ifri/faire-paix-construire-letatrelations-entre-pouvoir#sthash.drHiaRnr.dpbs>

10 Mathieu Pellerin, “Armed Violence in the Sahara: Are we Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?”, Etudes de l’IFRI, November 2019, available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_armed_violence_sahara_2020_okes.pdf

itics” into the northern and central parts of the country.¹¹ The instrumental reactivation of ethnic grievances by terrorist actors such as the Katiba Macina and Ansar Dine, combined with the repressive strategy adopted by the state against rebels, terrorist fighters, and – in many cases – civilian populations, have changed the nature of the Malian conflict.¹² During this period, open conflict started to reach central Mali, as state security forces were gradually excluded from the area.¹³ As a result, self-defence and ethnic militias started mushrooming, including the Dogon militia Dan Na Ambassougou established in 2016 in the Mopti region, likely with the silent consent – or even support – of the national government, and whose main aim is to fight what it considers as the “Fulani Jihad.”¹⁴

Following the post-2016 explosion of armed groups, the conflict in Mali saw unprecedented numbers of attacks in 2019 and well into 2020, and shows no signs of slowing down (see Figure 1). The country is characterised by rising violence, intra-terrorist conflict that exploded at the end of 2019, and the state’s ab-

sence from most of the northern and central regions of the country.¹⁵

Within a fragmented, competitive, and shifting landscape, two main terrorist coalitions have emerged in Mali. Established in March 2017, Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) is the umbrella organisation for Sahelian groups affiliated to Al-Qaida, including Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, al-Mourabitoun, and the Katiba Macina, which respectively follow a sort of geographical division of labour, and recognise the leadership of Iyad ag Ghali, former leader of Ansar Dine and a notorious Tuareg chief and former rebel.¹⁶ On the opposite side, echoing the schism that divided the global terrorist landscape, a splinter faction of al-Mourabitoun (itself now subsumed within JNIM) declared its allegiance to the Islamic State in 2015, subsequently branding itself as the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and establishing its presence around Menaka, in northern Mali, and in the border area between Mali and Niger.¹⁷

11 Edoardo Baldaro, “The Formidable Challenges to Peace in Mali”, ISPI Commentary, 9 September 2019, available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/formidabile-challenges-peace-mali-23835>

12 International Crisis Group, “Central Africa: A Crisis in the Making?”, Africa Report No. 238, 16 July 2016, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making>

13 The beginning of the fourth phase can be identified in 2019, when a series of massacres – such as the one in Ogosagou – and hard defeats of the army – such as the one in Indelimane near Menaka in November 2019 – sanctioned the *de facto* division of Mali in different and mostly autonomous subsystems. This is also the phase which sees for the first time, the open and violent conflict between the JNIM and the EIGS, for the leadership over the jihad in Mali.

14 Human Rights Watch, ““We Used to Be Brothers”: Self-Defense Group Abuses in Central Mali”, 7 December 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/12/07/we-used-be-brothers/self-defense-group-abuses-central-mali>; FIDH and AMDH, “Centre Mali : les populations prises au piège du terrorisme et du contre-terrorisme”, 20 November 2018, available at: <https://www.fidh.org/fr/regions/afrique/mali/centre-mali-les-populations-prises-au-piege-du-terrorisme-et-du>; Morgane Le Cam, “Au Mali, les liaisons dangereuses entre l’Etat et les milices”, Le Monde, 24 July 2018, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/07/24/au-mali-les-liaisons-dangereuses-entre-l-etat-et-les-milices_5335256_3212.html

15 IACLED, “Regional Overview: Africa 15 December 2019 – 4 January 2020”, 10 January 2020, available at: <https://acled-data.com/2020/01/10/regional-overview-africa-15-december-2019-4-january-2020/>

16 Djallil Lounnas, “The Transmutation of Jihadi Organizations in the Sahel and the Regional Security Architecture”, Future Notes No. 10, April 2018, available at: https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fn_10.pdf

17 International Crisis Group, “Sidelineing the Islamic State in Niger’s Tillabery?”, Africa Report No. 289, 3 June 2020, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/289-sidelineing-islamic-state-nigers-tillabery>

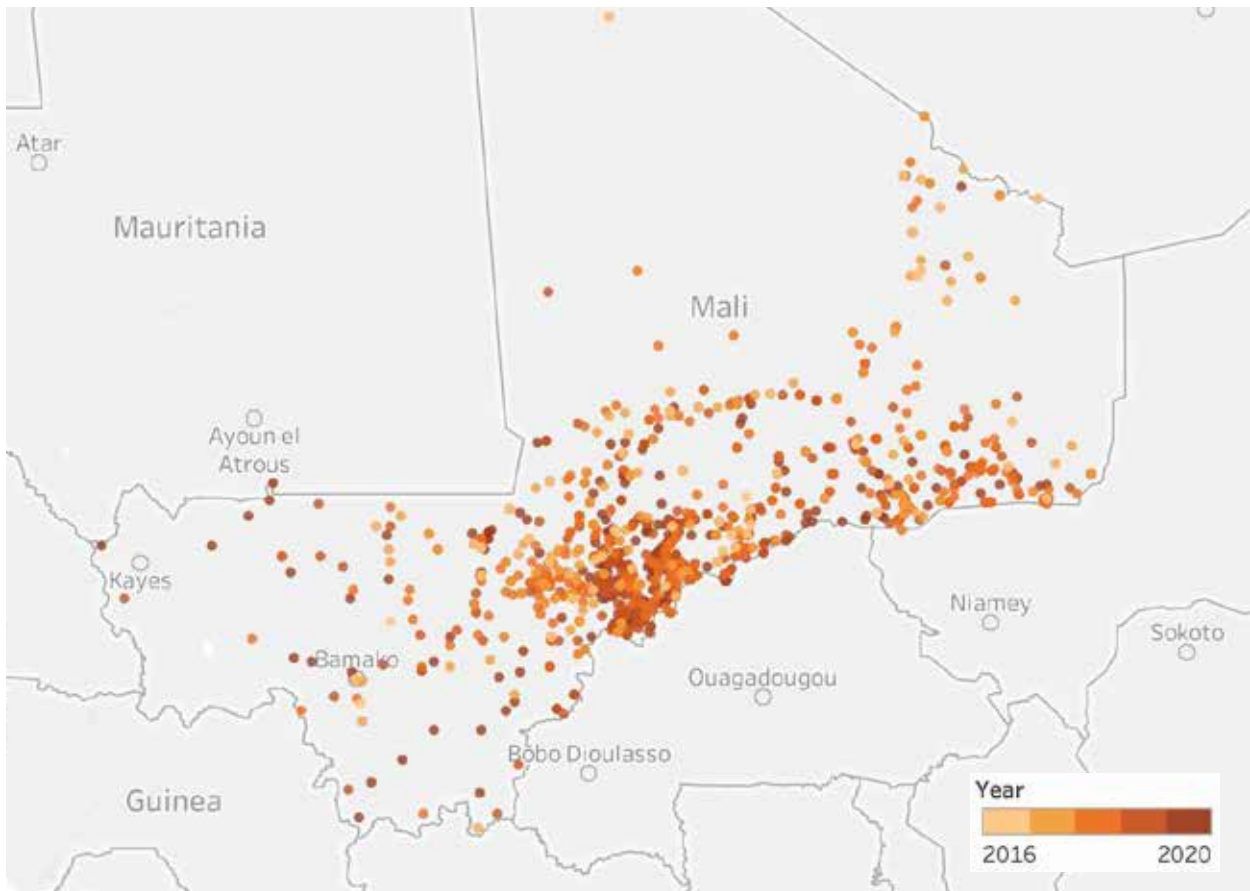


Figure 1 Violent incidents from 2016 to 2020, elaborated from ACLED Data - Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED - acleddata.com)

As a result of persistent structural fragilities and the inability to effectively contain the terrorist expansion, geographic and inter-ethnic tensions have increased and crystallised throughout the country. The emergence of various ethnicity-based self-defence militias and non-state armed groups has resulted in a deadly dynamic of inter-ethnic violence

mainly targeting civilians.¹⁸ In addition to non-state actors, national defence and security forces have also been accused of perpetrating violence against the populations, mainly in central Mali, including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests.¹⁹ In various parts of the country the presence of state representatives and se-

18 International Alert, "If Victims Become Perpetrators: Factors contributing to vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism in the central Sahel", June 2018, available at: https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Sahel_ViolentExtremismVulnerabilityResilience_EN_2018.pdf; International Crisis Group, "Central Africa: A Crisis in the Making?", Africa Report No. 238, 16 July 2016, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/af-rica/west-af-rica/mali/central-mali-uprising-making>

19 United Nations Security Council, Situation in Mali, Report of the Secretary-General. S/2020/476, 2020, available: https://minisma.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/s_2020_476_e.pdf.

curity forces is weak, and their authority has been substituted by rebel, or even terrorist, forms of governance.²⁰ Over time, terrorism and the fight against it have progressively become the main concern not only for the Malian government, but also for various actors throughout the country, including the multitude of international missions operating on the ground.²¹

Given the mounting violence, increased terrorist activities, and inter-community clashes, research has started to explore the main drivers of engagement in terrorist and other armed groups, and the factors of resilience

and/or vulnerability of local populations vis-à-vis violent extremism and behaviours emerging from radical ideologies.²² This renewed attention has been accompanied by the implementation of many new programs aimed at countering violent extremism, often with a specific focus placed on youth.²³ Young people are particularly exposed and vulnerable to radical discourses and affiliation, as in the process of defining their identity they are vulnerable to “ideological and passionate solicitations”²⁴, they search for “affiliation and meaning”²⁵ and might be exposed to driving factors.²⁶

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- 20 Craven-Matthews, Catriona, and Pierre Englebert. “A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction.” *African Security* 11.1 (2018): 1-31. Raineri, Luca, and Francesco Strazzari. «Jihadism in Mali and the Sahel: Evolving dynamics and patterns.» Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies (2017). Pellerin Mathieu (2019) *Les violences armées au Sahara. Du djihadisme aux insurrections?*. Etudes de l’Ifri, December, Paris:Ifri.
- 21 Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, “Stabilizing Mali: The Challenges to Conflict Resolution”, June 2018, available at: https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2018_06_Stabilizing-Mali_EN.pdf; Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, “Between Destabilization and Local Embeddedness: Jihadist Groups in the Malian Conflict Since 2015”, August 2018, available at: https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018_08_Campana-Report-Stabilizing-Mali.pdf
- 22 Among them, we can recall International Alert, 2016. *They treat us like jihadists. Policy Brief*. London: December 2016; Pellerin M., 2017. *Les trajectoires de radicalisation religieuse au Sahel. Notes de l’IFRI*. Paris: Février 2017; International Alert, 2018. *If Victims Become Perpetrators: Factors Contributing to Vulnerability and Resilience to Violent Extremism in the Central Sahel*. London: June 2018 ; Fédération Internationale des Droits de l’Homme, 2018. *Dans le centre du Mali, les populations prises au piège du terrorisme et du contre-terrorisme*. Paris : November 2018 ; International Crisis Group, “Speaking with the “Bad Guys”: Toward Dialogue with Central Mali’s Jihadists”, African Report No. 276, May 2019, available at: <https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Sahel-Violent-Extremism-Gender-EN-2020.pdf>
- 23 Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook”, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html>
- 24 Saul Levine, ‘Youth in terroristic groups, gangs, and cults: The allure, the animus, and the alienation’, *Psychiatric Annals* 29.6 (1999), pp. 342-343
- 25 Jeff Victoroff, ‘The mind of the terrorist: A review and critique of psychological approaches’, *Journal of Conflict resolution* 49.1 (2005), p. 24
- 26 UNDP, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment”, 2017, available at: <http://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/>

Scope and aim of the research

The present report is part of a broader initiative jointly carried out by UNICRI and ICCT, the Mali (Dis-) Engagement and Re-Integration related to Terrorism (MERIT) project. The project targets both the prison environment as well as the broader community to facilitate effective Violent Extremist Offender (VEO) reintegration while reducing the risk of radicalisation in the larger population, especially among youth. With this report, UNICRI and ICCT aim to contribute to advance knowledge and awareness on the issue of violent extremism

in Mali through the lenses and voices of the country's youth. Giving voice to a representative sample, the report offers new insights on the impact of terrorism on youth, who have not been selected in virtue of their engagement in violent extremism or conflict, but whose life is highly affected by the terrorist presence in their country. In the analysis of the perceptions that young Malians have of their life, their role, and their future under the terrorist threat, the following guiding questions have driven the qualitative data collection process:

How do young people define terrorist groups and how do they perceive their presence?

How do they relate terrorist presence to the wider context of insecurity in which they are living?

What effects does the terrorist presence have on their life and what is the relationship of such effects with other elements of insecurity that characterise the country?

How do young people explain the choice made by some of their peers, to take up arms and join these groups?

What do they feel they can do to counter the terrorist threat in their country and within their communities?

These questions have been tackled through different lenses to analyse the different dimensions of the impact of violent extremism on youth. The report is built on the findings of a set of in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with young people in Mali and is composed of three main sections preceded by a brief overview on the methodology: the first will analyse the ways youths identify and define terrorist groups in the Malian context,

and their perceptions regarding the presence of those groups; the second will review the impact of the terrorist groups on youths' lives in terms of violence, governance, as well as the economic impact and changes in everyday life and social relationships; the third will conclude with an assessment of young people's vulnerability and resilience to violent extremism.

Methodology

The report builds upon 24 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted in the regions of Bamako, Menaka, and Mopti.

Researched regions

Data was collected in the three locations of Bamako, Menaka, and Mopti, with the purpose of allowing for comparison between areas where terrorist organisations have been present for varying lengths of time and to varying extents. Indeed, the epicentre of terrorism and other forms of violence has progressively shifted since 2015 from the north, where Menaka is located, to the central region of Mopti. Although Bamako has been the site of several high-profile terrorist at-

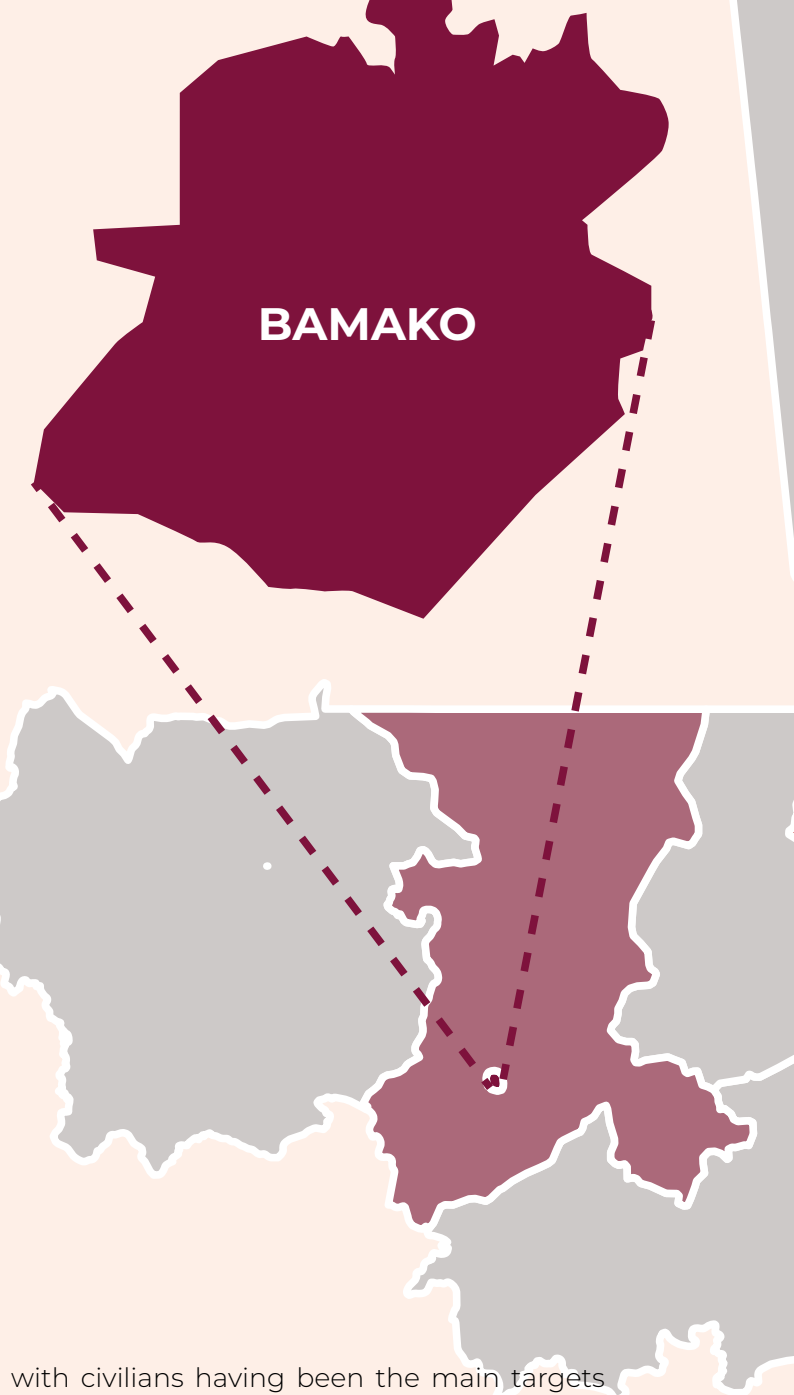
tacks, primarily targeting internationals, it remains largely secure and less exposed to terrorist violence as compared to Menaka and Mopti. Moreover, and while the phenomenon of terrorism represents the main focus of the research, the report does not only explore how terrorist activities directly affect youths' lives, but also sheds light on interrelated aspects that are influenced by its presence and affect the general security situation.

Bamako

The picture is quite different in Bamako, Mali's capital and most populous city. Bamako – and more generally southern Mali – are probably the only parts of the country where the central government has consistently exercised its authority, and where basic services and public security delivery have been maintained throughout the crisis.³² Terrorist organisations do not have a notable physical presence in Bamako, and they do not represent an alternative centre of power, as they do in Menaka and Mopti. At the same time, Bamako has been hit by four different terrorist attacks since 2015, and initiatives for implementing and reinforcing security and counterterrorist programs in the city have been adopted on a regular basis, affecting the life of the inhabitants.³³

Mopti

For its part, Mopti and its surroundings have seen increasing levels of violence more recently, particularly since 2016. Mopti is the biggest city of the inner Niger Delta, and the second city of central Mali after Ségou. Mainly inhabited by Fulani, Dogon, Songhay, and Bozo communities, Mopti emerged as the epicentre of the Malian crisis when Amadou Koufa's Katiba Macina settled in the area. In a region where the double impact of climate change and institutional mismanagement of lands has created the ideal conditions for the development of a new theatre of armed conflict,²⁹ terrorist activities overlap with and further exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions and socio-economic grievances. The main clashes have been recorded between the Katiba Macina and the Dogon self-defence militias,



with civilians having been the main targets and victims of what is dangerously becoming both an inter- (and intra-)ethnic and an anti-state conflict.³⁰ Since the beginning of 2020, a new development in the crisis has been the open conflict involving the members of the Katiba Macina, who have been under the al-Qaida-affiliated JNIM since 2017, and the fighters of ISGS who recently penetrated the region of Mopti. As underlined by different observers, this clash is representing the end of the “Sahelian exception” within the global rivalry between Al-Qaida and the Islamic State.³¹ As in the case of Menaka, terrorist groups do not directly control the city, but they exert authority over rural areas where they significantly affect the mobility of the population.

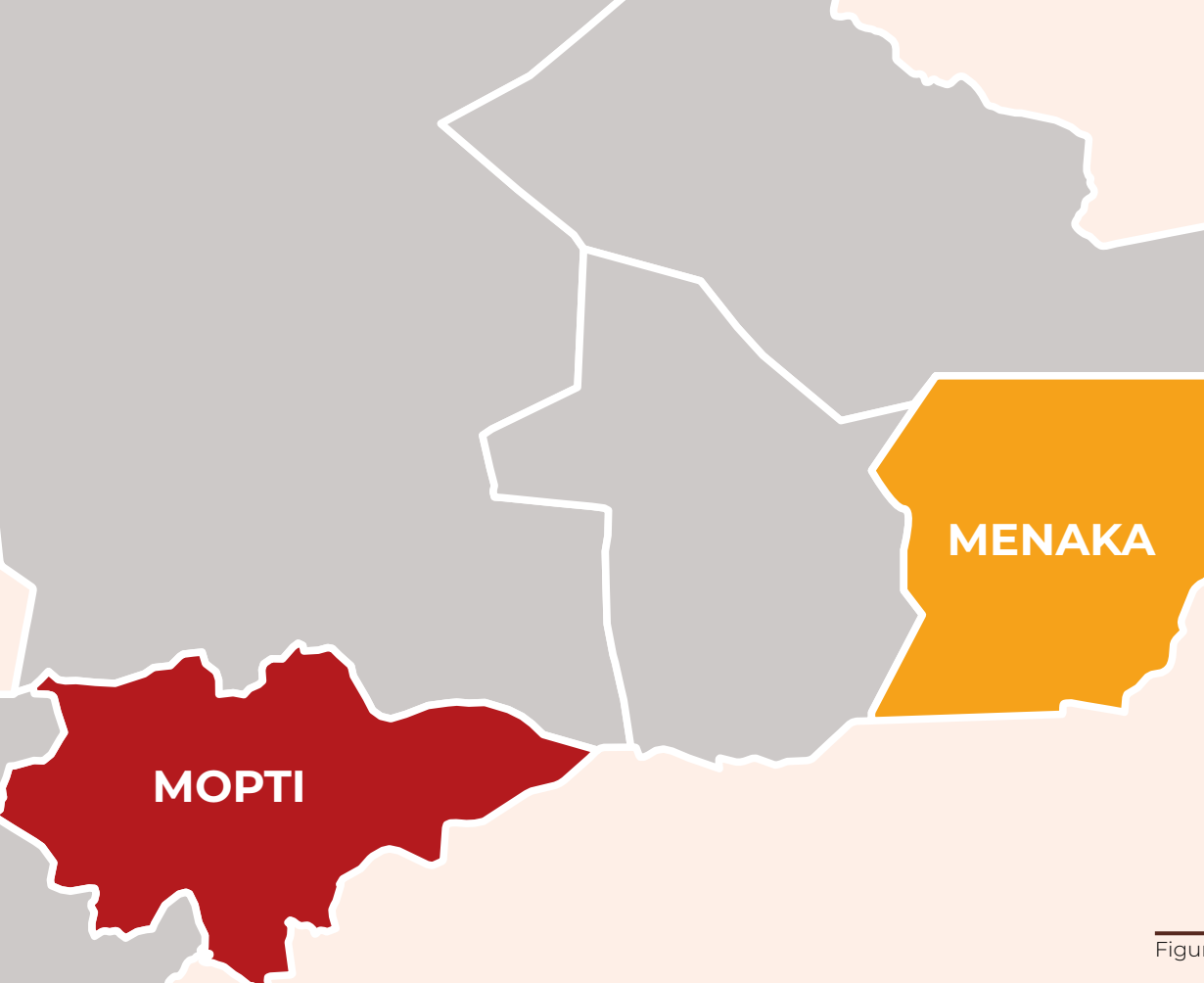


Figure 2 Research areas

Menaka

Menaka has been strongly affected by the crisis since its inception, having been captured by the MNLA in January 2012 and then taken over in November of the same year by the MUJAO. The city, mostly inhabited by Tuareg, Songhay, and Hausa communities, is situated in the recently established region of Menaka²⁷ in the north-eastern part of Mali, along the Mali-Niger border. Menaka remains one of the most exposed provinces to the presence

and violence of both terrorist organisations and other armed groups born from the fragmentation of the 2012 rebel front. The Indelimane attack of 1 November 2019 – in which 53 Malian soldiers were killed and whose responsibility was claimed by ISGS – took place only a few kilometres away from Menaka, confirming the continued vulnerability of the region to violent extremist actors.²⁸

27 Aljazeera, “Mali: Dozens of troops killed in military outpost attack”, 3 November 2019, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/03/mali-dozens-of-troops-killed-in-military-outpost-attack/>

28 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/mali-dozens-troops-killed-military-outpost-attack-191102052705177.html>

29 Benjaminsen, Tor A., and Boubacar Ba. “Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation.” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46.1 (2019): 1-20.

30 Institute for Security Studies, “Violent extremism, organised crime and local conflicts in Liptako-Gourma”, 10 December 2019, available at: <https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/violent-extremism-organised-crime-and-local-conflicts-in-liptako-gourma>

31 The Africa Report, “Sahel – a new battlefield between IS and Al-Qaeda?”, 4 June 2020, available at: <https://www.theafricareport.com/29184/sahel-a-new-battlefield-between-is-and-al-qaeda/>

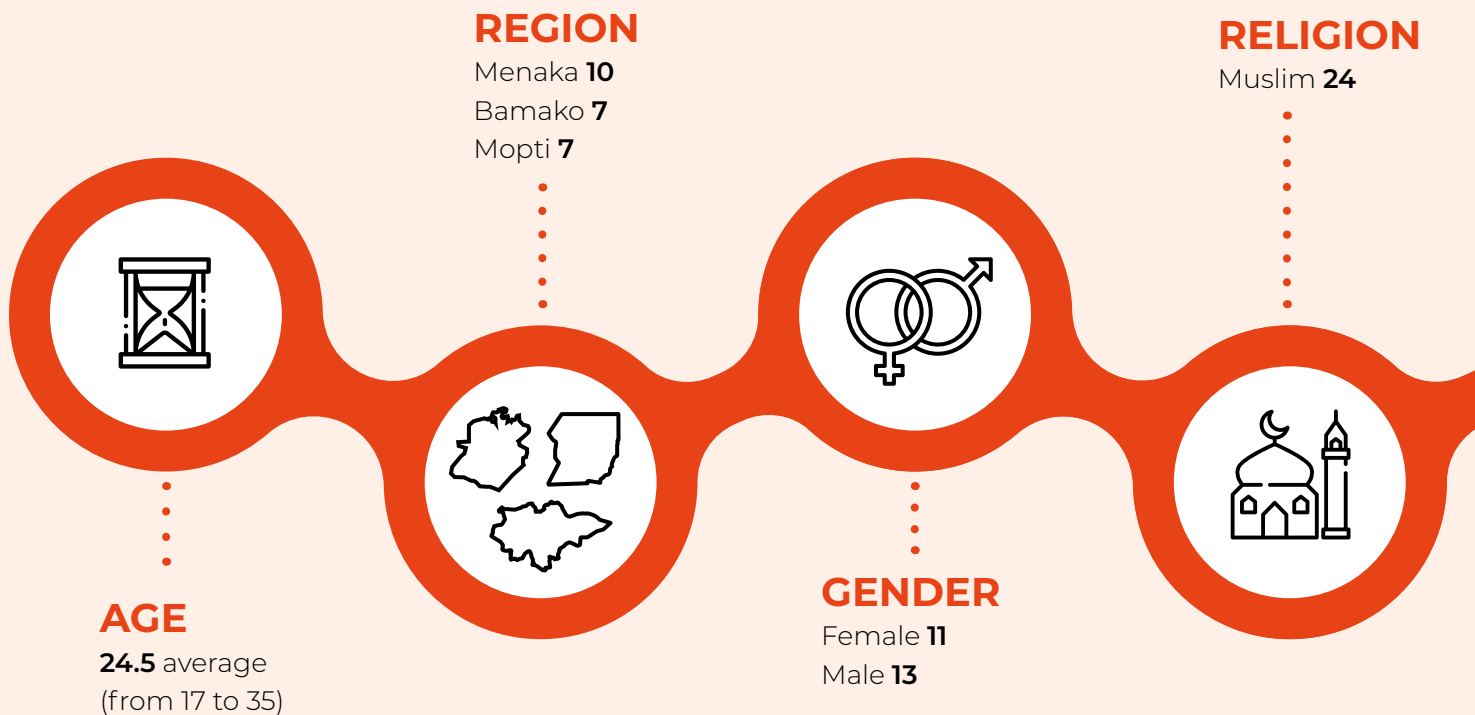
32 Craven-Matthews, Catriona, and Pierre Englebert. “A Potemkin state in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction.” *African Security* 11.1 (2018): 1-31.

33 The four terrorist attacks in Bamako took place in March 2015 at the La Terrace Restaurant (killing 5 and wounding 9), in November 2015 at the Radisson Blue hotel (killing 22 and wounding 9), against the siege of the EUTM mission in March 2016 (killing 1 terrorist), and in June 2017 against Le Campementresort (killing 9).

Participants

Given the scope of the research, participants in the interviews were selected based on a range of key criteria: the respondents were all young Malians, playing different roles with-

in their communities, both acting as young leaders as well as without any specific prominent role; an equal gender split was sought as much as possible; representatives of vari-



MAIN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

ous ethnic groups, with differing levels of education and professional occupations, were included in order to obtain a representative

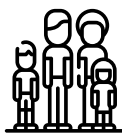
sample of the demographics of each regions for the survey, and to have a comprehensive view of the situation on the ground.

FAMILY SITUATION

Single **9**
 Married **13**
 Engaged **1**
 Widow **1**
58% of the interviewees have children (an average of 3)

JOB

From unemployed to teachers, vendors, traders, herders and farmers. Several participants employed in the day-by-day and informal economy.



ETHNICITY

Various ethnic groups:
 Bambara **5**
 Tamasheq **4**
 Songhai **4**
 Haoussa **2**
 Peul **7**
 Dogon **1**
 Bozo **1**

EDUCATION (LEVEL AND TYPE)

From none **2** to basic **2**:
 Franco-Arabic school **1**;
 primary **2**, secondary **4**; university **1**
 and koranic school **8**.
 Four interviewees were still enrolled in an education programme (were, rather than are as the complete thought there is four interviewees were still enrolled in an education programme.)



DEFINING YOUTH IN MALI

At a legal and cultural level, in Mali and in the neighbouring countries, “youth” is considered to cover a range between 0 and 35 years old.

In this research, we selected our participants in accordance with this threshold (participants were between 17 and 35 years old).

At the same time, in Sahelian society, the distinction between youth and adulthood is foremost based on the individual’s occupational, social, and marital status. For men in particular, recognition as an adult is primarily linked to their capacity to find a job, enabling them to guarantee their livelihood, to build a house and get married. In rural contexts specifically, becoming an adult usually means having access to the decision-making processes within the community and/or the village.

Women, for their part, are usually subjected to minority status in relation to men, and their social conditions evolve mainly through marriage and motherhood. Moreover, the internal traditional structure of most Malian communities tends to be quite rigid, creating deep distinctions on the base of class and caste — which in turn has an impact on social status and on the transition from youth to adulthood. In more recent years, rising unemployment and the diffusion of violence have undermined this fixed social organisation, with the so-called “social minors”— those who share a low level of social recognition — trying to exploit the conditions created by persistent conflict to improve their status.

Data collection process

The data collection started in March 2020 and ended in May 2020. The length of the process is the result of a combination of factors, including security concerns related to both the ongoing conflict in northern and central Mali, as well as surrounding specific events, such as the parliamentary elections held on 29 March and 19 April 2020. ICCT and UNICRI developed the research design and an international researcher coordinated the data collection process and was supported by two local researchers with expertise on the topic, on the regions covered and on local languages and dialects to facilitate the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed to all respondents, in order to promote candid responses.

Four main themes were touched upon during the in-depth qualitative interviews: (1) the presence of terrorist groups, geographical distribution (in the country in general and in the proximity of the interviewee), variation over time, and intensity; (2) the impact – positive and negative – of the presence of terrorism on the interviewee youth's daily life, including direct contact and experience with

terrorist groups, practical and psychological changes related to the interviewee's personal routine and for young people in Mali in general, and institutional, economic and societal changes; (3) the criminal trajectory due to the presence of terrorist groups, including the support of Malian youth towards terrorism and its variation depending on location or gender, and youths' engagement in illegal activities; and (4) youth resilience towards terrorism, especially their personal role and the role of young people in general to counter the impact of the presence of terrorist groups, and what could help them being more effective in this purpose. The qualitative research was based on an interview guide developed around the four thematic areas and comprising both simple and open-ended questions asked verbally to the youths in one-on-one face-to-face interview. Interviewers were free to pursue emergent questions during the research when relevant.³⁴ While the interview guide was developed in French, local researchers also resorted to other languages and local dialects to convey the meaning of the questions and collect answers from the participants.

34 Charmaz K (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), p. 41.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINITION AND PRESENCE OF THE “TERRORISTS”

TERRORISM, VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND JIHADISM

The authors use terrorism and violent extremism interchangeably, but it is worth highlighting that when quoting the interview or questionnaire participants, the authors have retained the respondents' use of the term “jihadists” or “jihadism”. Among Malian youth, and Malian society more generally, these terms – or indeed the term terrorism itself – are used to describe actors or actions that fall outside of the normally accepted definition. Thus, it is common for Malians to describe criminal actors not affiliated with



A MULTIFACETED AND COMPLEX TALE

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violent extremist groups as terrorists or jihadists. This report has preserved the respondents' choice of words, but when not referring to responses from the data gathering, uses terrorism and violent extremism, in line with the main characteristics of these phenomena outlined by the United Nations³⁵.

³⁵ Charmaz K (2017). The power of constructivist grounded theory for critical inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(1), p. 41.

Terrorists as the perpetrators of violence: jihadists and beyond

“ *Insecurity is everywhere in the country.*³⁶ ”

When dealing with the identification of terrorist actors, some discrepancies exist between the external discourse describing terrorism in Mali, and the perceptions of the Malian youth. These points of friction regard: 1) the misconception, long conveyed through the media, that the current terrorist and security threats in Mali originally emerged from other countries, and evolved independently from the wider context of crisis in the country; 2) the fact that it is always possible to distinguish terrorist actors from other non-state armed groups or criminal actors; and 3) the idea that making this distinction is useful and meaningful for local populations.

From a conceptual perspective, participants in the interviews share certain perceptions about who the “jihadist” actors are: all interviewees underline the connection between the development of the Malian crisis and the definitions of what they call “terrorists” and/or “jihadists”. They also underline the presumed religious motivations behind jihadist actions and suggest that the objective of these actors is to impose the *Sharia* over conquered lands, through the use of violence. Nevertheless, the answers entail different nuanced understandings of the circumstances, a fact which

is understandable given the country’s complicated situation. Different interpretations of events or contexts are often linked to different geographic origins and ethnic affiliations: interviewees from Menaka, as the most exposed to the jihadist terrorist presence for the longest time, appear as those who have the best comprehension of the divisions between the various groups, and who are able to distinguish between jihadist actors and other armed formations in their area. In addition, according to one interviewee from Mopti, the term reflects its use by extremist groups: “we call them jihadists, because they employ that term for themselves, and we do not have to invent a name for them.”³⁷ Throughout the interviews, the definition of terrorist used by the respondents appears even broader than that of jihadist in their usage. It often includes all armed actors accused of committing abuses and massacres against the population, or a specific community, including self-defence militias and (in some cases) the Malian security forces.

The interviewees tend to consider 2012 as the turning point that led to the significant change in the security conditions of their country.

36 Interview Participant, Bamako.

37 Interview Participant, Mopti.

“ Security has changed in Mali since 2012, as a consequence of the coup d'état against the president Amadou Toumani Touré. After the coup, the jihadists and the terrorists arrived in northern Mali, and more specifically in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. With the arrival of these jihadist terrorists, security started to change in Mali.³⁸

Accordingly, they attribute the current situation in the country to a large extent to terrorism. Their responses indicate that they understand the changing dynamics of the problem of terrorism in the country over time: at the beginning of the crisis, most of the international analyses dedicated to the Malian conflict depicted terrorist organisations as the main cause and source of violence and instability in Mali, suggesting that they represented an exogenous threat which had impacted

a peaceful country.³⁹ While terrorist groups are strictly identified as insurgents, predominantly driven by ideological and religious motivations, and who are still depicted as the most pressing security challenge for Mali,⁴⁰ more recently, this vision of the Malian conflict has changed. There is an increasing recognition that many of the armed groups are now led by Malians who rely on local constituencies for support.

“ There have been a lot of changes in the security situation in recent years, with new actors and new operational modes.⁴¹

“ During the last years the security situation has deeply changed, everyone is scared [...] There are people carrying weapons everywhere. There are three kinds of armed individuals, on the one hand the Donso hunters, the jihadists, and on the other hand the Malian army. Between them, we do not know who are the more dangerous for us. All of these three groups kill us.⁴²

38 Interview Participant, Bamako.

39 Laurent, Samuel. Sahelistan. Le Seuil, 2013 ; De Castelli, Laurent. "Mali: from sanctuary to Islamic state." The RUSI Journal 159.3 (2014): 62-68.

40 Raineri, Luca, and Edoardo Baldaro. "Resilience to What? EU Capacity-Building Missions in the Sahel." *Projecting Resilience Across the Mediterranean*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020. 169-187.

41 Interview Participant, Menaka.

42 Interview Participant, Mopti.

Some of the participants, in particular those from Bamako, named the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) as one of the “terrorist” groups active in the country: “There are many groups. There is AQIM, there is MNLA, there is MUJAO.”⁴³ The identification of MNLA, a party to the 2015 peace process, as a terrorist group reveals the persistence of some deeply-rooted divisions within Malian society. For those living in Bamako, where the presence of the state is better established, the

feeling of a Malian identity is stronger,⁴⁴ and the memories of atrocities committed by MNLA’s fighters against Malian soldiers during the earlier rebellion remain vivid, “terrorist” groups include not only violent extremist groups, but also secessionist movements, including many that are signatories of the Algiers Peace Agreement.⁴⁵ The northern cause remains poorly understood in Bamako, and even today the peace process does not enjoy full support, especially in the south.

“ They say there are many different jihadist groups. I am not able to make a distinction among them. To me, they are all jihadists.”⁴⁶

“ You know, there are so many groups in Mali, some of them are not even jihadists, they are simple bandits.”⁴⁷

The dynamics of fragmentation and competition that have shaped terrorist organisations in the country appear to have also influenced the interview respondents’ answers regarding the distinction of the different sub-groups. Interviewees acknowledge, more or

less explicitly, that “jihadists” are those actors using violence for implementing an extremist political agenda inspired by a radical vision of Islam, but they do not necessarily make a distinction between the different leaders and groups.

43 Interview participant, Bamako.

44 In the various investigations conducted by the Afrobarometer during the last years, the results confirm that the self-identification with the National community is stronger, and tends to exceed other – ethnic, religious, or other – competing identities, in Bamako and in the southern part of the country. On the contrary, in other areas of the country, and in the north in particular, the Malian identity appears as more diluted, and exceeded by other affiliations. For more information on this topic, see: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

45 Human Rights Watch, “Mali: War Crimes by Northern Rebels”, 30 April 2012, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/04/30/mali-war-crimes-northern-rebels>

46 Interview Participant, Bamako.

47 Interview Participant, Bamako.

“ *The terrorist groups which are present in the country are MUJAO, Al-Qaida, Ansar Dine, the Katiba of Amadou Koufa, and AQIM. But honestly I do not know which group arrived before the others.*⁴⁸ ”

Consequently, while “Koufa’s men”⁴⁹ emerge as the main representatives of the terrorist actors for the Mopti respondents, others still talk about MUJAO – a group which merged with another local organisation to form Al-Mourabitoun in 2013, and later merged to form part of JNIM in 2017. Respondents from Menaka more clearly distinguish between

Al-Qaida and the Islamic State, showing also a certain understanding of internal organisational competition. However, apart from the most famous leaders such as Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Koufa, none of the participants specified the name of terrorist leaders, and one of them even refused to name groups, likely out of a mix of fear and disdain.⁵⁰

“ *This crisis develops new cycles of violence and takes new forms. Often the changes develop in forms that nobody knows. There is not only one kind of change, there are many.*⁵¹ ”

Finally, the more recent dynamics of the crisis are decisive for explaining why young people adopt a broad and, in a certain sense, problematic definition of terrorism. In a context characterised by high levels of violence and the absence of a central authority able to exert a monopoly over the use of armed force, terrorists are only a part of a broader worrying picture. Similarly, the different percep-

tions of the security forces can be understood only if viewed within this context. While participants from Bamako mainly express trust and support towards the Malian army, people from Mopti, particularly from the Fulani communities, are more nuanced in their views, with some even including the FAMa (*Forces Armées du Mali*, Malian Armed Forces) on their personal list of terrorists.⁵²

“ *In a way, the fault lies with the army which [...] committed abuses in the village. This is what created this problem. Today in my village many young boys and girls join these jihadist groups. These boys who could have become great executives and are in the bush today.*⁵³ ”

48 Interview participant, Bamako.

49 Interview Participant, Mopti.

50 Interview Participant, Bamako.

51 Interview Participant, Mopti.

52 Interview Participants, Mopti.

53 Interview Participant, Mopti.

A pervasive but differentiated presence: the terrorist manifold threat

When discussing the terrorist presence and impact on the lives of young Malians, different experiences of respondents have resulted from the different levels of exposure *vis-à-vis* longstanding violence in the three different regions. The experience of young inhabitants in Bamako seems to be different from that of their peers in Menaka and Mopti, a fact which can create even internal divisions: “Young

people really suffer in Mopti, but in Bamako, some of the youths do not believe this is true because for them, as long as they are not directly touched, everything is ok.”⁵⁴ Yet, even for some of Bamako’s inhabitants, everyday life is characterised by the pervasive threat of violence, instability, and terror created by the conflict, as evidenced by two interviewees from Bamako:

*Insecurity is high in Bamako [...] There has been insecurity everywhere in Mali in recent years, but the situation in Bamako is more worrying because Bamako should be more secure but this is not the case. Security inside Bamako is even lower than in other localities in Mali. In Bamako the robberies are carried out at midday. We didn’t experience that before.*⁵⁵

*Even at our level here in Bamako we are really afraid. Above all, we fear the spread of insecurity in the south.*⁵⁶

Still, terrorist groups’ presence remains more visible and felt more prominently by youth living in central and northern regions of the country. Confirming the impression that the region of Menaka is almost completely un-

der the “control” of different terrorist groups, when asked where terrorist groups are entrenched, one of our interview respondents reported that “the terrorist groups are settled in the southeast and in the north of Mena-

54 Interview Participant, Mopti.

55 Interview Participant, Bamako.

56 Interview Participant, Bamako.

ka [...] and they intervene all along the frontier with Niger.”⁵⁷ Another interview participant went even further in the explanation, arguing that “ISGS is everywhere along the frontier with Niger, and between Ansongo [90km south of Gao] and Menaka. JNIM is in the north, between Menaka and Kidal.”⁵⁸ The two main groups identified by the interviewees are JNIM led by Iyad ag Ghali, and ISGS of

Abou Walid al-Sahraoui. While JNIM is effectively well positioned in the area around Kidal, where it can count on the support that part of local populations offers to the Tuareg leader, ag Ghali, ISGS appears less “territorialised”, as its strategy of alliances established with different trans-border communities allows the group to freely move and recruit between Menaka and the Tillaberi region in Niger.

“ *The security situation has deeply changed in recent years. This is why I am saying that the situation is fairly more dangerous than the years before, in particular in northern and central Mali: Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal, Mopti and Ségou.*⁵⁹

Currently, the situation in central Mali is similar to the one in Menaka, although the primary group operating in this area is JNIM’s Katiba Macina. The group can be found throughout the whole Macina⁶⁰ – the area extending across central Mali from the Mauritanian border to Burkina Faso that corresponds to the territory of the historical Macina Empire, established during the 19th century between Mopti, Ségou and Djenne. As described by an interviewee, the members of JNIM are identified with the Fula terms bahé (“those with long beards”) or yimbelade.⁶¹ This latter term, which means “those who live in the bush”, seemingly confirms that terrorist fighters do not directly occupy the main cities, but use rural areas as their rear bases for organising and planning their initiatives. According to

respondents, apart from attacks themselves, during the day, terrorist insurgents tend to be organised in small groups of 3-4 persons moving from one village to the other, in order to show their presence to the inhabitants.⁶²

The situation in Mopti recently has been made more complex, due to the dynamic between Al-Qaida’s and the Islamic State’s affiliates. Starting in early 2020, members of ISGS have openly contested and tried to replace the Katiba Macina as the leading organisation in central Mali, launching a phase of violent competition, which has expanded to northern Mali and now includes the other Al-Qaida’s affiliated groups.⁶³ Within the mounting chaos and the rising violence caused by this new line of conflict, local communities still try to distinguish between the different groups.

57 Interview Participant, Menaka.

58 Interview Participant, Menaka.

59 Interview Participant, Mopti.

60 Interview Participant, Mopti.

61 Interview Participant, Mopti.

62 Interview Participants, Mopti.

63 Center for Global Policy, “ISIS in Africa: The End of the “Sahel Exception””, 2 June 2020, available at: <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/>

- ISGS
- AQIM
- KATIBA MACINA
- JNIM
- TERRORISTS

SENEGAL

● kayes

GUINEA

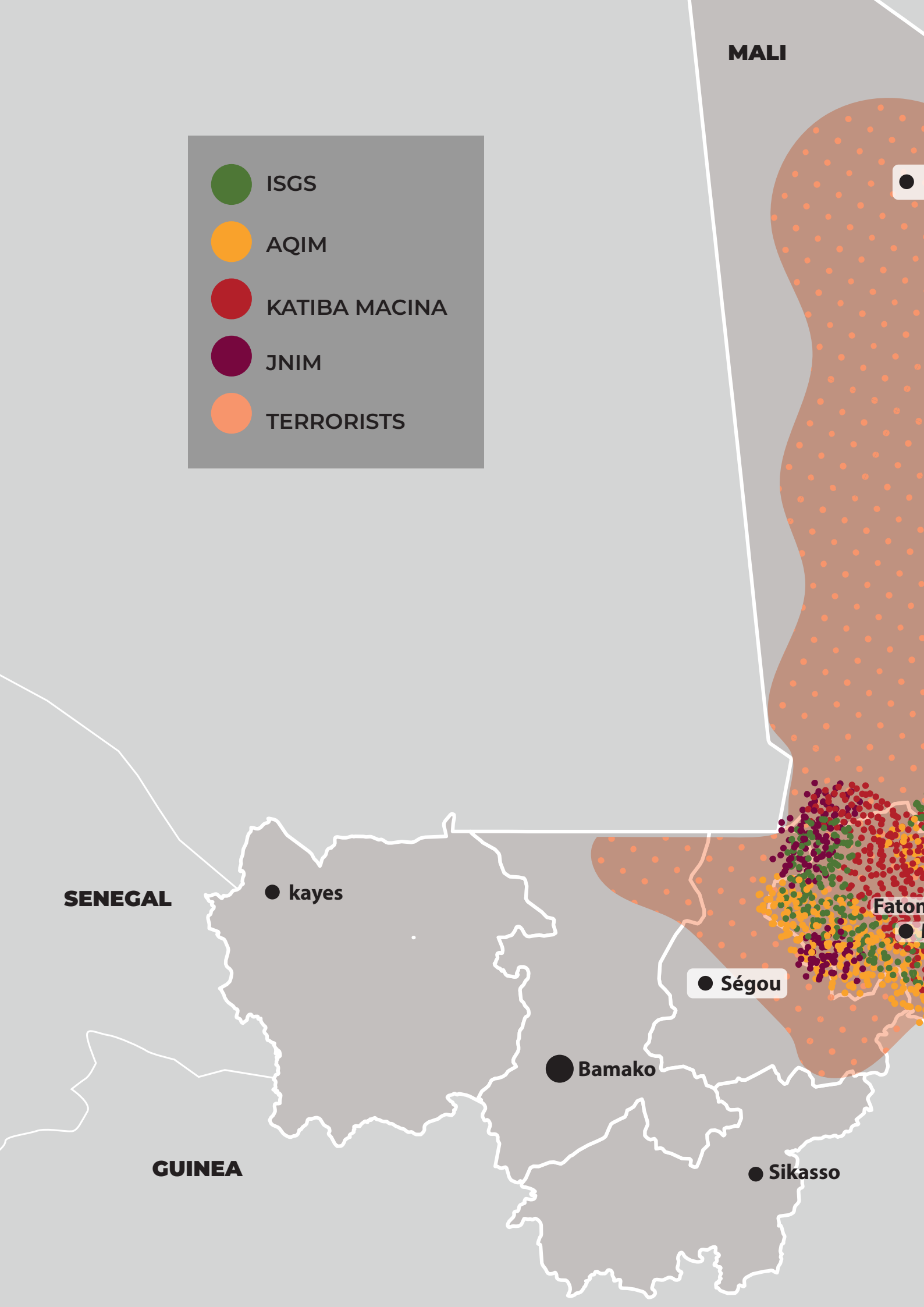
● Bamako

● Ségou

● Sikasso

MALI

Faton



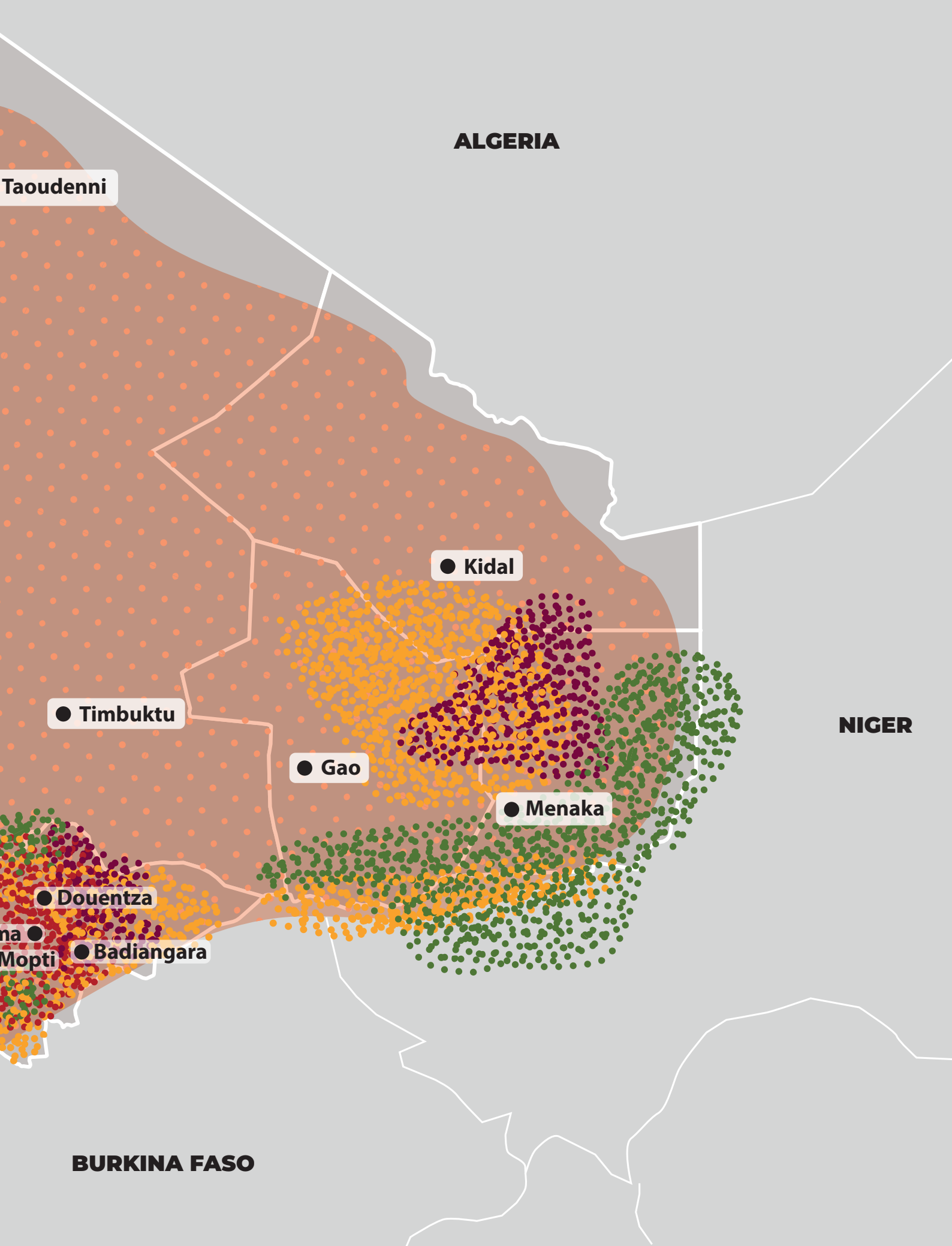


Figure 3 Visual illustration of terrorist organisations based on interviewees' perceptions

“ We do not know so many things about those who fight for Dawla [Islamic State in Arabic] [...] both sides claim that the others are apostates. For distinguishing between them, we say Dawla’s men wear a red tissue, Al-Qaida’s fighters a white turban.⁶⁴ ”

Interestingly, despite geographic distance it appeared that youths from Bamako are also well informed about the position of the different groups throughout the country – partly thanks to the traditional media and debates they can follow,⁶⁵ but also through social media, including WhatsApp and Facebook, which are useful instruments used both by terrorist groups, local politicians, and members of the civil society for reaching and influencing public opinion in Mali.⁶⁶ As stated by a participant from Mopti who

lived in Bamako, “They [the terrorist groups] do not hide what they do, they are present and discuss on social networks. Everybody hears them and listens to them. This is how we know that they are present.”⁶⁷

Concerning the origins of terrorist groups, different interview respondents recalled that even prior to 2012, some of individuals who later joined the armed jihadist insurgence groups were already preaching in the respondents’ villages and in the main mosques:

“ Before, they [the terrorists] were already there under different forms. From time to time, they came just for preaching [...] they gave money to the population.⁶⁸ ”

Whether these preachers and extremist groups were all from local communities, or if this initial penetration was led by foreign actors, remains a debated issue.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, testimonies from Menaka confirm that

starting in 2012 the strategies employed for gaining the support of the population were substituted by initiatives aimed at gaining military control over the territory.

64 Interview Participant, Mopti.

65 Mostly on radio or on the newspapers, at least in Bamako.

66 Elise Vermeersch, Julie Coleman, Meryl Demuyneck and Elena Dal Santo, “The Role of Social Media in Mali and its relation to violent extremism: a Youth Perspective”, 18 March 2020, available at: <http://www.unicri.it/index.php/news/role-social-media-mali-and-its-relation-violent-extremism-youth-perspective>

67 Interview Participant, Mopti.

68 International Alert, “Dogmatism or Pragmatism? Violent extremism and gender in the central Sahel”, July 2020, available at: <https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Sahel-Violent-Extremism-Gender-EN-2020.pdf>

69 Baldaro, Edoardo. “A dangerous method: how Mali lost control of the north, and learned to stop worrying.” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29.3 (2018): 579-603.

“ It is after the crisis in 2012 that the military form of terrorism started to be more evident. At the beginning, they [the terrorist fighters] were constrained by the rebel groups who were pursuing a separatist agenda, while the terrorist groups wanted to impose an Islamic state. Cohabitation was difficult. After the French intervention, the terrorist groups, with the help of other armed groups, moved to the forests in the tri-frontier area [the border area between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger], and this allowed them to reorganise. After this reorganisation these groups decided to go on the offensive, attacking military posts and villages.⁷⁰

Mopti respondents underline how the first group who penetrated the area was MUJAO in 2013, and that, from 2015 onwards, people presenting themselves as “wise men” preached in the main mosques of the region under the leadership of Iyad ag Ghali, then leader of Ansar Dine.⁷¹ The tactics employed in the Macina between 2013 and 2015 reproduced those that had been applied in

northern Mali few years before.⁷² The creation of contacts with local populations, the identification of potential local constituencies and an improved knowledge of the territory in fact paved the way to the following offensive launched by Katiba Macina starting from 2016, with the decisive support of Iyad ag Ghali’s men.

70 Interview Participant, Menaka.

71 Interview Participant, Mopti.

72 See for example Sandor, A., and Campana, A. 2019. Les groupes djihadistes au Mali, entre violence, recherche de légitimité et politiques locales. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 53(3): 415-430 ; Jourde, C., Brossier, M., and Cissé, M. G. 2019. Prédation et violence au Mali: élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti. *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue canadienne des études africaines*, 53(3): 431-445.

CHAPTER 3

THE IMPACT OF TERRORIST GROUPS

Young Malians are confronted with a complex, changing, and dangerous environment, which affects their perceptions and influence the way they define threats and challenges. As already emphasised, against the backdrop of armed politics and civil unrest, terrorist groups represent only a part of a wider picture of violence, instability, and uncertainty. The Malian crisis is not only a fight against

terrorism; struggles for power and authority involve various actors who pursue complementary, competing, or conflicting agendas and interests. Attacks and abuses against the population are committed by ethnic militias, self-defence groups, criminal organisations and even by the state security forces.⁷³ In 2019, around 4,000 people in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso lost their lives as a conse-

⁷³ France24, “At least two dozen killed in central Mali”, 6 June 2020, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/20200606-militant-attack-kills-more-than-two-dozen-in-central-mali>



HOW LIFE CHANGES UNDER THREAT

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quence of armed attacks.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, the weakened capacity of central authorities to deliver essential public services and security in vast areas of the country has created new opportunities for criminal and predato-

ry entrepreneurs,⁷⁵ and is forcing local communities to modify their economic strategies and practices. As a direct consequence, illegality and trafficking are expanding, offering a “valuable” livelihood alternative for a grow-

⁷⁴ Le Monde, “La coalition anti-Etat islamique « préoccupée » par la situation au Sahel”, 5 June 2020, available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/05/la-coalition-anti-etat-islamique-preoccupee-par-la-situation-au-sahel_6041848_3212.html

⁷⁵ The Tony Blair Foundation, Global Extremism Monitor (2019), <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/articles/Global-Extremism-Monitor-Islamist-Violence-after-ISIS.pdf>

ing part of the population.⁷⁶ Moreover, these elements contribute to create and further social mistrust at different levels, antagonising inter-ethnic tensions and reducing trust among individuals.

Notwithstanding the extensive overlap of factors, respondents were still able to attribute specific outcomes to the different actors, and to distinguish among them and the impact they produce on their lives. Through their responses, it is possible to explore the impact that a specific group of armed actors, namely

those terrorist groups who claim to pursue an Islamist agenda, have produced on the lives of our young respondents. For analytical purposes, there are four main categories where, according to our respondents, the presence and the impact of the terrorists can be perceived and exposed. These are: 1) armed violence and physical threat; 2) territorial control and local governance (more evident in the cases of Menaka and Mopti); 3) economy and livelihood; and 4) social and psychological aspects.

Violence and physical threats

Terrorist violence has a double purpose in Mali: while violence is used against the rivals of the groups, it also represents a tool of governance over the population.

Attacks against national security forces, international interveners such as UN and French troops, or against other armed groups and militias have taken various forms. These range from suicide bombings and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on main roads, to attacks carried out using small arms and light weapons.⁷⁷ Terrorist groups are also reported to increasingly use technology, including commercially available drones, to carry out rapid, well-targeted attacks.⁷⁸ At the same time, these groups instrumentalise violence as a means for spreading terror and exerting control over the local population, in order to repress potential challengers, and to impose themselves as the dominant actor

in their area of action. The representatives of the state and security forces remain the main targets of terrorist violence, but local authorities, traditional chiefs, and any others who are suspected of cooperating with the state or other international forces can become targets, along with innocent civilians. Violence has a “political purpose”: armed actions are initially conducted to eliminate enemies and weaken popular resistance; where and when this objective is achieved, violence and terror become tools of governance.

Although civilians, local authorities and traditional chiefs have been increasingly targeted by terrorist attacks, interview participants from Bamako in particular emphasised that the primary targets remain the armed forces and militaries, despite the absence of attacks targeted against military forces in the capital. Their responses may result from the fact that

⁷⁶ The Global Initiative, “Fragile Borders: rethinking borders and insecurity in Northern Mali”, November 2016, available at: <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/tgiatoc-northern-mali-and-its-borders-report-1793-proof31.pdf>

⁷⁷ Small arms and light weapons (such as handguns and Kalashnikov rifles) have easily circulated in West Africa since the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the 1990s and weapons availability has increased after the fall of Gaddafi’s regime.

⁷⁸ Interview Participant, Menaka.

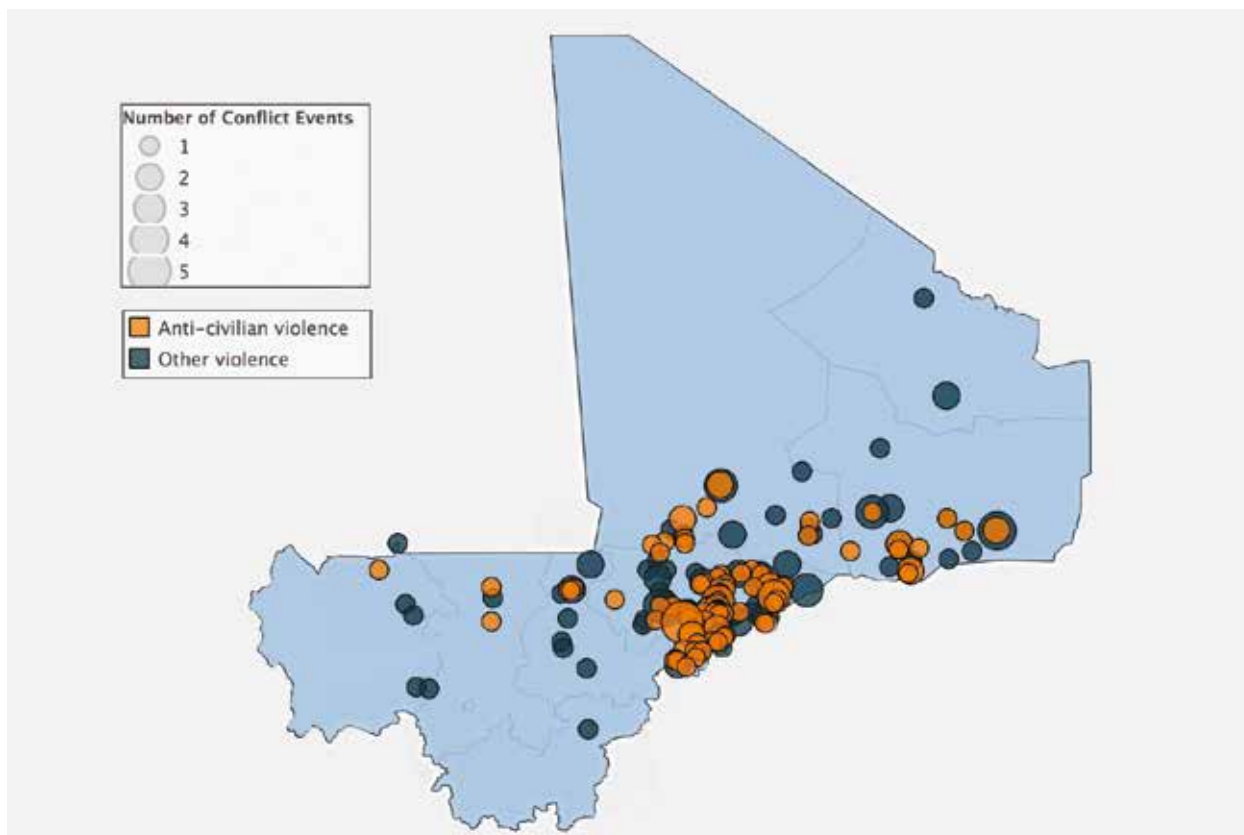


Figure 4 Trends on recent violent incidents in Mali (elaborated from ACLED data and based on image by Carboni, Andrea (16 April 2020). "Navigating through a violent insurgency in Mali – CDT Spotlight." Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). © 2020 ACLED All rights reserved. Used with permission from ACLED.

they have not personally witnessed terrorist attacks, but rather their perceptions of the problem are shaped by media (which has focused heavily on attacks against armed forces) or because they have been able to observe the effects that the various defeats and attacks suffered by the army have produced on soldiers and on the state's institutions since 2012. In this sense, terrorism has accelerated a process of disintegration that was already underway within the state's institutions.⁷⁹

Terrorist groups have also deeply impacted the territories that they occupy. Describing the occupation of the village of Dialloubé in the region of Mopti, one interviewee underlined that the first person who had been targeted, at the beginning of 2016, was the Commissioner for the Management of Lands and Public Waters, who was killed in an attack carried out by Katiba Macina. After this first killing, men from the Katiba Macina entered in the village, where they started preaching in the mosque and threatening all

⁷⁹ Interview Participant, Bamako.

those who opposed their arrival. During this same period, they also recruited fighters and informants among inhabitants. As the first occupation of Dialloubé occurred during the school holidays, informants were tasked with monitoring young students returning home from studying in Mopti. Over the following months, part of the population fled the village, which the army managed to reconquer. Nonetheless, the presence of the security forces – who carried out various punishments, including summary trials of those suspected of supporting the Katiba Macina – did not last long. Koufa's men besieged the village, blocking all movement of people and goods. The situation was solved after two months, when local chiefs decided to negotiate with Katiba Macina fighters and “surrendered” Dialloubé. Katiba Macina then exerted its vengeance on those who had previously fled the village, kidnapping or killing several persons.⁸⁰

Stories about the sieges of various villages, and the destruction of all symbols of civilian rule and the Malian state – including city halls, health centres and schools – were also reported by other respondents from Mopti and Menaka. The level of violence employed against inhabitants varied according to their “level of compliance”. Targeted killings were used against community and/or traditional leaders who refused to accept jihadist rule. A girl coming from a rural area north of Menaka reported the story of the chief of her village, who was kidnapped after he refused to cooperate with the terrorists and never returned.⁸¹ This is one example among many of kidnap-

pings and attacks carried out against local leaders or vocal citizens who tried to organise some sort of “opposition”.

Violence continues to be pervasive and ever-present in the lives of Malian youths. Intra-terrorist clashes, ethnic-based tensions and the conflict between terrorist groups and armed militias characterise the security landscape in northern and central Mali, while affecting life also in Bamako. Even in areas where the terrorist groups are well settled and unchallenged, they still utilise violence. Arguably the most worrisome phenomenon caused by the arrival and the success of the terrorist groups is the “militarisation” and the “weaponisation” of societal conflicts and inter-community relations. When reflecting on the evolution of the security context, almost all respondents clearly indicated JNIM and ISGS as the drivers of the escalation of the conflict in the country, which has in turn engendered brutal and indiscriminate responses by the other armed actors, including ethnic massacres by community-based militias, or indiscriminate civilian killings by the army.⁸² In the every-day lives of these youths, this has made weapons easily available, and has increased acceptance of the idea of using them as much for defensive purposes as for resolving disputes and gaining resources. Thus, as has been observed in numerous other conflict settings,⁸³ defeating terrorists will not be enough, if their presence has led to the normalisation of violence among youths and more generally, throughout Malian society.

80 Interview Participant, Mopti.

81 Interview Participant, Menaka.

82 Jeune Afrique, “La Minusma accuse les armées malienne et nigérienne d’avoir commis des exécutions extrajudiciaires,” 2 May 2020, available at <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/938689/politique/mali-la-minusma-accuse-les-armees-malienne-et-nigerienne-davoir-commis-des-executions-extrajudiciaires/>

83 Clayton, Govinda, and Andrew Thomson. “Civilianizing civil conflict: civilian defense militias and the logic of violence in intrastate conflict.” *International Studies Perspectives* 60.3 (2016): 499-510.

Governance and territorial control

Service delivery, control and management of territory, and the rule of law are fundamental aspects, which have been significantly affected by the creation of alternative systems of governance and authority implemented by the terrorist groups. Once again, deep differences exist between the situation in Bamako and the context faced by the inhabitants of Menaka and Mopti. The key variable is, of

course, the presence or the absence of state's authorities and representatives, who can exert their power and rule social and economic relations and disputes. Nevertheless, even if most of the issues presented primarily affect the life of northern and central Malians, others have an impact on the whole population. Mobility is the clearest example, as suggested by one of our respondents from Bamako:

“*Nowadays, going from Bamako to Gao takes the same time than going from Bamako to Abidjan, and is far more dangerous.*⁸⁴”

Bamako is one of the fastest growing cities on the African continent, mainly because of internal migrations from the rest of the country.⁸⁵ Consequently, domestic mobility is a fundamental issue for Bamako's inhabitants, for both economic and family reasons. Most of our interview respondents insisted on the fact that the connections with the other

parts of the country – for Bamako's citizens – or even with neighbouring villages and towns – for those from Mopti and Menaka – has become a dangerous and challenging endeavour, mostly because of the control exerted by terrorist groups on the main roads through check points, IEDs, or ambushes.

“*Insecurity on the roads has become the 'new normal' for us, because of the presence of IEDs.*⁸⁶”

84 Interview Participant, Bamako.

85 Atlas of Urban Expansion: Bamako, available at <http://atlasofurbanexpansion.org/cities/view/Bamako>

86 Interview Participant, Menaka.

“Among the main changes [...] are the difficulties in moving from one place to another. Particularly after 6 p.m., if you have not reached your destination, you will spend your night in the bush. And those who kill are also in the bush [...] In the opposite case, if you reach a check point at 6 p.m., you will not be allowed to leave and you have to spend the night at the check point. This measure did not exist before this insecurity [...] They force you to stay at the check point because routes are not safe and terrorist attacks can happen at every moment.”⁸⁷

At the same time, it is where the terrorist groups have directly challenged, or even substituted, the state as the main authority on the ground, that the most significant effects can be identified. In this sense, the cases of Menaka and Mopti present very interesting similarities. In both regions, terrorist groups do not directly occupy major cities, but in recent years they have started to impose their law and to develop embryonic forms of governance, using the countryside as rear bases. This is confirmed by our interview respondents both in Menaka and Mopti, who use the expression “men of the bush” or “those who live in the bush”⁸⁸ for identifying the terrorist fighters.⁸⁹ This situation creates a sort of “interdependence” between terrorist groups and local populations. Terrorist groups indeed rely on local communities for the provision of food and basic goods, and the gathering of essential information. They recruit local youths in order to control the populations and deepen

their presence in local societies.⁹⁰ In parallel, in the Macina around Mopti, and in the areas north and southeast of Menaka, since “all the representatives of the state are gone”,⁹¹ the men in the bush have become “the true masters, they manage current affairs and deliver justice.”⁹²

The imposition of an alternative system of governance by terrorist groups has generally followed the eradication of the few symbolic and effective state institutions that may have once existed. A sort of “terrorist blueprint” seems to exist, as the stories from Mopti and Menaka tend to correspond in large part with what was observed in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal during the occupation in 2012.⁹³ In Timbuktu as much as in the inner Niger Delta, terrorist groups eliminated taxes and customs, refused to apply secular civil law, and closed – or burnt – most of the schools and health centres. As underlined by our participants, these two latter points in particular, have a strong impact

87 Interview Participant, Mopti.

88 The term “brousse” is used by interviewees to indicate the bush.

89 Interview Participants, Menaka and Mopti.

90 Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and UNDP, “Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali,” 2019, available at <https://www.nupi.no/en/Publications/CRISTin-Pub/Local-Drivers-of-Violent-Extremism-in-Central-Mali>

91 Interview Participant, Bamako.

92 Interview Participant, Menaka.

93 Lecocq, Baz, et al. “One hippopotamus and eight blind analysts: a multivocal analysis of the 2012 political crisis in the divided Republic of Mali.” *Review of African Political Economy* 40.137 (2013): 343-357.

on the lives of youths and their families. In some parts of the country, schools – even the medersas – have been (and remain) closed for years, creating a generation with neither training nor education.⁹⁴ At the same time, the absence of health centres is obviously worrisome, in particular for young women who have no access to medical support during pregnancy and childbirth, and consequently have a higher risk of complications or death for themselves and their children.⁹⁵

However, “terrorist governance” has not exclusively destroyed existing structures. Rather, there are three categories of services for which terrorist organisations have introduced alternatives in the absence of the state, namely: 1) the system of taxation; 2) the management of land; and 3) the provision of justice.

The most well-established of the practices concerning taxation comes from the imposition of the *zakat*, which, as intended by the terrorist organisations, is a religious tax to support the mujahideens. In the area of Mopti, herders have to pay this tax every year.⁹⁶ Following a disputed interpretation of a recommendation from the Koran, the *zakat* is calculated on the dimension of the herd: the herder has to offer one bull every thirty cows, and one calf every forty cows. Once the *zakat* is collected, terrorist groups use it for their needs, or sell it at the local markets.⁹⁷ Although terrorist organisations have assumed the state’s role in taxation, the elimination of previous

public tax collections has resulted in a dramatic decrease in essential public services. As underlined by a participant from Menaka, a large part of the population can survive only thanks to the activities of NGOs that are still allowed by terrorist groups to operate in the areas under their control.⁹⁸

As regards land management, in order to gain the support of local populations, terrorist organisations have not put into question the customary system already in place in the areas where they settled. For instance, in an area where the theocratic Fulani Macina Empire of the 19th century still represents a powerful point of reference, and a symbol of legitimacy and belonging,⁹⁹ the Katiba Macina has tried to build a system of norms and rules inspired by that historical experience. Following an administrative scheme that was established under the Macina Empire, but whose present structure was set under colonial rule, and reinforced during the first years of the post-colonial Mali, a part of the grazing lands of the Niger Delta is reserved for the Djowros – the Fulani “upper class” who regularly collect tributes from other herders. In a similar vein, public lands are also ruled by a sort of right of precedence and exploitation that belongs to the Djowros. The Katiba Macina has limited the amount of the tribute to be paid to the Djowros, while not contesting the basic functioning of the system.¹⁰⁰ According to some investigative works, and as confirmed

94 Maliweb, “Crise scolaire endémique au Mali: il faut qu’elle prenne fin!” 11 May 2020, available at <https://www.maliweb.net/education/crise-scolaire-endemique-au-mali-il-faut-quelle-prenne-fin-2873343.html>

95 Interview Participants, Bamako and Menaka.

96 Interview Participant, Mopti.

97 Interview Participants, Mopti and Bamako.

98 Interview Participant, Menaka.

99 Ba, Boubacar. «Pouvoirs, ressources et développement dans le delta central du Niger.» (2008).

100 Interview Participants, Mopti.

by our interview respondents,¹⁰¹ this is one of the points the ISGS is exploiting to contest the ruling position of the Katiba Macina in the area, as the IS-affiliated group preaches for the complete collectivisation of lands in the area.¹⁰²

Finally, another sector deeply impacted by the terrorist rule is the system of justice. In accordance with their literalist interpretation of Islam, terrorist groups are imposing the *Sharia* in the territories under their control. According to the interviewees, all those

who try to address the state's (secular) judges are threatened and, in some cases, even killed. All those who want to report a crime must address terrorist leaders and their legal counsellors. Judgments are fast, and taken in accordance with the Islamic law, as interpreted by the groups. This implies that no appeals are allowed, and there is no room for contestation. The application of the *Sharia* changes between the different groups with, for instance, the Katiba Macina tending not to employ corporal punishments for thieves and other low-level criminal behaviours.¹⁰³

“ *They [the jihadists] are the masters in my village [...] All the controversies are managed by them. They are the judges, the chiefs of the villages and the imams. Because they have the last word. Everything made by the chiefs – the chiefs of the villages or the religious leaders [...] – must be approved by them. Nothing can be done by the other chiefs without asking their opinion.*¹⁰⁴

Overall, the interview respondents agree that “terrorist governance” is worsening their life, and the system has been built through fear and violence. At the same time, in particular when it comes to justice, different voices have underlined that the system implemented by the terrorist organisations appears more “fair”

and “efficient” than the one previously applied by the state. This has been attributed to the duration of the process – which, according to some, under the state authorities could last up to twenty years – and, even more importantly, to the wide corruption among judges and civil servants.

“ *With them justice is well served unlike the state courts that were here before their arrival. [...] Malian justice was the justice of the rich, that is to say the one who paid was always right.*¹⁰⁵

101 Interview Participants, Mopti and Bamako. See also The Africa Report, “Sahel: A new battlefield between IS and Al-Qaeda?” 4 June 2020, available at <https://www.theafricareport.com/29184/sahel-a-new-battlefield-between-is-and-al-qaeda/>

102 RFI, “Dans le centre du Mali, les combats entre groupes armés s’intensifient,” 10 April 2020, available at <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200410-mali-centre-pays-les-combats-entre-groupes-arm%C3%A9s-sintensifient>

103 Interview Participants, Mopti and Menaka.

104 Interview Participant, Mopti.

105 Interview Participant, Mopti.

The presence of terrorist groups ensures that other powers in the area tend to follow their indications, including in the administration of justice. This applies also to Islamic judges, who are presumed to not make distinction on the basis of class, employment, or ethnicity, and are viewed as incorruptible. Unfortu-

nately, the allegations of the shortcomings of the state judicial processes are neither new nor unconfirmed,¹⁰⁶ which suggests that one of the main challenges to be tackled for containing and defeating terrorist group, is the re-establishment of an efficient and fair system of rule of law.

Economic aspects

Notwithstanding the presumed efforts deployed by the terrorist groups for guaranteeing a sort of hybrid system of governance that partially respects customary arrangements and activities, the economic impact of their presence is almost unanimously considered as “devastating” by the youth respondents. Most of the interview respondents remarked that since the beginning of the crisis in 2012, and even more so during the last few years, job opportunities, the quality and the accessibility of public services, and more generally the development of an environment safe for trade and other productive activities, have all dramatically decreased.¹⁰⁷ These conditions are not directly generated by the terrorists,

but they result from a less secure environment, where poverty and weapons are more commonplace. The violent conflict and the political crisis have become disruptive forces, which have worsened an already fragile situation in which both criminal entrepreneurs and terrorist groups represent an attractive force for many disenfranchised and unemployed youths. In Bamako, more particularly, the need to divert security resources to the fight against terrorism, and the reduction of economic exchanges due to the restriction on domestic mobility (see above), are moreover presented as two major factors that have led to a dramatic rise of petty crime.

“*The presence of these groups changed a lot of things in our everyday life. Firstly, it changed our socio-economic conditions, it made our professional life harder. With their arrival, access to basic services has become really difficult. This changed a lot of things. The access to health centres, access to potable water, insecurity and their presence are even impacting access to the job market.*”¹⁰⁸

106Tobie, Aurélien and Sangaré, Boukary, “Impacts des groupes armés sur les populations au nord et au centre du Mali,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), October 2019, available at https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/1910_sipri_report_impacts_des_groupes_armes_sur_les_populations_au_nord_et_au_centre_du_mali.pdf

107 Interview Participants, Bamako.

108 Interview Participant, Bamako.

Another element advanced by our respondents concerns the arrival of thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the main cities of the country: “the presence of these groups increased poverty, and it also increased the number of displaced people from the north to the south; this is not easy, we try to help each other but it is not easy at all.”¹⁰⁹ This represents a crisis within the crisis, as the government usually fails to take charge of IDPs, and urban communities are left to compensate for the deficiencies of central institutions, trying to share and redistribute resources that are already declining.¹¹⁰ Once again, a violent and unstable context deeply affects the life of the youths, as it reduces

their opportunities and weakens interpersonal trust and their confidence in the future. This generates a vicious cycle of poverty and wariness that leaves few options to those who entered in the labour market after 2012.

At the same time, terrorist groups have also had a more direct impact on the economic life of young Malians. This is more evident where they are physically present, in the north and the centre of the country. In this case, terrorists’ activities, and the rules they impose, negatively affect both commercial activities and the agricultural and pastoral production, as summarised by an interview participant from Menaka:

“ *Here, there are no economic activities anymore. Everything stopped because of the jihadists, with the exception of a few subsistence activities. The absence of the state has been followed by the collapse of the economy. Because of the immobility of people and goods, there is nothing in my village. People survive thanks to the NGOs.*”¹¹¹

According to the answers received through the interviews, members of the different terrorist groups regularly go to the weekly markets both to get fresh supplies, and to demonstrate their presence to local merchants and sellers. In other cases, they force markets to close by blocking regional commerce, or by stealing most of the products.¹¹² Different testimonies also highlighted that, in recent years, terrorist groups have started to

steal the cattle of local herders, making this activity harder and less desirable for the traditionally pastoralist communities.¹¹³ Moreover, herding in free-access pasturelands is becoming more dangerous, as these locations are where armed insurgents and criminals frequently hide and build their camps.¹¹⁴

Moreover, the problems encountered in accessing the land and the pastures are reducing the quantity of commercial goods and

109 Interview Participant, Bamako.

110 Interview Participants, Bamako and Mopti.

111 Interview Participant, Menaka.

112 Interview Participant, Mopti.

113 Interview Participant, Menaka.

114 Interview Participant, Mopti.

increasing their prices, a situation that exacerbates the food insecurity of a significant portion of the population and could easily evolve into an even more widespread food crisis.¹¹⁵ In addition, the viability of local markets is particularly affected by the new limitations imposed on women. Both in Menaka and Mopti, and more generally in rural environments, Malian women play a crucial role for the local economies as producers, artisans, and merchants. By applying the Sharia, terrorist groups are now making it almost impossible for women to work, or even to leave their houses and go to the market with-

out the presence of a male member of their families.¹¹⁶ Consequently, family budgets are decreasing, and most of the families' efforts are now directed towards the search for fundamental goods and the struggle for the daily survival.

While in the case of local governance and justice administration some voices suggested that the impact of terrorists was not only negative, in the case of the economic activities all our interview respondents agreed on the fact that the current situation represents an irredeemable challenge for their survival.



¹¹⁵ Interview Participant, Mopti.

¹¹⁶ Interview Participant, Menaka.

Social and every-day life

By definition, terrorism is a tactic to provoke a general state of terror among the population. Approximately half of the youth participants to the interviews have directly experienced episodes of violence perpetrated by terrorist actors against them, or against members of

their families and communities. In all these cases, the long-term effects of these events are evident, and a mix of fear and resignation tend to characterise their vision of the terrorist issue.

“ *What is the first sensation that I feel? The fear! The fear!*¹¹⁷ ”

In the case of Mali, terrorism and violence are instruments employed to impose a specific system of norms, rules, and social arrangements inspired by terrorist groups' radical

interpretation of Islam. In the vision of these groups, the *Sharia* must regulate all the aspects of life, and new behaviours are imposed in the territories under their control:

“ *Many things have changed because of the terrorist presence. Our everyday practices, the way we chose our dresses, our freedom of expression and movement, everything has changed. Simple things such as freely choosing our trousers are not possible anymore.*¹¹⁸ ”

Some of these behaviours and rules have had an impact even in Bamako, as well as in other parts of the country where the state is still in control. The presence of terrorist groups is changing – and limiting – the social role and possibilities of young women; erasing

traditional practices and cultural festivities; changing the way young people can live their leisure; and is literally silencing the music, in one of the country that has given the biggest contribution to the advancement and the development of “African” music.

“ *Concerning the traditional weddings, wherever they are still organised they are not as they were before.*¹¹⁹ ”

117 Interview Participant, Menaka.

118 Interview Participant, Menaka.

119 Interview Participant, Mopti.

Mitigating the long-term impact of these elements represents one of the biggest challenges for Mali and its international partners, as new generations are growing up in a context that offers little hope for their future. Moreover, feelings of insecurity and injustice are not limited to youth's personal experience. A widespread mistrust seems to characterise their social relations: as terrorists are an invisible enemy, most of the time it is impossible to establish with certitude who is who, and who can be trusted. As a result, the youths interviewed view the other members of their community with mounting suspicion, and they limit their confidence to the closest

members of their social network, and in particular to family members and close friends. As described by a participant from Bamako, "People now are like snails, if you touch them they hide in their shell."¹²⁰ In addition, this pervasive condition of mistrust and suspicion also impact inter-community relationships as well as the relations these young people have with the state. The retreat towards family and members of their community tends to deepen and enlarge the divide between ethnic groups and classes, thereby reactivating ethnic and economic grievances – a mechanism more or less consciously exploited by most of the armed actors on the ground.

“ *They [the terrorist groups] have infiltrated many segments of our society, now if say something bad about them they can hear. Here, you cannot trust anybody because you do not know who is with them or who is not. Less than a month ago, a young person was killed in front of his front door during the day because he was suspected of working with the Whites [Barkhane and MINUSMA].*¹²¹

Something similar happens *vis-à-vis* the state and its representatives. Many of the respondents, in particular from Mopti and Menaka, insisted that what was already perceived as a policy of marginalisation, or even discrimination, enacted by the state against their communities, has become something more dangerous: they fear being designated as terrorists or opponents of the state, on the simple basis of their ethnic or geographical origins.¹²²

In Menaka, the claims of how life has changed under the presence of terrorist groups tend to be all similar: "Terrorists are everywhere and nowhere! They hide and blend into the population. It is impossible to identify them"; "They are not physically visible, but their presence is there"; "In our village, we meet them every day without even noticing them."¹²³ Sharing the same sensation as their peers in Mopti and Bamako, youth in Menaka are unable to know when and if they have met, or if they

¹²⁰ Interview Participant, Bamako.

¹²¹ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹²² Interview Participants, Mopti and Menaka. See also further in this section.

¹²³ Interview Participants, Menaka.

are going to meet, a member or an informant of JNIM or ISGS. This situation produces a double effect. While causing fear, psychological distress, and further social mistrust, it also affects the way state authorities perceive and treat local populations: "They treat us all as terrorists".¹²⁴

Moreover, fear appears as a constant feeling in youth's life. Various respondents have denounced their anguish, every time that a member of their family has to leave the house. This condition is even stronger for women. A girl from Menaka told us about her first encounter with the terrorists. She was walking in the countryside with two

friends, when a group of *barbus* ("those with a beard") stopped them, threatening to beat them if they did not go back home. Terrorists imposed them to veil, and forbade them to leave their houses without the presence of a male member of their family, or to meet their friends outside of their houses.¹²⁵ Moreover, if a man is seen talking with a woman he is not married to, he can be assaulted or even killed.¹²⁶ Another girl from Mopti, whose mother was an elected representative in their commune, added that it is now impossible for women to participate in politics in areas under the control of terrorist groups.¹²⁷

Other stories come from Mopti:

“*Since they [the terrorists] are there, all our cultural festivities have stopped. The griots do not play music for the nobles anymore. There are no celebrations during weddings. People can sit around the table without any problem. But they cannot sing or make music. Young people cannot play cards or checkers. During cultural or religious celebrations young girls cannot dress in the traditional way for going dancing in the main square. During the festivities at the end of the seasonal herd migrations there are no more flutes or bongos. [...] They have banned the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, they have closed French schools, but sometimes they allow Arab schools to remain open. I do not know why they have forbidden all these things.*¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹²⁵ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹²⁶ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹²⁷ Interview Participant, Mopti.

¹²⁸ Interview Participant, Mopti.

The sensation that the “music has stopped” resounds in the answers of many respondents, without major distinctions on the basis

of their geographical origins. Another participant, a boy from Dialloubé near Mopti, reported the difficulties he faced to play football:

“*They had forbidden playing on our football pitch. We went to negotiate with their leader. He gave us his authorisation for playing, but only if we accepted following his rules. We cannot bet or mark the points, and we must stop at the time of the prayers. And we cannot argue while playing. But at least we can play. And now this has become something normal for us. Before, we were terrified, we were scared of seeing them coming.*”¹²⁹

Interestingly, similar feelings are shared by young people in Bamako:

“*With the arrival of the jihadists, when a member of my family leaves the house, I pray to God until he or she comes back home. I am frightened that a member of my family will be attacked [...] I am even scared that a jihadist attack may occur in the city.*”¹³⁰

This is true not only in relation to the pervasive feeling of insecurity, but also regarding social relations and activities: “With the presence of the terrorist, we must be always careful, and be careful about the places we frequent”; “on social relations, there is no more confidence between the different communities who live together”; “Nobody trusts anybody. We can

walk together, but do not trust each other. Many people prefer to take their distances. We have not the freedom of doing things as we used before.”¹³¹ Music is stopping even in Bamako, and a long road must be taken, before youth can rebuild full trust in their state, their society, and their future.

¹²⁹ Interview Participant, Mopti.

¹³⁰ Interview Participant, Bamako.

¹³¹ Interview Participants, Bamako.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT ROLE FOR THE YOUTHS?

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So far, this report has described how young Malians see their life and their environment, in a context characterised by violence and danger. Accounting for their definitions of who is a terrorist and what constitutes a threat for them, the data has demonstrated how they perceive the presence of terrorism, and how these groups affect their life in various ways. Nevertheless, young people should not be regarded only as victims, or as passive observers of the situation they have to face. Some have actively chosen to

engage in violent extremism. However, this group represents only a small fraction of Malian youth. A far greater majority have made the choice not to engage in violent or criminal activities. Some are actively looking for and implementing possible solutions, and offering their contribution to reaffirm peace and security in their communities and in their country. Others are opting for finding a way to live with the dangers by which they are surrounded. The reasons behind their choices are numerous and diverse.



SUPPORT AND RESISTANCE IN TIMES OF VIOLENCE

The choice to engage in violent extremism

Although violence is on the rise in Mali, with youths representing the main recruitment base for terrorist and criminal groups,¹³³ most young Malians do not support these actors,

and some of them openly oppose and fight against these groups. Most of the time, they do not agree with their peers who opted to join violent extremist groups, but they do

¹³³ Trisko Darden, Jessica, "Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth," American Enterprise Institute (AEI), May 2019, available at <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/report/tackling-terrorists-exploitation-of-youth/Tackling-Terrorists-Exploitation-of-Youth.pdf>

understand the factors which could explain such a choice. With reference to the youth perceptions of the main causes behind the choice of violence, the entirety of the interview respondents – none of them being engaged in terrorist organisations – acknowledged that the vast majority of Malian youth do not support terrorist groups. When asked to evaluate the number of their peers who

are actively or indirectly participating in terrorist activities, most of the respondents estimated that this amounts to no more than 20 per cent of them.

Within this group, a first distinction can be drawn between those who voluntarily joined terrorist actors and those who were forced to, as explained by participants from Menaka:

“

*The support of the youth is of two kinds: there is a voluntary support from those young people who see in these groups the possibility to gain money or respect; and the forced support because terrorists require a communitarian effort and every village must offer some fighters.*¹³⁴

“

*They are threatened, members of their family are kidnapped in order to force them to commit these crimes.*¹³⁵

Another interview participant from Bamako also underlined that once an individual en-

gages in any manner with terrorist groups, it is very hard and dangerous to leave:

“

*I think they are forced to commit these crimes. Because terrorism is like a komo, a secret society in Africa that you can join, but you cannot leave, that means you come in but you do not go out [...] When you refuse to do what they say, you will be killed.*¹³⁶

Focusing the attention on those who voluntarily engaged in terrorist groups, different patterns of support for terrorism can be iden-

tified, along with a strong connection with another phenomenon, namely engagement in criminal activities. Among the reasons pre-

¹³⁴ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹³⁵ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹³⁶ Interview Participant, Bamako.

sented by our respondents for explaining the choice to join terrorist groups, three main categories emerge: 1) personal or community protection; 2) improving one's own social status; and 3) vengeance against or violent contestation of (perceived or factual) injustices and threats.

Elements characterising the first category have already been discussed throughout the report and are directly linked to the context of violence and armed politics in contemporary Mali. In contexts where none of the actors present on the ground hold the monopoly over the means of (legitimate) violence, and the rule of law is either absent or poorly implemented, terrorist – and other armed – groups are perceived as an alternative. The fact that certain communities or villages had previously created links with a terrorist formation can thus influence, or even channel, youth's choice.¹³⁷ Among those who joined terrorist groups, another distinction underlined concerns the geographic and ethnic origins of the supporters, and the impact of the presence of terrorist groups. With regards to this latter point, a participant from Menaka suggested that “the engagement differs in various regions, those who live in areas under occupation are more engaged than others because of the absence of alternatives apart from enlisting in a terrorist group.”¹³⁸ Concerning the geographical and ethnic distribution

of the support, according to some respondents, “it varies from one region to another and from one ethnic group to another.”¹³⁹

As previously noted, varieties in the support for terrorist groups should not be understood as a direct consequence of ethnicity or geography. As it emerges from the interviewees, terrorist groups intercept and exploit pre-existing local grievances and inter-ethnic tensions. In particular, economic considerations and the lack of viable livelihood alternatives are the main driving forces pushing youth to engage in criminal activities. At the same time, the sense of impunity created by a context of armed violence, combined with a weakening presence of the security forces and high availability of weapons, seems to play a central role in motivating youth to choose the way of crime. Thefts, armed robberies, rustling and drug and arms trafficking are the main activities listed by our participants. Many of those who participate in drug trafficking are usually presented also as consumers, who spend part of their money on drugs.¹⁴⁰ More generally, as suggested by one respondent from Mopti “the very presence of the jihadists allowed some young people to start illegal activities. For example, some young thieves joined the terrorists in order to avoid being killed.”¹⁴¹ The protection offered by terrorist groups seems to play a crucial role in connecting terrorist and criminal activities:



The presence of terrorist groups is having an impact on the engagement of young people in illegal activities. As they trust the influence and the power of their terrorist

¹³⁷ Interview Participants, Mopti and Menaka.

¹³⁸ Interview Participant, Menaka.

¹³⁹ Interview Participant, Bamako.

¹⁴⁰ Interview Participants from Bamako and Menaka.

¹⁴¹ Interview Participant, Mopti.

*leaders, these youngsters feel free to commit every kind of crime without worrying for the consequences because they are protected, and so they do what they want. They commit verbal, physical and sexual aggressions. They sell and consume drugs. Some of them are forced to do these things by their chiefs.*¹⁴²

Terrorist groups are not directly involved in ordinary criminal activities. The narco-terrorist connections in the Sahel were a highly debated issue for a while, but there is now a certain consensus about the idea that the two groups of actors are distinct and separate, even if they collaborate from time to time.¹⁴³

The will to improve one's own social status is particularly important among the so-called "cadets sociaux", categories of individuals who structurally occupy a subordinate posi-

tion in their social and political environment based on their age, gender, class and/or ethnicity.¹⁴⁴ None of the ethnic groups in Mali are monolithic, and the customary rules and traditions that govern intra-ethnic relations are not uncontested. Pervasive violence and the presence of terrorist groups can offer new incentives and opportunities for young Malians who want to subvert the status quo or obtain symbolic and material gains that would be impossible to reach under "normal" circumstances:

“ *The terrorist groups offer to some of these youths the possibility to express themselves.*¹⁴⁵

In this sense, terrorist groups are no different than other insurgent or rebel groups inspired by different motivations or causes.¹⁴⁶ The access to weapons, the economic gains connected to terrorist activities, and the possibility to conclude an advantageous marriage are among the main motivations that push youth from the lower classes or more mar-

ginalised ethnic groups to join the terrorists. Even if similar motivations seem to inspire young women, fewer actually join, as family and community linkages and the will to comply with social expectations play a more significant influence.¹⁴⁷

Finally, joining terrorist groups can be a choice dictated by the will to obtain venge-

142 Interview Participant, Menaka.

143 Ba, Boubacar and Boas, Morten, "Mali: A Political Economy Analysis," Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, November 2017, available at https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2468085/NUPI_rapport_Mali_Ba_B%25C3%25B8%25C3%25A5s.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

144 Bayart, Jean-François. *L'Etat en Afrique: la politique du ventre*. Fayard, 2006.

145 Interview Participant, Menaka.

146 Bøås, Morten, and Kevin C. Dunn. "Africa's insurgents: Navigating an evolving landscape." *Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers* (2017).

147 Interview Participants from Bamako, Mopti and Menaka.

ance and to fight against those who committed an abuse, crime, or killing against a family and/or community member: “When your village is burnt and your parents are killed, if you find someone who is ready to help you in your vengeance and protect you, you will support this person.”¹⁴⁸ Once again, these reasons are particularly present when our respondents describe the situation in central Mali – where inter- and intra-ethnic clashes characterise the relationships between the Fulani, the Dogon, and the other ethnic

groups – and in the northern regions, where the Tuareg question still represents an unresolved issue. Nonetheless, even if inter-ethnic grievances are a strong incentive for those who join the terrorist groups, the main target of their hate and their violence remains the central state and its representatives. Most of the interview respondents accused the Malian state and the security forces of exactions and indiscriminate abuses, which paved the way to the success of terrorist groups:

“ *When the army comes to your village, it does not try to understand, the soldiers will consider all the inhabitants as terrorists. The soldiers punch, kill and steal [...] this explains the participation in and the support of the youth for the jihadist groups in the centre of Mali.*¹⁴⁹ ”

“ *Someone joined the terrorist groups to avenge his family who were killed by the rebels or by other communities who are socially stronger thanks to the impunity guaranteed by the state.*¹⁵⁰ ”

“ *Some of them are in terrorist groups in order to seek revenge after the injustices that they suffered from the state.*¹⁵¹ ”

148 Interview Participants, Bamako.

149 Interview Participant, Mopti.

150 Interview Participant, Menaka.

151 Interview Participant, Bamako.

The choice of resisting

With reference to the role of youth in preventing or countering the spread of violent extremism, two main positions can be identified among the interviewees. Almost half of

the interview participants believe that it is too hard and too late for the youth to take action against the terrorists:

“*For me, the youth cannot do anything to limit or oppose the presence of terrorist groups. Not only the youngsters, but also old people and the state cannot do anything to oppose the presence of the terrorist groups [...] things should have been done before, now it is too late to react.*¹⁵²

This is concerning considering the emphasis on young generations as drivers of change.¹⁵³ While it is usually recognised that young generations can be frustrated by their environment, the social and political rules that govern their life and their societies, it is also believed that youths have the means, motivations, and ideas to build their own alternatives. In reality, youth agency remains influenced and limited by the circumstances in which they live: a context of violence and instability does not necessarily produce incentives for peaceful change, but can rather foster further violence. Being young does not necessarily mean being an actor of change, nor does it imply having the resources and the motivations for transforming one's own environment. The contextual conditions play a fundamental role in allowing for the devel-

opment of alternative visions and strategies of life. Moreover, the actions undertaken in order to change the environment in which the youth are embedded must take into account the complexity of the situation and identify specific priorities to be tackled. This is what the second half of interviewee respondents are trying to do, or at least to imagine.

Three main possible initiatives focusing on different aspects of the Malian crisis resound in the answers of interviewees trying to propose potential solutions for resistance and change in relation to the terrorist challenge. While these suggestions do not necessarily represent the authors' perspectives and recommendations, it is crucial to carefully listen and consider what young Malians think in order to have a better understanding of the situation on the ground.

¹⁵² Interview Participant, Bamako.

¹⁵³ Africa Renewal, "Youth can be agents of positive change," April 2018-July 2018, available at <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2018-july-2018/youth-can-be-agents-positive-change>; IFRC, "Youth in Africa, Agents of Change," 30 January 2019, available at <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/youth-africa-agents-change/>; World Bank, "Youth Transforming Africa," available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/youth-transforming-africa>; United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, "Youth in Africa: A Major Resource for Change," available at https://www.une-ca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/ADF/ADF4/youth_symposium_-_a_policy_for_african_youth.pdf

1) Some of the interviewees support the idea of taking the initiative and, if needed, even taking up arms against the terrorists:

“

Many young people died fighting for the army, in order to allow us to live in peace. Without the army, we would not be there talking to each other. I thank the army for having protected us. Within the army, most of the soldiers are youths. [...] If you ask someone to come kill a lion, you must have the mind and thoughts of a lion. Young people must stop being lazy and start acting on their own. When the youth do not help each other, the wall starts fracturing and water comes in. When the youth join their hands together, it is going to be hard for terrorists to resist.¹⁵⁴

2) Some interview respondents claimed that the most effective way to deal with the current situation consists in creating awareness and new opportunities:

“ I think that youth are those who can do something to oppose and limit the impact of the presence of terrorists. But young people also need help to do this. The first thing to do is to create awareness. And then give them jobs. Young people can create awareness among other young people. One young person can persuade other young people. This role must be played by young people and not by the older ones, because youth are those who join terrorist groups [...] if we manage to persuade the youth, there will be no more efforts to be done, the essential part will be accomplished. We also need to show to the youth what they are going to gain if they leave the terrorist groups [...] If we convince some of them to leave the jihad, they will become a strong example for others. [...]

“ Personally, I come from the centre of Mali, I was born and I grew up here, so I asked myself what could I do to oppose terrorist groups. [...] What can I do? What can someone else do? [...] And suddenly I realised that everybody uses social networks. And so, I decided to start debating and engaging with young supporters of terrorist groups on social media. [...]

“

In my opinion, to help young people find a solution, we need to offer them a job or something concrete. We cannot ask someone to abandon his weapon, if we do not offer him an alternative. Without that, it will not be easy for them to leave, they need to know that there is something else for them. In order to do this, we need to mobilise those who did not take up arms. For example, we can offer a training about how to use the Internet and social networks. We need these youths to talk with those who have engaged in violence. Telling them that there is something for them [...] If they do not see something like this, they will not quit.¹⁵⁵

3) Finally, some participants emphasised the importance of re-engaging with the state:

“

The strong presence of the state in this part of the country can give hope for fighting against the terrorist groups. Moreover, taking action against youth unemployment and poverty can defeat the increasing power of these groups. It can destroy them.¹⁵⁶

155 Interview Participant, Mopti.

156 Interview Participant, Menaka.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Little research has been conducted on the impact that the presence of terrorist groups has had on the daily lives of young people in Mali, including the effect that the longstanding presence of terrorist groups may have on either enhancing or diminishing youths' en-

dorsement of extremist narratives and their willingness to engage in violence.¹⁵⁷ This report contributes to shedding light on the perceptions that young Malians have of their life, their role, and their future under the terrorist threat and how this may in turn impact

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Jasko, Katarzyna, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski. "Quest for significance and violent extremism: The case of domestic radicalization." *Political Psychology* 38.5 (2017): 815-831; Institute for Security Studies, 2016. *Jeunes 'djihadistes' au Mali. Guidés par la foi ou par les circonstances? Note d'Analyse* 89. Dakar: August 2016 ; Interpeace, 2016. *Au-delà de l'idéologie et de l'appât du gain : trajectoires des jeunes vers les nouvelles formes de violence en Côte d'Ivoire et au Mali*. Abidjan: October 2016; United Nations Development Programme, 2017. *Journey to Extremism*. New York: September 2017.



AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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their propensity to support and/or resort to (extremist) violence.

The concept of terrorism itself entails many limits when applied to the Malian context. In an environment characterised by “tribalised armed politics”, terrorist groups have created strong links with specific local grievances

and constituencies.¹⁵⁸ In this sense, terrorist groups in Mali can be seen both as violent actors pursuing a transnational agenda, and as local insurgents who are shaping, but are also influenced by local struggles for power and recognition.¹⁵⁹ This is why significant attention has been devoted throughout this report to the perceptions and definitions em-

¹⁵⁸ Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and UNDP, “Local Drivers of Violent Extremism in Central Mali,” 2019, available at <https://www.nupi.no/en/Publications/CRIStin-Pub/Local-Drivers-of-Violent-Extremism-in-Central-Mali>

¹⁵⁹ Mathieu Pellerin, “Armed Violence in the Sahara: Are we Moving from Jihadism to Insurgency?”, Etudes de l’IFRI, November 2019, available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_armed_violence_sahara_2020_okes.pdf

ployed by local youths when describing the phenomenon of terrorism and its manifestations in the country.

Young interviewees have described the impact that terrorist groups have produced on their existence. First of all, exposure to violence and physical threats has significantly increased: although participants claimed that armed forces and militaries have been the first target of the terrorist attacks, many episodes of violence against civil representatives of the state and the population have been reported especially in the regions of Mopti and Menaka, leading to a normalisation of violence. Violent extremist groups have also contributed to increasing ethnic tensions as well as brutal massacres by other armed actors.¹⁶⁰

Second, the presence and activities of violent extremist groups have affected governance and territorial control: the few symbolic and effective state institutions, especially in Mopti

and Menaka, have been eradicated and replaced by new forms of governance, including a revised system of taxation, a new management of the land and new mechanisms of justice delivery. Third, terrorism has had an economic impact which is almost unanimously considered as “devastating” by the interview respondents: the increased level of insecurity and the restricted mobility have negatively affected the country’s economy, while significantly limiting commercial activities and the agricultural and pastoral production at the micro level.

Finally, long-lasting exposure to violence has produced a wide-spread mix of fear, mistrust as well as resignation among the young people interviewed and has had a remarkable impact on their social life: traditional practices and cultural festivities have been prohibited, the way young people live leisure has been transformed, and the socio-political role of young women has been eroded.

“ *There is no more music, nor the cries of the griots.161 Tam Tam and flutes do not resound anymore*¹⁶² ”

The presence of terrorist groups has impacted and, most of the time, worsened interpersonal trust, societal and interethnic relations, as well as the relationship between citizens and the state as well as the international missions present on the ground. Various examples have highlighted the role played by representatives of the state in furthering tensions and fostering conflict among the population. Land and

law mismanagement, policies of political and economic marginalisation, but also physical abuses and violent injustices have contributed to worsening an already fragile situation, facilitating the development of violent grievances, and the creation of a breeding ground for terrorist and other armed groups. At the same time, the state and the national security forces remain a major point of reference for those

160 Jeune Afrique, “La Minusma accuse les armées maliennes et nigériennes d’avoir commis des exécutions extrajudiciaires,” 2 May 2020, available at <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/938689/politique/mali-la-minusma-accuse-les-armees-malienne-et-nigerienne-davoir-commis-des-executions-extrajudiciaires/>

161 In West Africa, a *griot* is an historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet and/or musician. Even if historical comparisons are somehow problematic, they could be seen as a modern expression of the medieval *troubadours*.

162 Interview Participant, Mopti.

who hope to find a solution to the violent crisis affecting Mali. While the state is often portrayed as one of the main sources of instability and insecurity, it is also identified as the main driver of viable solutions and a necessary tool against an indiscriminate violence and the expansion of the crisis.

Terrorism has greatly affected the lives of Malian young people all over the country. If the security situation in Bamako is generally considered less worrying by most of the interviewees, the pervasive feeling of insecurity, the negative economic and social impacts brought by the presence of terrorist groups seem equally shared among the youth from the three researched regions.

The country's youth have been impacted significantly by violent extremism; for a small percent, this has been through taking part in violent extremism; for the great majority, it has meant learning to cope with such a phenomenon, and for some of those, actively countering it. Although participants were not selected for their engagement in violent forms of extremism, their answers have helped in identifying the main factors furthering vulnerability to violent extremism. Their perspectives also shed light on the circumstances that, in the eyes of local witnesses, may explain the choice to take up arms and join terrorist groups or other non-state armed actors, such as self-defence militias or criminal groups. Various and usually coexisting push and pull factors concerning engagement into violent extremism have been identified by previous research, which have been confirmed by the youth interviewed in the course of this research. If the presence of a well-developed terrorist insurgency is clearly a strong pull factor, the choice to take up

arms usually depends on a mix of elements and events that are deeply embedded in the local socio-political landscape. Interviewees confirmed that religion seems to play a marginal role: among the new recruits of terrorist groups, very few have a real knowledge of their religion, or are able, in the case of Islam, to read the Quran.¹⁶³ Patterns of religious "radicalization" can be identified once the person has already joined the group and he or she has been exposed to the preaching and structural violence permeating these organisations. But even among those who do not necessarily see extremist goals, such as the imposition of the Sharia, from a negative perspective, it is hard to find justifications for the violent means adopted to pursue this objective.¹⁶⁴ On the contrary, those who received a religious education in the so-called Arab schools or medersas are among the strongest opponents of terrorist groups, who are perceived as "traitors" of their faith¹⁶⁵, as confirmed also by several participants to the research. This report suggests that along with the impact of the presence of terrorism, other factors such as the deterioration of the economic opportunities, the sense of abandonment or discrimination by the state, or the changes observed in the system of governance ruling everyday activities result to play a role in this process. These and other factors will be discussed in greater depth in an upcoming ICCT and UNICRI report based on quantitative data gathered through surveys of Malian youth.

According to the picture that emerges from the data collected, the choice of violence tends to be primarily "relational" and "consequential": the choice to join terrorist groups must be understood taking into considera-

¹⁶³ Interview Participant, Mopti.

¹⁶⁴ Interview Participant, Mopti.

¹⁶⁵ Interview Participant, Bamako.

tion the context of the geographic area, and in the light of the recruit's previous experiences. Taking the context into consideration means examining the level of violence to which the recruit has been exposed and by whom; the "normalisation" of violence and the availability of weapons in the surrounding environment; as well as the structural conditions of marginalisation and/or discrimination the individual is living on the basis of his/her age, employment, level of education, class, religion, ethnicity, or gender. Joining terrorist groups can be done for something, against someone, or both at the same time, but in no case is a choice taken in a vacuum. It is a decision that is strongly influenced by the relations the individual has built and experienced with his/her environment and the people, communities, groups and institutions around him/her. Moreover, joining terrorist groups is consequential, as it usually follows one or more episodes of violence or discrimination, which have definitively reinforced one's resolution. Nonetheless, it should also be remarked that the enlistment in terrorist or criminal groups is not always an individual or a free choice: some youths have been forced to follow terrorists under the threat of death; in other cases, young people follow the decision taken by their family or their com-

munity to collaborate with terrorist groups to obtain protection or support in their fight against other armed groups and actors.

This report contributes to the development of a better comprehension of the needs, the fears, the main factors of vulnerability and drivers of youth's engagement in violence, but also of the visions young people have for their country and their future, which is essential for implementing more effective initiatives to counter violent extremism. Diverse and complementary elements, strategies, and behaviours have been discussed by the interviewees to enhance youth resilience *vis-à-vis* armed violence and extremist ideologies. Even if a certain degree of fatalism seems to characterise the discourse of the participants, respondents put forward a clear description of what is needed to improve their life and to effectively counter the terrorist threat. Young people should be encouraged to undertake a central role in the development of a successful initiative to counter the spread of violent extremism. In addition, further efforts should be devoted to increase awareness about the phenomenon, including promoting media literacy and critical thinking to reduce the risks of exposure to radicalisation and terrorist propaganda.

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“*What is needed is that we, the young people, wake up and become aware that those people [the terrorists] are here only to destroy our future. We own the future of our country. We must rebuild our country. The fact that it is so easy for them to recruit us is disturbing. This is going to jeopardise our future. Young people must mobilise [...] Sooner or later, we are going to defeat the enemy. This is our duty.*¹⁶⁶

Young people can be the drivers of change among their peers as well as among their communities, especially if their fragile socio-economic situation is strengthened through the provision of new opportunities and responsibilities. Finally, a crucial role can and shall be played by the state and its representatives: a new power management system, an enhanced relationship of trust between the state and its people and a greater involvement of young people could contribute to improve security and stability as well

as addressing the threats posed by terrorist groups in the country. Defeating terrorists will not be enough, if their presence has led to the normalisation of violence among youths and more generally, throughout Malian society. Mitigating the long-term impact that the presence of terrorism has produced represents one of the biggest challenges for Mali and its international partners in order to contribute to the development of a more stable and peaceful context within which new generations can build their future.

¹⁶⁶ Participant, Bamako.



