RESOLVE

NETWORK

CENTRAL MALI
ARMED COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION IN CRISIS

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proliferation of community-based armed groups (CBAGs)[1] in Mali's Mopti and Ségou Regions has contributed to transforming Central Mali into a regional epicenter of conflict since 2016. Due to the lack of adequate presence of the state, certain vulnerable, conflict-affected communities resorted to embracing non-state armed groups[2] as security umbrellas in the context of inter-communal violence. These local conflicts are the result of long-standing issues over increasing pressure on natural resources, climate shocks, competing economic lifestyles, nepotistic and exclusionary resource management practices, and the shifting representations of a segregated, historically constructed sense of ethnic identities in the region.

The continuous rise of violent incidents perpetrated by jihadist groups and CBAGs in the past five years aggravated the security situation in Central Mali. The jihadist group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), through its local affiliate Katiba Macina, exploited already tense conflict dynamics and the grievances of marginalized Fulani communities to increase its power and influence. Through its compelling inclusive narrative, which reinforces perceptions of the government's abdication of reliable security and justice provision, and successful recruitment efforts, JNIM is now firmly established in rural areas of Central Mali.

CBAGs are also capitalizing on the chaos to extend their influence and control. Countering perceived security threats by Katiba Macina, government security forces, and rival groups, they further amplify ethnic tensions through rhetoric that vilifies the "other" based on belonging to an identity group. Consequently, the vicious cycle of attacks has included violence against civilians as a form of retaliation by all armed parties to the protracted regional conflict. It is reframing the political realities in Central Mali toward polarized identities, a militarization of local communities, and the normalization of violence as a political tool. These disturbing trends put Central Mali on a pathway toward an endless cycle of violence and an increase in civilian casualties.

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1   According to Dr. Daniel E. Agbiboa: "A consolidated definition of CBAGs has proven difficult because of their multiple types and characteristics, and because CBAGs are typically located in zones of ambiguity between the presence and absence of law and social order. Across Africa, CBAGs have organized at various levels (from lineage to ethnic group), in various spaces (from village ward to city streets), and for various reasons (from crime fighting to political lobbying to counterinsurgency). CBAGs draw their legitimacy from various and, at times, competing sources, including traditional and communal establishments, religious establishments, and political establishments." See: Daniel Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance and Armed Community Mobilization in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.2.

2   According to Lauren Van Metre: "Community-based armed groups are a subset of non-state armed groups (NSAGs), defined by their relationship to the state and local communities and the ways they exercise power. While NSAGs, such as insurgent or terrorist groups, seek to disrupt or undermine the state to take it over or establish an alternative political system, CBAGs can be aligned with, or complementary to, the state, or they can operate in gray areas with minimal state presence. They do not typically pursue large political ambitions and strategies; rather, they advance the local ambitions of their stakeholders." See: Lauren Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism: A Typology Framework of Community-Based Armed Groups*, (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2019), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2019.3.

This report untangles the legitimacy of armed groups, mobilizing factors, and the multi-level impact of violence implicating CBAGs. It further explores the relations amongst different actors, including the state, armed groups, and communities. The field research team conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with populations affected by violence at key locations in Mopti and Ségou Regions.[3] The interviews, conducted between February and April 2020, focused on local perspectives about the factors, mechanisms, and dynamics of armed mobilization in the interviewees' communities. As a complement to the interviews, and to provide a comprehensive overview, the report maps and analyzes the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) to visualize and assess CBAG activities, trends of violence, and hyper-localized dynamics.[4] The findings provide relevant insight for context-specific policy design toward conflict resolution and hybrid security governance.

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3   Special thanks to Modibo Ghaly Cissé, who conducted field interviews in Mopti and Ségou Regions.
4   Special thanks to Héni Nsaibia, who is a Senior Researcher at ACLED.

INTRODUCTION

This research report reviews the security situation in Central Mali focusing on the causes behind the proliferation of non-state and community-based armed groups. The research applies the conceptual framework of CBAGs to Central Mali to analyze the drivers of community mobilization and relationships between communities, ethnic groups, and the state. Through a better understanding of CBAGs and hybrid security governance structures in the area, the research seeks to fill in knowledge gaps on Central Mali community security with recommendations for policy and programming.

Background

Mali has been undergoing a political and security crisis since 2012, signified by two key events: the occupation of the north by a coalition of jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and a coup d'état motivated by the mishandling of the security situation in the north. While the crisis was somewhat limited to northern regions, it started to move into central regions. In January 2013, jihadist groups launched a first assault in Central Mali to expand further south. Their progress was quickly halted by the intervention of the French Operation Serval and the Malian and African militaries. Pressure from France and its allies chased violent extremist organizations (VEOs) out of the key towns and cities that they occupied in 2012. However, they maintained noticeable influence in rural areas and villages in central and northern parts of the country. Subsequently, early 2015 signaled the birth of a new front for jihadists that had previously only operated in northern Mali. A brigade associated with al-Qaeda began a cycle of violence that has since escalated.

The crisis made its way into Central Mali. While occupying parts of the north, jihadists exploited divisions between communities and grievances toward the state and rival armed groups to expand their influence into Central Mali, notably resonating with Fulani communities. The inability of the state to protect Fulani herders against Tuareg armed bandits and local elites provided an opportunity for jihadists to recruit, arm, and train among disadvantaged Fulani communities, in exchange for providing security and justice the state was unable to provide. This alliance served jihadists by enabling them to establish themselves in Mopti and Ségou Regions. They were helped by influential Fulani preacher Hamadou Koufa, who played a key role in jihadists influence and expansion in the center. By 2015, he led al-Qaeda's new front in Central Mali, which earned him the deputy leadership nomination of the newly established al-Qaeda branch, Jama't Nusrat al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM), in the Sahel. The jihadist recruitment of Fulani fueled tensions with the Bambara and the Dogon ethnic groups and, in addition to the weak presence of the national security forces, lead to the creation of ethnic self-defense groups.

As a result of the escalating crisis, violence in Central Mali has skyrocketed since 2015. Lacking sufficient physical protection from state security forces, the population started to re-organize to protect their communities. Several self-defense and ethnic-based armed groups have emerged under different pretexts. In August 2018, an armed group formed to represent Dogon hunters, called Dan Na Ambassagou. While

the group received initial support from the Malian government, it was repeatedly accused of massacring Fulani civilians. Subsequently, Fulani communities also created their own self-defense militias.

The proliferation of non-state groups and CBAGs therefore has worsened the security situation in Central Mali and transformed it into a conflict epicenter. The number of CBAGs has dramatically increased following the emergence of VEOs in Central Mali after the 2015 peace agreement in Northern Mali.[5] The implementation of the accord saw modest results in six years. But new destabilizing events continue to be a setback.[6] The region has witnessed unprecedented massacres. On January 1, 2019, at least 37 Fulanis were killed, including women and children, in Mopti Region[7]; in March 2019, at least 160 Fulani civilians were killed[8]—a Dogon CBAG was suspected to be responsible for both. In June 2019, at least a hundred Dogon civilians were killed by a suspected Fulani CBAG in Mopti Region.[9] In May 2020, three Dogon villages were attacked, and at least 27 civilians were killed by a suspected Fulani CBAG.[10] Bambara CBAGs reportedly have also committed attacks against Fulani villages in Central Mali.[11]

Community Mobilization

Despite existing tensions between different communities over natural resources and social divides, tensions in Central Mali had been non-violent except for sporadic incidents. However, recently the region was dragged into a quagmire of violent retributions between previously competing communities and ethnic groups. Communal violence in Central Mali intensified following the arrival of jihadist groups in 2015. This transformation of the security environment was accompanied by the creation of armed Bambara, Dogon, and Fulani CBAGs.[12] Communities saw the militarization of civilians as legitimate, as attacks against the Malian army intensified.[13] Thus, rising insecurity, weakened presence of the state administration, operational weakness of the government forces, and ecological-economic pressures became the rationale for the mobilization and militarization of civilian communities.

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5   Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process, July 24, 2014, https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/EN-ML_150620_Accord-pour-la-paix-et-la-reconciliation-au-Mali_Issu-du-Processus-d'Alger.pdf

6   The Carter Center, "L'Observateur Indépendant au Mali: La période de transition est décisive pour progresser dans la mise en œuvre de l'Accord de Paix," August 23, 2021, https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2021/mali-082321-fr.pdf.

7   BBC, "Mali villagers killed in armed raid in Mopti region," January 1, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46732703.

8   Katarina Hoije, "Death Toll From Mali Attacks Climbs to 160, Government Says," Bloomberg, March 26, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-03-26/death-toll-from-mali-attacks-climbs-to-160-government-says.

9   BBC, "Mali attack: 100 killed in ethnic Dogon village," June 10, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48579475.

10   Al Jazeera, "Many killed in central Mali ethnic attacks: Officials," May 28, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/28/many-killed-in-central-mali-ethnic-attacks-officials.

11   Human Rights Watch, "Avant, nous étions des frères," December 7, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/fr/report/2018/12/07/avant-nous-etions-des-freres-exactions-commises-par-des-groupes-dautodefense-dans.

12   Minority Rights Group International, "World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples—Mali," November 2017, https://www.refworld.org/docid/4954ce5bc.html

13   Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

Communities affected by inter-communal violence accepted armed groups as security providers. These local conflicts have diverse drivers, including stresses on natural resources, climate shocks, competing economic lifestyles, nepotis}\tic and exclusionary resource management practices, and transforming ethnic identities. The creation of CBAGs continues to cause more harm than the protection they purport to provide, as the number of civilian casualties is on the rise.[14] Communities that once lived together in peace, despite their differences, continue to grow apart. Social cohesion that once brought unity is rapidly vanishing.

Poor governance stands out as a salient driver of the proliferation of armed groups and the current multidimensional crisis. Local communities have lost faith in the central government and its security forces and are looking for alternative actors to provide security, justice, and economic development. Government representatives are perceived as corrupt, unjust, and after their own gain.[15] Security forces are perceived as oppressive actors, at least since 2013, and are repeatedly accused of arbitrary arrests and acts of atrocity against populations suspected to support jihadists in Central Mali.[16] Jihadist groups have tapped into this struggle of the state and the disillusionment of populations.[17] The resulting polarization along ethnic lines spurred the creation of numerous ethnically homogenous CBAGs, further jeopardizing the security condition in the Central Mali Regions of Ségou and Mopti (Figure 1).

The state's failure as a security provider has been the catalytic narrative for the growth of CBAGs. The lack of government institutions at the local level, together with communities' perceptions and responses to government neglect, is a key basis for CBAGs' successful proliferation in Central Mali.[18] Government security initiatives in Central Mali since 2018 have failed to establish stability or community trust. The military-led transition governments set up after the August 2020 and March 2021 military coups had no plans for addressing the region's security gaps.[19] Their transition roadmap highlights the importance

14 Héni Nsaiba and Jules Duhamel, "Sahel 2021: Communal Wars, Broken Ceasefires, and Shifting Frontlines," *ACLED*, June 2021, https://acleddata.com/2021/06/17/sahel-2021-communal-wars-broken-ceasefires-and-shifting-frontlines/.

15 Cédric Jourde, Marie Brossier, and Modibo Ghaly Cissé, "Prédation et violence au Mali: élites statutaires peules et logiques de domination dans la région de Mopti," Canadian Journal of African Studies 53, no. 3 (2019): 431-445, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2019.1666016.

16 Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Malian Army, Islamist Groups Executed Prisoners," February 1, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/node/248691/printable/print; Agence France Press, "Mali Army Arrests Soldiers Accused Over Torture Video," *Barron's*, October 13, 2021, https://www.barrons.com/news/mali-army-arrests-soldiers-accused-over-torture-video-01634151006.

17 Corinne Dufka, *How Much More Blood Must be Spilled? Atrocities Against Civilians in Central Mali* (USA: Human Rights Watch, 2020), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/mali0220_web.pdf; Le Monde, "Nouveau Massacre dans des Villages Dogon dans le Centre du Mali," July 4, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/07/04/nouvelles-tueries-au-mali-au-moins-40-villageois-et-soldats-tues_6045207_3212.html; Baba Ahmed, "Massacres dans le Centre du Mali: Pourquoi l'Armée ne Parvient pas à Protéger la Population," *Jeune Afrique*, November 12, 2019, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/794794/politique/massacres-dans-le-centre-du-mali-pourquoi-larmee-ne-parvient-pas-a-proteger-la-population/.

18 Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance*.

19 United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA), "Trois Projets MINUSMA pour Soutenir la Stratégie de Stabilisation du Centre du Mali," *Reliefweb*, December 1, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/trois-projets-minusma-pour-soutenir-la-strat-gie-de-stabilisation-du-centre-du-mali; United Nations Development Programme, "A Ségou, le Comité Régional du Cadre Politique de Gestion de la Crise au Centre du Mali a été Lancé," July 2, 2020, https://www.ml.undp.org/content/mali/fr/home/press-center/articles/a-segou--le-comite-regional-du-cadre-politique-de-gestion-de-la-.html.

of disarming self-defense militias, promoting communal dialogue, launching a dialogue with armed groups, and redeploying the state; however, it provides no action plan.[20]

However salient, this "weak state" analysis[21] alone cannot explain the creation and proliferation of CBAGs in Central Mali. State presence and governance provision in rural areas, including in Central Mali, have always been inadequate and insufficient.[22] It is a parochial analysis and an insufficient approach in understanding and responding to the crisis. Such a limited analysis could undermine security efforts by negating
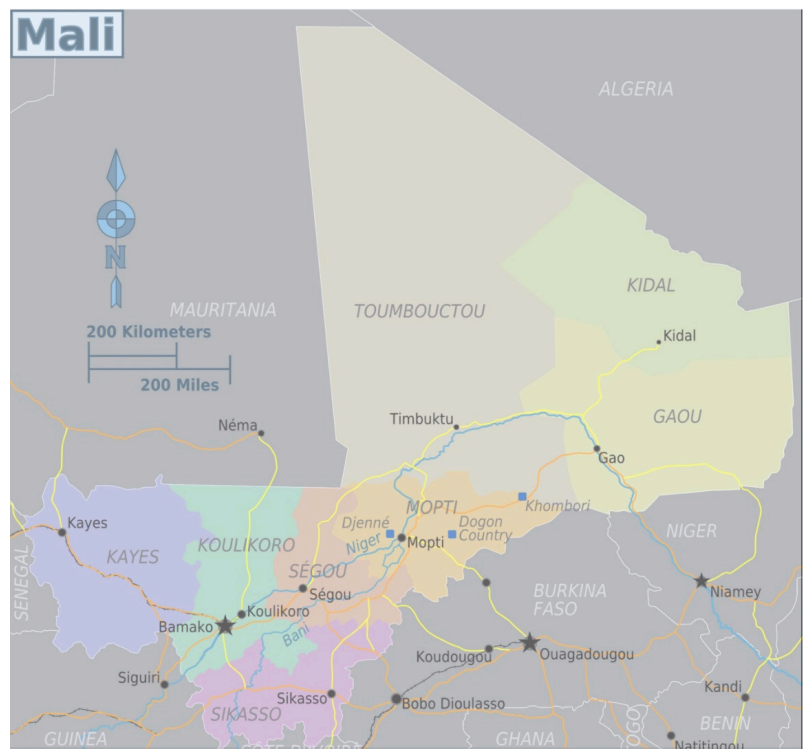

Figure 1: Regions of Mali.[23]

the agency of local non-governmental actors in establishing security and could weaken the government's ability to play a role in local security and governance.[24]

Daniel Agbiboa explains that hybrid security governance emerges where the recognition and support of CBAGs are necessary in security and justice provision to bolster a weak state's presence and ability to govern.[25] The argument stems from the historical dynamics in colonial and post-colonial Africa and the disconnect they created between political institutions both under colonial rule and post-independence for policing the communities they claim to secure. This disconnect spurs the need for communities to access political resources locally.

CBAGs are difficult to define because of their diverse behaviors, tactics, and motivations. CBAGs are fluid, and though in Central Mali they initially intended to protect their communities, their political objectives might change over time and become threats to their communities. Lauren Van Metre offers a typological

20   International Crisis Group, "Enrayer La Communautarisation de La Violence au Centre du Mali," November 9, 2020, https://www.crisis-group.org/fr/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali.

21   International Crisis Group, "Central Mali: An Uprising in the Making?," July 6, 2016, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/central-mali-uprising-making.

22   Mamadou Bodian, Aurélien Tobie, and Myriam Marending, "The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali," *SIPRI*, March 2020, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/challenges-governance-development-and-security-central-regions-mali.

23   Largre regions map of Mali, *Mapsland*, accessed September 13, 2021, https://www.mapsland.com/africa/mali/large-regions-map-of-mali.

24   Agbiboa, *Origins of Hybrid Governance*, 8.

25   Ibid.

framework for understanding potential shifts in CBAG identities.[26] Van Metre positions state-community relations, resources, norms, threats, and international actors as external factors that feed into an armed group's internal structure to give it a specific identity and assume the likelihood and nature of violence. Given the fluid nature of these group identities and their importance in drafting successful stabilization policies toward CBAGs, this report focuses on understanding relationships amongst CBAGs, affected communities, and the central government, as well as clarifying group influence.

Building on a decade of studies of the evolvement of different armed groups in Mali and the wider West African Sahel, this report will identify and provide background about different armed groups operating in Central Mali and their key mobilization factors. It will then unpack the legitimization and motivation behind the emergence of CBAGs in different geographic areas of Central Mali and discuss the complex security dynamics connected to CBAGs. The report concludes with practical programmatic recommendations based on the findings of the study.

METHODOLOGY

This research report seeks to contextualize theoretical literature on CBAGs to Central Mali. The aim is to apply knowledge about CBAGs to the localized conflict dynamics in Central Mali to provide relevant insight for policymaking toward hybrid security governance. The research's purpose is threefold:

- First, to map community-based armed groups and their mobilization efforts in Central Mali.

- Second, to investigate relationships between community-based armed groups, the government, and local populations to understand the conditions that lead to their proliferation.

- Third, to provide a comprehensive overview of trends in violence and conflict involving jihadist groups and CBAGs, and how these groups use violence when they engage with each other and communities.

The study used qualitative research methods, including 35 field interviews, in addition to a comprehensive review of the relevant academic and gray literature. Data from the ACLED online dataset was also used to create graphs and maps.

The data collection was based on in-depth individual interviews, structured and unstructured, with stakeholders relevant to the Central Mali crisis. To adequately investigate relationships with local populations, the sampling process for the interviews attempted to capture different perspectives representative of all of society, including gender, age, and occupations to include administrative agents, traditional authori-

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26   Van Metre, *From Self-Defense to Vigilantism*.

ties, local social actors, and religious leaders. The 35 interviewees were participants living and working in Central Mali. The researchers conducted preliminary screening to select only participants known to be aware and knowledgeable of this important and complex topic. The 35 participants included men and women from Dogon and Fulani communities (Table 1). After validation of the data collection tool and guide, interview questions were translated into local languages, Bamanakan and Fulfulde.

The interviews were conducted at three key locations in Mopti and Ségou Regions selected for their relevant experiences. Additional interviews were also conducted in Bamako (Table 1).

- **Bandiagara**, Mopti Region: the research site was selected due to its accessibility, because the general population was broadly affected by the inter-communal conflict between Dogon and Fulani ethnic groups, and for the presence of jihadist brigades connected to al-Qaeda affiliate JNIM.

Actors	Ségou Region		Mopti Region		Bamako District
	Macina	Kolongo-Tomo	Diafarabé	Bandiagara	Bamako
Local Inhabitants		2	3	2	
Communal Council	1	0	1	1	
Village Council	1	0	1	2	
Women Leaders	1	1	2	2	
Youth Leaders	2	1	1	1	
NGO	0	0	0	1	
Traditional Hunters	2	0	1	1	
Others	0	2	2		7
Total	7	6	11	10	7

Table 1. Interview participants

- **Macina**, Ségou Region: harbors the largest number of fighters in the region and is considered a leading supplier of combatants to groups in neighboring cercles.[27]

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27   The highest level of Mali's administrative structure consists of eight regions, all named after the capital. The second level administrative divisions are 56 Cercles. At the third level they are divided into 703 communes. See: Regions of Mali, *Mappr*, accessed September 13, 2021, https://www.mappr.co/counties/mali-regions/.

- **Diafarabé**, Mopti Region: inter-communal conflict remains a serious concern in the area.

The focus of all interviews was the presence of armed groups and their constituencies, the history of communal mobilization and its legitimacy among the population, mobilizing factors and dynamics of engagement between the population and armed groups, social changes linked to the emergence of these groups, perceptions of state responses to security challenges, and recommendations by the population to reduce violence. In addition, data related to violent incidents involving both jihadist groups and CBAGs between 2015-2020 in Mopti and Ségou Regions are drawn from the ACLED dataset.[28]

The fieldwork and data collection faced some challenges. The data collection phase in Macina and Ténénkou was scheduled to take place days after the first round of the legislative elections on March 29, 2020, and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection was conducted in person via local researchers then by phone to respect COVID-19 measures. During the meetings participants often assumed the discussion was about the elections and/or COVID-19. The research team invested time explaining the purpose of the meeting and the importance to remain focused. Simultaneously, and as expected in the tense atmosphere in the region due to increased violence, participants were hesitant to speak about armed actors. However, the research team's ability to speak to local concerns was key to gaining the trust of participants.

CONTEXT: CENTRAL MALI'S VIOLENT CONFLICT

Mopti and Ségou Regions are two ethnically diverse regions situated in the heart of Mali, with important economies mostly based on agriculture, livestock herding, and fishing. Both regions are inhabited mainly by Fulani, Dogon, Bambara, Songhai, and Tuareg ethnic groups. The Tuareg and the Fulani are known as nomadic ethnic groups of pastoralists who move their herds across the regions in search of grazing and water for their animals. The Songhai, the Dogon, and the Bambara have a sedentary farming and fishing lifestyle. Being the primary livestock herding region in Mali, Mopti is critical not only for Mali's economy but also for the neighboring countries of Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Rice production makes the Ségou Region equally important. However, investment in rural communities and livestock herding remains low. In addition to a lack of sufficient state investment, intra- and inter-community conflicts in recent years have further deteriorated the conditions for these economic activities that the local population depends on. Pastoralism is threatened today by insecurity throughout West Africa, not just in Mali.[29]

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28   Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen, "Introducing ACLED: Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset: Special Data Feature," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 651-660, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310378914.

29   Mathieu Pellerin, *Entendre la Voix des Eleveurs au Sahel et en Afrique de l'Ouest: Queal Avenir Pour le Pastoralisme Face à l'Insécurité et ses Impacts?* (Niamey: Réseau Billital Maroobé et partenaires, 2021), https://www.maroobe.com/images/DOCS/Rapport%20Etude%20-Avenir%20du%20pastoralisme%20face%20%C3%A0%20l'ins%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20-RBM.pdf.

Unprecedented violence

In 2015, the movement of jihadist-linked armed groups into Central Mali and attacks against military camps in Ségou and Mopti Regions officially launched a new jihadist front. In the following years, jihadists gained momentum and embedded themselves in different parts of both regions. Government forces struggled to halt the jihadist expansion, while government representatives, including traditional authorities, either fled the area or negotiated a co-existence.[30]

Jihadist groups exploited the narrative of inequalities to source support and recruit from disadvantaged Fulani pastoralist communities.[31] Access, power, and protection were key mobilizing factors for local communities to engage with jihadist groups.[32] In 2016 and 2017, the assassinations of two Dogon leaders by jihadists were turning points in the conflict, leading the Dogon to create their own CBAG. They started targeting Fulani civilians under the pretext of their support for jihadists operating in Central Mali.
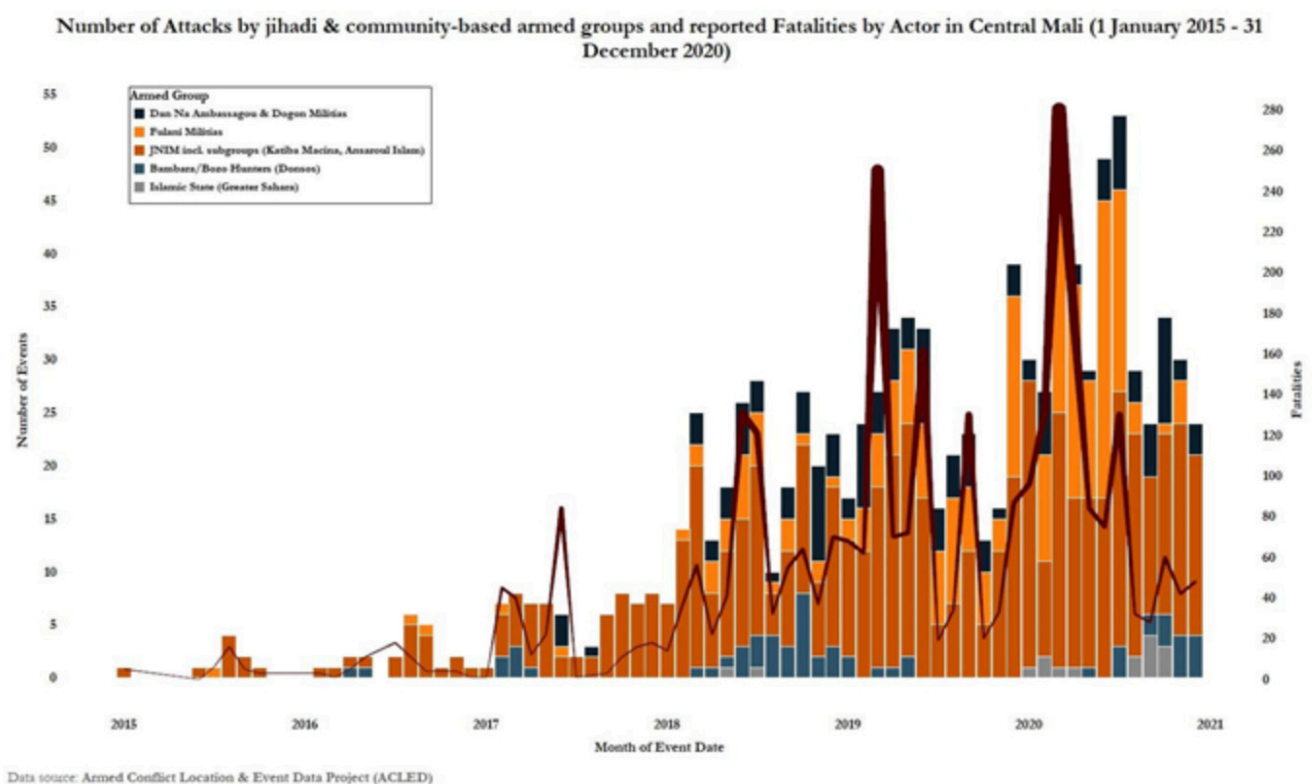

Figure 2: Violence trends in Ségou and Mopti Regions, Mali, by armed groups (January 1, 2015-December 12, 2020).[33]

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30   International Crisis Group, "Parler aux jihadistes au centre du Mali: le dialogue est-il possible?," May 28, 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists; International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence," November 9, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/293-enrayer-la-communautarisation-de-la-violence-au-centre-du-mali.

31   Sangaré Boukary, "Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?," *Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité (GRIP)*, May 20, 2016, https://grip.org/le-centre-du-mali-epicentre-du-djihadisme/.

32   Jourde, et al., "Prédation et violence au Mali."

33   Source: ACLED

Violence by Dogon self-defense groups against Fulani villages became recurrent. In response, Fulani civilians established Fulani CBAGs to protect their communities against repeated attacks by Dogon CBAGs. At first, the violence was a byproduct of the domino effect of newly created CBAGs, resulting in a cycle of retaliatory violence.

While jihadist groups in the Macina area inflamed conflicts, it was the shift in intra- and inter-community power politics that spurred the multiplication of armed groups and the cycle of unprecedented violence of the past five years (Figure 2). The ACLED data shows that since 2015 the number of casualties in Central Mali has been increasing every year as a result of the establishment and armed mobilization of different armed groups, both CBAGs and jihadists. Mopti's eastern Cercles of Bandiagara, Koro, and Bankass harbor multiple armed groups who contest influence over the population and territory and are experiencing the highest levels of attacks (Figure 3). The area is also known as *zone exondée*. Territorial contestation represents a key factor in the violence between jihadist groups and CBAGs. Multiple elements play into the mobilization of armed groups.

The role of the state

The proliferation of CBAGs in Ségou and Mopti Regions can be traced to the Malian state's retrenchment as a security provider and its history of reliance on ethnically aligned self-defense groups to supplement its armed forces during internal conflicts.[34] For instance, at least since the 1990s, to counter the rise of Tuareg and Arab rebellions in the North, the Malian government relied on the Ganda Koy militia.[35] In 2014, the Malian government created the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defense Group and Allies (GATIA in French, *Groupe d'Autodéfense Tuareg Imghad et Alliés*) to challenge other armed groups seeking independence of the North.[36] The emergence of CBAGs and reliance on ethnic-based armed groups is not a new phenomenon, and Central Mali demonstrated similar trends in recent years.

In 2012, a coalition of jihadist and separatist groups occupied northern Mali, capturing feelings of victimhood that also existed within the country's Fulani population. The state's abandonment of the Fulani, who were violently targeted by Tuareg rebels, pushed many Fulani to seek protection by joining jihadist groups.[37] The community radicalization of Fulani populations in Douentza Cercle, Mopti Region, is one example of the results of a vulnerable community's neglect by the government and its international partners who focused exclusively on addressing the crisis in Northern Mali to the detriment of Fulanis in

34   Ousmane Aly Diallo, "Ethnic Clashes, Jihad, and Insecurity in Central Mali," *Peace Review* 29, no. 3 (2017): 299–306, https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2017.1344529.

35   Nicolas Florquin and Stéphanie Pézard, "Insurgency, Disarmament, and Insecurity in Northern Mali, 1990-2004," in *Armed and Aimless: Armed Groups, Guns, and Human Security in the ECOWAS Region*, eds. Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2005), 46-77, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/armed-and-aimless-armed-groups-guns-and-human-security-ecowas-region.

36   Andrew Lebovich, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," *European Council on Foreign Affairs*, May 2019, https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/.

37   Boukary, "Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?"

Central Mali.[38] Malian authorities have never had a strong presence in rural areas and have struggled to provide adequate public services.[39]

Access to natural resources

In the 1990s decentralization and land code reforms created a hybrid system of governance that outsourced several government duties to local elites, including resource management and land allocation. The paradigm shift caused by decentralization beginning in the 1990s shifted competition over land rights to a natives versus non-natives narrative.[40] It marginalized settled communities such as non-elite Fulani from free access to pastoral resources, while favoring Fulani elites (Djowros) or Dogon farmers. The elite Djowros became gatekeepers of scarce land and levied taxes on nomadic Fulani herders searching for water and vegetation. Politicians would collect a share of the tax.[41] The levels of corruption and rent-seeking practices by elites toward increasingly marginalized nomadic groups became a risk factor for violence.[42]

The arrival of jihadists in 2015, however, gave non-elite pastoralists access to pasture.[43] Narratives of inequalities related to access to resources used by jihadist groups after their arrival resonated well with disadvantaged Fulani pastoralists and played a key role in mobilizing and arming new recruits.[44] Local youth joined jihadist groups because of their desire to elevate their social status and challenge the elites over access to land and natural resources.[45] Despite this access, the power dynamic between elites and non-elites did not greatly shift, as both elites and non-elites developed relationships with jihadists and sought military training and access to arms. Access to natural resources, power, and protection were a greater motivation for communities to align with jihadist groups than ideological alignment, which jihadists exploited to build ties with whole communities regardless of people's elite or non-elite status.[46]

The escalation in multi-directional violence further provides CBAGs new opportunities for mobilization. The dominant farmer-herder conflicts in Central Mali suddenly became absorbed by the overall insecurity and, as one interviewee described it, "The position of history in conflictual cohabitation [recurrent

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38   Mirjam de Bruijn, ed., *Biographies of Radicalization: Hidden Messages of Social Change* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110623628.

39   Bodian, Tobie, and Marending, "The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali."

40   De Bruijn, ed., *Biographies of Radicalization*.

41   Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, "Farmer–Herder Conflicts, Pastoral Marginalisation and Corruption: A Case Study from the Inland Niger Delta of Mali," *Geographical Journal* 175 (2009): 71-81, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2008.00312.x.

42   Matthew D. Turner, "The Micropolitics of Common Property Management on the Maasina Floodplains of Central Mali," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des études Africaines* 40, no. 1 (2006): 41–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2006.10751335.

43   Jourde, et al., "Prédation et violence au Mali."

44   Boukary, "Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?."

45   Adam Thiam, *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d'une crise négligée* (Genève: Centre pour le dialogue humanitaire; Bamako: Institut du Macina, 2017), https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Centre-du-Mali-Enjeux-et-dangers-dune-crise-n%C3%A9glig%C3%A9e.pdf.

46   Jourde, et al., "Prédation et violence au Mali."

conflicts between farmers and herders] in the mobilization of the masses is in favor of the armed groups. Nowadays, we tend to forget the conflict between farmer and herder so much [because] the current crisis has ravaged the communities. Among the deepest causes, this historical conflict is the basis of visceral hate the communities have toward each other."[47] Still, despite the farmer-herder conflict being seen as the main conflict driver and source of hate, data between 1992 and 2009 from the Mopti Regional Court of Appeals indicates that 69.9 percent of the cases were between farmers, while only 12.2 percent were between farmers and herders, and 7.7 percent were between fishermen and farmers.[48] The competition over land and access to natural resources intensifies with the climate emergency.[49]

This sentiment of hate does not appear to be widely shared among all community members but is rather a growing feeling among those who suffered directly from the massacres Central Mali witnessed since 2017. CBAGs are seen as taking control of their safety, because their respective communities and their properties are left unprotected and exposed to attacks by those now seen as rival communities. Easy access to firearms has contributed to the development and militarization of CBAGs, making existing community tensions increasingly deadly.[50] The Bambara and Dogon communities with an agricultural tradition, and the Fulani community with a pastoral tradition, have long been in conflict over access to water sources and land. However, disagreements were usually resolved peacefully.[51]

Shifting identities

With the arrival of jihadist organizations, the occupational basis of identity-building in Central Mali was renegotiated as religious identity, particularly amongst Fulani communities who were more likely to align with jihadists for protection. The economic and environmental impacts of violence and climate change, compounded with the effects of decentralization on marginalizing non-elite Fulanis, resulted in significant losses of cattle—key for livelihoods.[52] The need for protection and the safeguarding of a nobility[53] status pushed many Fulani "herders" to become Fulani "Muslims."[54] This, alongside worsening political-ecological factors,[55] redesigned how ethnic groups engage. Bambara, Dogon, and Fulani communities present in Central Mali had their differences, issues, and conflicts, but these tensions took another turn after jihadist groups arrived in 2015. With insecurity increasing and the state unable to provide safety, local

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47   Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

48   International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence."

49   Tor A. Benjaminson, Koffi Alinon, Halvard Buhaug and Jill Buseth, "Does Climate Change Drive Land-Use Conflicts in the Sahel?," *Journal of Peace Research* 49, no. 1 (2012): 97-111, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343311427343.

50   Human Rights Watch, "Avant, nous étions des frères."

51   Ibid.

52   International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence," 6.

53   Alfhild Birkeland, "Managing Fulbe Identity: Exchange Relations and Ethnic Discourses in a Village in Central Mali" (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2007).

54   Mirjam de Bruijn and Han van Dijk, *Peuls et Mandingues: Dialectiques Des Constructions Identitaires* (Leyde: Afrika-Studiecentrum, 1997).

55   Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, "Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups? A Political Ecological Explanation," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46, no. 1 (2019): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1474457.

communities had to pick sides. As a result, ethnically aligned CBAGs (Bambara, Dogon, and Fulani) began vying for legitimacy from their respective communities, control over natural resources, and strengthening of their political positions. This dynamic construction of ethnoreligious identities, alongside Central Mali's security and economic challenges, thus became the dominating paradigm in the mobilization of CBAGs.

A paramount impact of the proliferation of CBAGs is the changing patterns of violence, that is, the dramatic increase observed since 2015 (Figure 2). Conflict involving jihadist groups and CBAGs has generated numerous mass atrocities, including the deadliest attacks recorded against civilians in Mali. The engagement of ethnic groups has severed ethnically-diverse ties at the familial level as inter-community relations deteriorate over pervasive fear and distrust based on ethnic and religious differences.[56] Familial ties are breaking, as the crisis has resulted in mixed marriage divorces between Fulani and Dogon.[57] These family cases might be rare and do not capture the bigger picture, however, the cohabitation and coexistence between Bambara, Dogon, and Fulani communities is undergoing a tough test.

OVERVIEW OF CENTRAL MALI'S ARMED GROUPS

Armed Groups and CBAGs	Background	Purpose	Triggers and Motivations	Areas of Operation (see Figure 2)
Katiha Macina (JNIM)	Fulani–dominated, but also includes Dogon, Bambara, Tuareg, Arab, and other minorities	Fight Malian state and international forces Spread jihadist ideology Enact Sharia Law	Emerged in 2012 and became more visible in late 2014 and early 2015 under the externally attributed name the Macina Liberation Front (MLF)	Heartland in the Inner Niger Delta Control or influence in rural areas Sporadic presence in villages in Ségou and Mopti Regions
Fulani self-defense groups	Fulani, Wouwarbe in Macina	Self-defense Vengeance Protection of Fulani from from Donso, Dan Na Ambassagou and Malian military	Burrning of Fulani villages since 2017 by the Malian army and Dan Na Ambassagou	Visible in Fulani villages
Dan Na Ambassagou (DNA)	Dogon, Dafing, Samogo, Bobo, Telem, Mossi	Self-defense Vengeance Protection of the Dogon country from jihadists	Advent of jihadists in the region Support Malian government security forces in security provision	Villages in Mopti Region's Bandiagara Bankass, Koro, and Douentza Cercles Control over checkpoints along national roads
Donso or Dozo Hunters	Bambara, Bobo, Bwa, Marka, Dafing, Bozo	Self-defense Vengeance Protection of community from jihadists	Attacks in Ténénkou and Macina in 2015 and 2016 by Katiha Macina	Visible in urban areas and villages mainly in Ségou Region's Macina and Niono Cercles and Mopti Region's Dienne Cercle

Table 2. Organized armed groups in Central Mali

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56   Interviews in Bandiagara and Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

57   Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

The constituencies and membership of CBAGs and other ethnic-majority jihadist groups fall primarily along ethnic lines (Bambara, Dogon, and Fulani). The ethnic affiliation is a byproduct of the evolution of each group's initial mobilization to protect and avenge or the ethnic affiliation of an influential leader.[58]

Katiba Macina

The Central Mali contingent of the Jihadist group JNIM, Katiba Macina, became prominent in early 2015 and remains the dominant armed group in Mali's central regions. The creation of the jihadist umbrella organization, JNIM, in March 2017 subsumed Katiba Macina into its organizational structure. Through its insurgency in Central Mali, the group has become the de facto authority in most of the Inner Niger Delta, which constitutes the group's heartland. The Inner Niger Delta comprises the flood-prone and vegetation-rich wetlands in the west of Mopti Region and the east of Ségou Region. In the north-south direction, the area is situated along the Niger river between the cities of Timbuktu and Ségou. This area, which includes the towns of Ténénkou and Youwarou, are the least affected by conflict since 2015 (Figure 3). However, militants frequently deter traditional social behaviors by intimidating locals, imposing dress codes, and extorting zakat, or religious taxes.
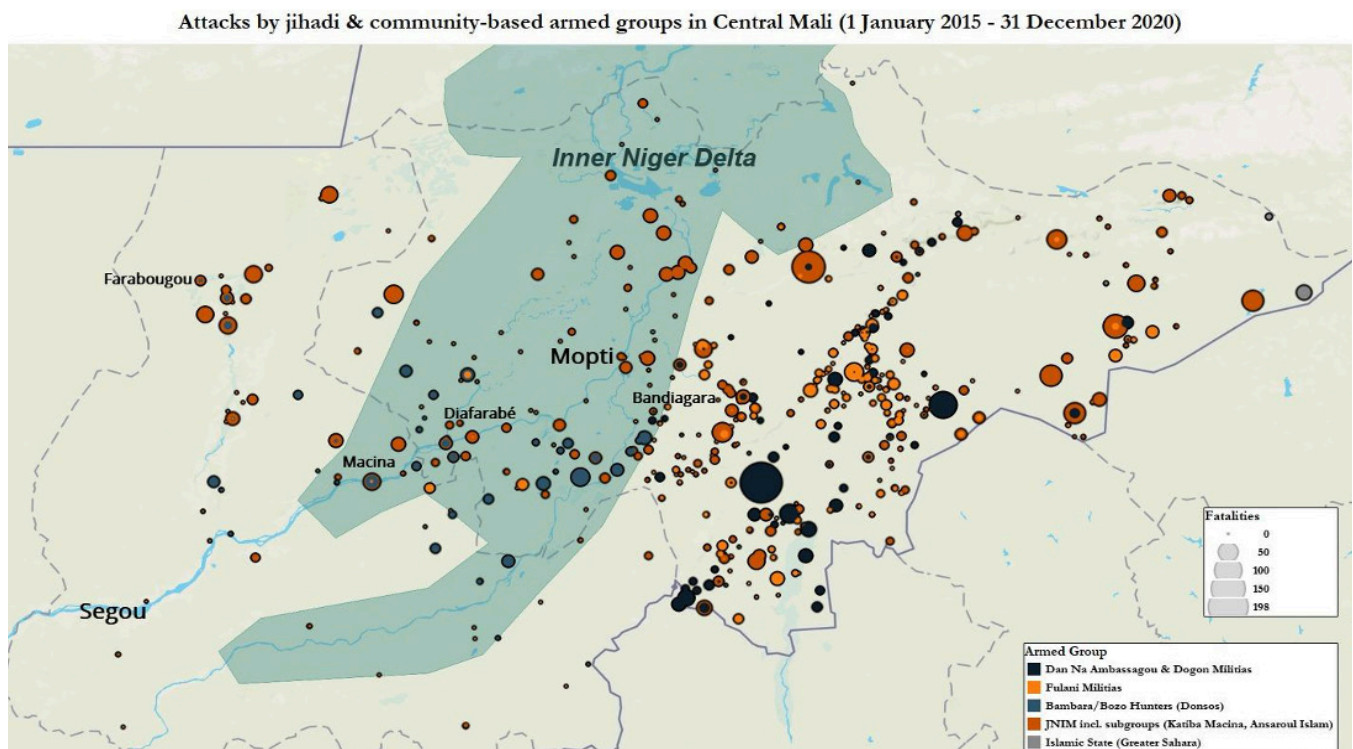

Figure 3: Conflict locations in Ségou and Mopti Regions, Mali (January 1, 2015-December 12, 2020).[59]

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58   For example, Hamadou Koufa's leadership of the Fulani-majority Katiba Macina. Aurélien Tobie and Boukary Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali," *SIPRI*, October 2019, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/other-publications/impact-armed-groups-populations-central-and-northern-mali.

59   Source: ACLED.

Through Katiba Macina, Amadou Koufa, a "jihadist entrepreneur" and local preacher who relied on a pointed discourse about local social and political grievances, became a powerful representative for Fulanis.[60] Koufa, who is a Fulani, relied on a discursive strategy speaking to the nomadic pastoralist Fulanis' grievances against the state,[61] Bambara and Dogon farmers,[62] and Fulani elites (Djowros).[63] Putting this discourse at the forefront of his strategy helped to expand the jihadist group's influence to Central Mali.[64] Katiba Macina was seen as a possible advocate to reclaim otherwise denied rights, such as access to pastoral lands and natural resources.[65]

Furthermore, abuses by security forces against civilians, especially Fulani since 2013 in Central Mali, encouraged some Fulani community members to join Katiba Macina.[66] In 2013 the Malian army was responsible for several atrocities and summary executions against Fulani civilians in Mopti.[67] In the following years abuses mainly against Fulani communities continued in Central Mali. Thus, JNIM's jihadist designation has taken on CBAG characteristics—namely its ethnic character, despite the slow integration of Dogon members as JNIM gained control and power in Dogon areas. The integration of Dogon fighters into JNIM is difficult to unpack; motivations could be ideological affiliation, a search for protection, a lack of an alternative, and forced recruitment. Some Dogon saw it as favorable to align with JNIM as the stronger armed actor in the area, thus altering the equilibrium in intra-Dogon conflicts. Simultaneously, while difficult to quantify, segments of the Fulani community remain unswayed by the jihadists' justice-oriented discourse and oppose the ideas and presence of Katiba Macina.

While primarily portraying itself as a jihadist group, the discourse and actions of Katiba Macina oscillate between a jihadist and a Fulani identity. This overlap could be described as a hybrid of a jihadist insurgent group and a self-defense militia.[68] Katiba Macina's leader Amadou Kouffa occasionally refutes claims that Katiba Macina is a Fulani armed group, even though his Fulani brethren do comprise the bulk of the

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60   Ibrahim Yahaya Ibrahim, *The Wave of Jihadist Insurgency in West Africa: Global Ideology, Local Context, Individual Motivations* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1787/eb95c0a9-en.

61   Examples are a predatory behavior of the forest services, corruption of state officials and the justice system in favor of other groups, etc.

62   Conflictual events such as the attack on Sari village in 2012; these are triggered by farming activities blocking cattle corridors.

63   The elite, alongside state representatives, would position themselves as gatekeepers for pastures, taxing the nomad pastoralists an entrance fee per head of livestock.

64   Benjaminsen and Ba, "Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?."

65   Jean-Hervé Jezequel and Vincent Foucher, "Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural," *International Crisis Group,* January 11, 2017, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural. See also: Clionadh Raleigh, Héni Nsaibia, and Caitriona Dowd, "The Sahel Crisis Since 2012," *African Affairs* 120, no. 478 (2020): 123–143, https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adaa022.

66   Boukary, "Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?."

67   Thiam, *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d'une crise négligée.*

68   Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel: Local Politics and Rebel Groups* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 158, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108771160.

group's fighting force. The group has often portrayed itself as a defender of the Fulani community by publicly "ethnicizing" local conflicts in its propaganda.[69]

Katiba Macina's approach affected the region's marginalized ethnic groups in two distinct ways. First, it resonated with the most marginalized Fulanis as an option to escape perceived injustices. Second, it negatively resonated amongst other ethnic groups, primarily the Dogon, who felt further threatened by the Fulanis as their identity shifted and "jihadist" and "Fulani" were seen as the same identity. This conflation of Fulani and jihadist identities amplified pre-existing stereotypes and stigmatization of the Fulani by the Dogon, who have previously said, "One needs to understand that the Fulani [for the Dogon] can also be understood as the evil coming from the grassy wilderness."[70] As such, Katiba Macina is perceived as an imminent threat to Dogons.

Nonetheless, the group is becoming more accepting of local cultures to establish greater control in the area. Abdel Kader Sidibé, who heads the Sahel mission for the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), argues, "In the Dogon country, they (the jihadists) do not impose Sharia. It is strategic: to have a grip, they want to be accepted locally."[71] JNIM's religious leader has actively pushed a pro-Dogon discourse to portray Dogon communities as part of the general Muslim population. This was in disagreement with Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS), which tended to conflate the Dogon ethnic group with Dozo hunters.

Jihadists present themselves as security and governance providers to push for their religious agenda.[72] Members of JNIM's constituent groups have since 2012 increasingly relied on their influence to engage in conflict resolution and justice provision in the Bandiagara area to establish legitimacy and build ties with local populations.[73] Interviewees also noted jihadists are only semi-present and mainly dwell in more remote and rural areas, operating at a distance.[74] To operate clandestinely, JNIM units have established themselves within rural communities after counter-militancy efforts pushed JNIM out of major towns and villages.[75]

Fulani self-defense groups

Several CBAGs emerged alongside Katiba Macina. As persecution by government security forces and reprisals by rival communities increased, young Fulani formed self-defense groups to protect their villages from the abuses of security forces and hunter-style militias such as the Donsos, or Dozos. Although

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69   MENASTREAM (@MENASTREAM), "#Mali: While #JNIM on several occasions have claimed attacks against #Dozos, there is a notable shift in the discourse, saying it is in defense of Fulani brethren, and giving Dozos the attribute "pagan", previously described as a militia backed by the army," Twitter, January 23, 2019, https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1088193830061514752?s=20.

70   This is represented in the funeral rituals of the Dogon. See also: de Bruijn and van Dijk, *Peuls et Mandingues*.

71   Ibid.

72   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

73   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

74   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

75   Jezequel and Foucher, "Forced Out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa's Jihadists Go Rural."

they formed as a self-defense mechanism, Fulani militias themselves often perpetrate attacks and are suspected of mass atrocities, notably the 2019 Sobane-Da massacre.[76] Fulani communities are not always accepting of these CBAGs, questioning their claims of protection in Macina and Ténénkou Cercles for instance, where some consider CBAGs opportunists taking advantage of disorder and chaos for profit.

Fulani CBAG members and Katiba Macina members are rooted in the same socio-political context, co-habit the same geographic areas, and claim to protect and provide justice to Fulani communities.[77] They are members of the same communities and are therefore not easily distinguishable. Fulani self-defense groups have sought support from powerful jihadist groups, JNIM and in rare cases ISGS, in their quest for protection, resources, and weapons, further challenging their distinction from jihadist groups.[78]

The cycle of tension followed by violence amongst Fulani, Dogon, and other minority ethnic groups became more prominent after Fulanis began forming their own CBAGs. This started when jihadists began targeting Dogon leaders and cultural sites.[79] Because many within the Dogon community view the Fulani CBAGs as jihadists, the Fulani CBAGs are seen as threats to Dogon and legitimize the existence of Dan Na Ambassagou, a Dogon-majority CBAG. From the perspective of Fulani CBAGs, the Dogon are viewed as a legitimate target for reprisals because of Dogon attacks on Fulanis, notably in the Bandiagara Cercle.

As a case in point, in Macina Cercle Fulanis from the Wouwarbe faction formed a CBAG after the arson of villages by Donso hunters in February 2017.[80] The Wouwarbe Fulani CBAGs attack and steal cattle from Bambara farmers associated with Donsos, demonstrating the cycle of Fulani and Bambara justifications for armed self-defense activities. Similarly, the connection between Fulani CBAGs and jihadists automatically made them rivals to the Donsos, whose multi-ethnic composition tends to associate them with farmers and fishermen as opposed to one ethnic group but who nevertheless are considered by Fulanis as aggravators and abusers.[81] For the Fulani community, the scope of its CBAGs do not extend beyond the local level. Fulani CBAGs are only responsible for protecting their individual community and exacting revenge in their immediate vicinities.

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76 RFI, "Mali: la Minusma a rendu son rapport sur le massacre de Sobane Da," August 9, 2019, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190808-mali-minusma-enquete-massacre-sobane-da-violences-entre-communautes.

77 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020. See also: International Crisis Group, "Enrayer La Communautarisation de La Violence au Centre du Mali"; Boukary, "Le Centre Du Mali: Épicentre Du Djihadisme?"; Thiam, *Centre du Mali: Enjeux et Dangers d'une crise négligée*.

78 Dougoukolo Alpha Oumar Ba-Konaré, "Entre faux djihadistes et faux chasseurs traditionnels, les civils piégés dans le centre du Mali," The Conversation, October 22, 2018, https://theconversation.com/entre-faux-djihadistes-et-faux-chasseurs-traditionnels-les-civils-pieges-dans-le-centre-du-mali-105181.

79 Abdoulaye Diarra, "Douentza: Les Islamistes Détruisent le Toguna de la Ville," L'Indépendant, October 10, 2012, http://news.abamako.com/h/6760.html.

80 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

81 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

Dan Na Ambassagou

The Dogon-majority Dan Na Ambassagou emerged in eastern Mopti Region and frames itself as a protector of the Dogon Country, a perception shared by many Dogon.[82] An interviewee claimed that Dan Na Ambassagou is "present where the army is absent . . . securing national roads."[83] Its support and legitimacy hinge on a sense of insecurity in the face of a jihadist threat. This affects the multifaceted relationship between Dan Na Ambassagou, who must provide justification for their actions as protection, and the Dogon community it claims to protect. The group has slowly become Katiba Macina's archenemy, and both groups contest territorial control and influence over local populations.

Dan Na Ambassagou is composed of traditional hunters (Dozos), though it also recruits from several minority ethnic groups not associated with Fulani or Katiba Macina efforts. In Bandiagara, the group also includes members from ethnic groups such as Samogo, Dafing, Bobo, Telem, and Mossi.[84] The movement's heartland is located on the Bandiagara Escarpment, or Cliffs of Bandiagara. It is also active across the four eastern Cercles of Mopti, including Bandiagara, Bankass, Douentza, and Koro, and maintains representation in Mopti and Sevaré in Mopti Cercle.

Dan Na Ambassagou relies on the Dogon community for recruitment, fundraising, and support. These needs incentivize it to assert security narratives by creating a state of insecurity and even targeting Dogon community members who defy or subvert its authority. Recently, Dan Na Ambassagou has targeted its own community by extorting, kidnapping, and murdering Dogon villagers in Bandiagara, Koro, and Bankass in Mopti Region, especially those who refuse to submit to the group's demands for funds and recruits.[85] Some Dogon have come to perceive Dan Na Ambassagou as a source of insecurity in a context where it is the jihadists that offer prospects of peace.[86]

Dan Na Ambassagou's creation intensified violence in Central Mali. The killing of a key Dogon leader and hunter, Théodore Soumbounou, in October 2016 by jihadists triggered the mobilization of Dan Na Ambassagou. However, according to local interviews, its rise in Bandiagara was not visible until 2018 and coincided with the increased presence of Katiba Macina and attacks against Malian forces.[87] The group has been responsible for multiple massacres against Fulani civilians, despite its claim of only targeting jihadist groups.[88]

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82   Several Dogon rallies been held in the capital Bamako and Bandiagara, Mopti Region, to show support for Dan Na Ambassagou.

83   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

84   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

85   Nathalie Prevost, "Des Dogons Harcelés Par La Milice Dans Le Centre Du Mali," *Mondafrique*, September 18, 2020, https://mondafrique.com/des-dogons-harceles-par-la-milice-dans-le-centre-du-mali/.

86   Célian Macé, "Au Mali, Les Jihadistes Se Font Parrains de La Paix," *Liberation*, September 21, 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/09/21/au-mali-les-jihadistes-se-font-parrains-de-la-paix_1800137.

87   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

88   Human Rights Watch, "Avant, nous étions des frères"; International Federation for Human Rights, "Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-terrorism," November 2018, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-populations-caught-between-terrorism-and-anti-terrorism.

During the first months of its existence, Dan Na Ambassagou enjoyed close, strategically established ties with the Malian government and its security forces under the pretext of fighting jihadists connected to Fulani communities.[89] However, this relationship between Dan Na Ambassagou and the Malian government suffered a major setback following the March 2019 Ogossagou massacre, where suspected Dan Na Ambassagou fighters killed at least 153 Fulani civilians, which signaled the revival of intercommunal violence.[90] Following the massacre, the Malian government was criticized for supporting a non-state actor who is committing atrocities. Even though Dan Na Ambassagou has suffered from the subsequent fallout with the central government, as Malian security forces targeted its bases, the group continued to enjoy popularity among Dogon communities in the area and Dogon diaspora.[91] Repeated attacks by Fulani and jihadist groups against Dogon villages justify popular support and Dan Na Ambassagou's continuous existence despite pressure from international and national human rights organizations.[92]

Donso or Dozo Hunters

Similar to the Dogons of Dan Na Ambassagou, other ethnic groups have also formed self-defense groups. Traditional hunters, or Donsos, from the Bozo fishermen community are present along the Niger river banks between Djenné and Ténénkou, Mopti Region. The Bambara, Bobo, Bwa, Marka, Dafing, and other ethnic groups organize hunter fraternities in the areas they inhabit: the Bwa and Dafing between Diallassagou in Bankass Cercle and Tominian in Tominian Cercle, Ségou Region; and the Bambara in Ténénkou, Mopti Region, and Ké-Macina and Niono, Ségou Region.

Competition and contention between the Bozo and Fulani have resulted in violent confrontations between Bozo hunters and Katiba Macina. Nouhoun-Bozo, a village famous for its boat-builders, was the focal point of the fighting between the two armed groups in 2018[93] and 2019.[94] Katiba Macina militants further imposed protracted embargoes on Bozo-majority villages such as Toguéré-Coumbé and Kouak-

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89   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020; Human Rights Watch, "Avant, nous étions des frères"; International Crisis Group, "Enrayer La Communautarisation de La Violence au Centre du Mali"; Olivier Dubois, "Mali – Mamadou Goudienkilé: Nous ne Négocierons pas avec les Djihadistes," *Le Point*, April 13, 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-mamadou-goudienkile-nous-ne-negocierons-pas-avec-les-djihadistes-13-04-2020-2371193_3826.php.

90   United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA), "Conclusions préliminaires de la mission d'enquête spéciale sur les graves atteintes aux droits de l'homme commis à Ogossagou le 23 mars 2019," United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, May 2, 2019, https://peacekeeping.un.org/fr/communique-de-presse-conclusions-preliminaires-de-la-mission-denquete-speciale-sur-les-graves.

91   International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence."

92   International Federation for Human Rights, "Central Mali: Perpetrators of Ogassagou massacre should be arrested and sentenced to stop the spiral of violence," March 26, 2019, https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/mali/central-mali-perpetrators-of-ogassagou-massacre-should-be-arrested\.

93   Rida Lyammouri, "Mali – Sahel: August 2017 – April 2018 Chronology of Violent Incidents by Al-Qaeda Affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Ansaroul Islam, and Armed Banditry and Inter-Community Violence," Sahel Memo, May 29, 2018, https://www.sahelmemo.com/2018/05/29/mali-sahel-august-2017-april-2018-chronology-of-violent-incidents-by-al-qaeda-affiliate-jamaat-nusrat-al-islam-wal-muslimeen-jnim-islamic-state-in-the-greater-sahara/.

94   MENASTREAM (@MENASTREAM), "#Mali: Yesterday, presumed Katiba Macina (#JNIM) militants aboard pickup trucks encircled the village of Nouhoun-Bozo (Djenné), #Mopti, a #FAMa aircraft reportedly intervened, forcing the assailants to withdraw," Twitter, June 29, 2019, https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1144961923374624773?s=20.

ourou, Mopti Region.[95] Initially, small conflicts related to the application of Sharia law triggered these embargoes. In Niono, Katiba Macina militants accused the Bambara Donso hunters of abuses against the Fulani community and since early October 2020 imposed an embargo on the village of Farabougou and its surroundings (Figure 3).

Like in Dogon areas, Katiba Macina militants have bombed bridges to hamper movement and prevent access, fired upon farmers while working on their fields, and instigated frequent clashes. While Katiba Macina is better armed, organized, and more motivated and experienced in warfare, the Donsos enjoy intermittent support from Malian government security forces.[96] Historically, the Malian government has relied on and supported armed militias, often ethnic-based, to combat a group threatening the state. In the same vein, in Central Mali, government security forces have been struggling to counter the rise of jihadist groups, in turn supporting militias and armed groups against jihadists.

The Malian armed forces' patrols in these Bozo-majority villages complicated the security situation, as Katiba Macina militants accused the villagers of bringing the army to the area. Consequently, the security situation in the villages worsened, with increased killings of villagers, roadside mines aimed at the security forces and Bozo hunters supporting them, and violent assaults on military positions. At present, a peace accord between Donsos and Fulani has become a tool for Katiba Macina to delegitimize Donso leaders. The Donsos' participation in any peace agreement has resulted in Dan Na Ambassagou, Katiba Macina's enemy, considering them traitors and legitimate targets of violence, even though Dan Na Ambassagou is led by a Donso and recruited heavily from Donsos when first established.[97]

CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF ARMED COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

While CBAG members come directly from the communities they claim to protect, a combination of other factors also motivate individuals, especially youth, to join or support CBAGs.[98] Ethnicity is only one mobilizing factor among others such as youth vulnerability and economic deprivation. Some CBAGs are multi-ethnic and sometimes multi-national, which indicates that mobilization across ethnic boundaries occurs amid common threat perceptions in hyperlocalized but cross-border contexts.

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95 International Crisis Group, "Parler aux jihadistes au centre du Mali : le dialogue est-il possible?"; Sahelien.com, "Au centre du Mali, trois villages sont assiégés par des djihadistes depuis plus d'un an," February 6, 2019, https://sahelien.com/au-centre-du-mali-trois-villages-sont-assieges-par-les-djihadistes-depuis-plus-dun-an/.

96 Tobie Aurélien and Boukary Sangaré, "Impacts des groupes armés sur les populations au nord et au centre du Mali : Adaptations souhaitables des stratégies de rétablissement de la paix," *SIPRI*, May 19, 2020, https://www.wathi.org/impacts-groupes-armes-mali-sipri/.

97 One such example is Ali Dolo, the mayor of Sangha Commune. See: "Le maire de Sangha sur la crise du centre: 'Cette guerre profite à certaines personnes,'" *Bamada.net*, September 17, 2020, http://bamada.net/le-maire-de-sangha-sur-la-crise-du-centre-%e2%80%89cette-guerre-profite-a-certaines-personnes%e2%80%89.

98 Interviews in Bandiagara and Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

Cycles of retributive violence

The ethnic characterization of Dan Na Ambassagou and Katiba Macina reinforces some local stereotypes that every armed Fulani group is affiliated with the jihadists of Katiba Macina and every Dogon militia is linked to Dan Na Ambassagou.[99] This explains the endless cycle of violence between these ethnic-based groups. All armed actors in Central Mali might have different ideologies and motivations; however, all of them benefit from ongoing conflicts and the absence of the state to legitimize their creation and justify their actions. Simultaneously, all groups might have similar grievances and sentiment of negligence by the central government and corrupt elites.

On the one hand, a Dogon farmer said, "The members of the self-defense group Dan Na Ambassagou are our gods who protect the Dogon community; the other group (jihadists) is made up of the enemies of Mali."[100] The statement captures discourse that further legitimizes CBAGs, to the point that this partici- pant labeled Dan Na Ambassagou as the ultimate protector, not the state.

On the other hand, Macina and Ténénkou Cercles are largely under the control of Katiba Macina and Donso hunters.[101] Here, Fulani Katiba Macina group members were vulnerable to recruitment because of a lack of state representation and grievances against local authorities, making them natural targets for Katiba Macina to increase their support in the area.[102]

In Macina Cercle, connecting Fulani communities to jihadist groups was almost immediate[103] and became evident in February 2017 following the assassination of Chaka Dembélé, a Bambara Donso hunter, attributed to Katiba Macina.[104] In reprisal, Donso hunters violently attacked Fulani villages; at least 21 civilians were killed. Since 2017, the area goes through cycles of revenge killings, legitimizing the further proliferation of CBAGs in the Cercle.[105]

Historical tensions

The underlying conflict between farmers and pastoralists in the region and the cycle of reprisals fueling the growing polarization of identities are linked and ultimately legitimize the proliferation of CBAGs.[106] The relationship between Fulani and Dogon communities is strained due to ancestral rivalries over influ- ence. These relations are increasingly stressed by worsening ecological conditions straining livelihood

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99   Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

100 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

101 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

102 Benjaminsen and Ba, "Why Do Pastoralists in Mali Join Jihadist Groups?."

103 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

104 Boubacar Sidiki Haidara, "Des Violences Intercommunautaires Font 21 Morts dans le Cercle de Macina," *Journal du Mali*, February 14, 2017, https://www.journaldumali.com/2017/02/14/violences-intercommunautaires-21-morts-cercle-de-macina/.

105 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

106 Raleigh, Nsaibia, and Dowd, "The Sahel Crisis Since 2012."

resources and by the struggle of the central government and traditional and local authorities to address natural resource management effectively, all putting the populations in competition over access to land, water, and natural resources.[107]

Due to a lack of resources and priorities, state presence in these rural areas is limited. When the state is present, it is usually through security forces. Without a sufficient presence of local authorities to address this level of conflict, jihadists and self-defense groups have taken advantage of the power vacuum by incorporating the ecological conflict into a broader discourse: they pose as necessary for protecting against the other, or enemy, relying on a narrative of Fulani herders versus the Dogon farmers in Central Mali.[108]

The Fulani-Bambara tensions are attached to the rivalry between farmers and pastoralists. The strained relations between Bambara and Fulani are felt by Fulani presence within jihadist ranks, which from the Bambara's perspective necessitates reliance on the community's Donso CBAGs for protection. Repeated attacks and cattle thefts on both sides further exacerbate tensions between the two communities, producing growing distrust. A degree of obscurity regarding the actual groups behind attacks and cattle thefts may result in scapegoating of whole communities or villages rather than of an organized group or militia.

Youth vulnerability

Central Mali youth are considered the most marginalized and vulnerable, alongside rural and nomadic pastoralist groups. Interviewees repeatedly cited insufficient job opportunities, poverty, poor access to education, social pressures to marry and start a family, and poor access to vocational and skills training to improve job prospects as factors contributing to youth associations with CBAGs.[109,110] Female youth have also engaged in supporting or fighting in CBAGs. Religion is considered a driver of female direct participation in armed groups and jihadist groups, however, reasons remain unclear.[111] Female youth might be participating in CBAG activities acting as informants providing information about opponent locations, recruiters, and transporters of goods and weapons through checkpoints.[112] While there has been over-

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107 Tor A. Benjaminsen and Boubacar Ba, "Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency," *African Security* 14, no. 1 (2021): 4-26, https://doi.org/10.1080/19392206.2021.1925035.

108 Ibid.

109 Interviews in Bandiagara and Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

110 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

111 Zoe Gorman and Gregory Chauzal, "Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali," *SIPRI*, December 2019, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2019/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/hand-hand-study-insecurity-and-gender-mali. See also: Hilary Matfess, *Brokers of Legitimacy: Women in Community-Based Armed Groups* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2020), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2020.1.

112 Gorman and Chauzal, "Hand in Hand: A Study of Insecurity and Gender in Mali." For more on women's roles and importance in armed groups, see: Jakana Thomas, *Duty and Defiance: Women in Community-based Armed Groups in West Africa* (Washington, D.C.: RESOLVE Network, 2021), https://doi.org/10.37805/cbags2021.1.

whelming evidence of women being forced into jihadist groups in the Lake Chad Basin, the role of women among jihadist groups and other armed groups in Central Mali remains understudied and unclear.[113]

The support from marginalized, disenfranchised youth is furthered through discourses of identity and communitarianism, alongside promises of weapons and profit amid conditions of poverty.[114] While the idea to create CBAGs often comes from elders, youth are mobilized to be in the frontline. One interviewee in Macina said, "The impact of youth on the birth of armed groups is minimal; the idea of creating militias does not come from the youth. They were incited, encouraged, and then recruited."[115] A Ségou interviewee said that youth are often led into vengeful cycles of violence they barely understand and find themselves conducting violent acts against unarmed civilians, including women and children.[116] Youth-perpetrated violence appears less tactical and politically referential and thus decreases the likelihood of peaceful resolution, whereas elder-led violence and reprisals tend to be limited by intercommunal norms that are fast becoming outdated.

With the proliferation of armed community mobilization came a general sidelining of traditional authorities and fragilization of locally-led dispute resolution mechanisms. Simultaneously, religious leaders have been engaging in religious debates with members of jihadist groups.[117] Thus, the mobilization of youth for violent conflict has generated adverse effects by subverting social norms and distorting hierarchies.[118] Women are increasingly exposed to sexual and gender-based violence by both armed groups and security forces.[119] According to an interviewee in Macina, "It is the youth of no value that we see in arms. Thanks to this weapon they are holding, they believe themselves vested of all power. With the weapon, they are everything: fathers of their fathers, big brothers to their elder brothers."[120] The possession of weapons has become a symbol of manhood. "Weapon carrying is now a badge of honor. Being a member of an armed group confers us a status of a full man."[121] This affects the region's social dynamics by presenting armed confrontation as an acceptable solution to protecting one's family and also legitimizing the growth in illicit small arms and light weapons.

113   Ella Jeannine Abatan and Boubacar Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including Women to What End?," *Institute for Security Studies*, March 31, 2021, https://issafrica.org/research/west-africa-report/katiba-macina-and-boko-haram-including-women-to-what-end.

114   Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

115   Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

116   Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

117   David Baché, "Mali: «Les habitants vivent très mal, tout manque» dans les localités soumises aux jihadistes," *RFI*, August 12, 2021, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/invit%C3%A9-afrique/20210812-mali-les-habitants-vivent-tr%C3%A8s-mal-tout-manque-dans-les-localit%C3%A9s-soumises-aux-jihadistes.

118   Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."

119   Shantelle Spencer, *CARE Rapid Gender Analysis Mopti – Mali* (CARE, 2020), https://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Mali-RGA-April-2020-Final-draft-clean.pdf.

120   Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

121   Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

Economic and ecological deprivation

Omnipresent in the Central Mali crisis literature is the competition over natural resources.[122] The Central Mali economy is dependent on farming, fishing, and livestock herding, making employment opportunities limited and seasonal due to irregular rainfall. After the harvest, temporary field workers are unemployed, herders struggle to find sufficient vegetation for their cattle and compete over jobs in transportation limited by route insecurity, and fishers' income-generating opportunities are impeded by the dry season.[123] Since 2015, the area's economy has worsened further due to, in part, security restrictions on travel and bans on motorbikes—an essential means of transportation between markets and fields.[124]

This economic deprivation, compounded by environmental shocks, contrasts with the relative riches of CBAG members who access funding through various means. Fulani self-defense groups are partially supported by funds raised through livestock trade.[125] Cattle theft is a common source of revenue for armed groups in Central Mali and is considered an incentive to join armed groups on two accounts: for the prospective income generated from reselling stolen cattle and for the protection of one's own cattle from theft.[126] Availability of and access to weapons for protection of livestock and property have additionally encouraged the recruitment of herders, farmers, and merchants. Some residents are more cynical—as one Macina interviewee said, "Jihadists as well as young Donsos make use of the disorder to get richer through theft, racketeering, banditry."[127]

Driven by economic hardship, members of different armed groups might use their position of power to generate income. For instance, jihadist groups rely on money and goods collected through Islamic taxation, known as zakat.[128] Interviewees said jihadist groups require payments from the communities they protect, be it under the guise of zakat or voluntary financial contributions. Some non-jihadist groups also find ways for community members to financially support them. One interviewee in Macina explained, "In a commune where the Donso hunters were regularly patrolling overnight, the people arrested would be taken to camps and they have to pay a fine of around 4-5 USD (2,000-3,000 CFA)."[129] Some support comes from across the borders. One interviewee mentioned that Dan Na Ambassagou receives funds from diaspora in West African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon since 2018.[130] Access to financial resources, albeit limited, might entice members of local communities to join armed groups to generate income.

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122 Anca-Elena Ursu, *Under the Gun: Resource Conflicts and Embattled Traditional Authorities in Central Mali* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, April 2018), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/under-the-gun.pdf.

123 Interview in Macina, Ségou region, March 2020.

124 Tobie and Sangaré, "The Impact of Armed Groups on the Populations of Central and Northern Mali."

125 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

126 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

127 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

128 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

129 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

130 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

State absence

Donso CBAGs are primarily present in towns and villages, and, like in Bandiagara, Katiba Macina control more remote and rural areas. Katiba Macina are said to control most of Ténénkou Cercle, Mopti Region,[131] while the Donsos have a stronger hold in urban areas and villages in the Macina Cercle, Ségou Region. The Malian government's security forces are partially present in Macina and Ténénkou Cercles, though the presence is limited within a few villages and in Diafarabé, Mopti Region.[132] What limited presence they do have is controversial, with one interviewee saying, "The Malian police and judiciary pillage the population. The police are an accomplice of the cattle thieves and impose themselves on the population. The judiciary does not manage conflict but exacerbates it. I can say they are very corrupt."[133]

The limited government security presence fuels feelings of insecurity amongst villagers and reinforces the reliance on CBAGs as security providers. The armed forces' alleged preference for and partiality toward the Bambara community in disfavor of the Fulani community negatively impacts perceptions of those government security forces who are present. A Diafarabé interviewee said, "With the arrival of the partial Mali army, and their collusion with the Donso militia against the Fulani, I am one of those who pray for the future victory of the jihadists who had so far not killed women and children or burned huts."[134] This non-neutral position frames the state as a participant in the ongoing conflict rather than a mediator.

However, not all views are negative. "The state cannot be everywhere," a Bandiagara interviewee said. "It does a lot by being present in half the communes of the [Ténénkou] Cercle. The state and its partners provide help in health, food, security, training, awareness, dialogue, and mediation."[135]

Central Mali populations of all ethnicities think the Malian government authorities should occupy a central role in ensuring local security and stability.[136] However, given the central government's absence in impactful local-level decision-making, the majority trust local and customary authorities more than government authorities.[137] Several existing governance issues are decades old, and the accumulation of mishandling disputes and conflicts is not a result of recent developments in Central Mali.[138]

Most Fulanis, except the elites profiting from their relationships with the government, view the state's absence as a root cause of the current crisis. "The state has failed," was a common sentiment across

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131 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

132 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

133 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

134 Interview in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020. See also: International Federation for Human Rights, *Dans le centre du Mali, les populations prises au piège du terrorisme et du contreterrorisme* (FIDH/ AMDH, November 2018), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fidh_centre_du_mali_les_populations_prises_au_pie_ge_du_terrorisme_et_contre_terrorisme.pdf.

135 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

136 Bodian, Tobie, and Marending, "The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali."

137 Ibid.

138 International Crisis Group, "Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence."

interviews.[139] "The state needs to take on its responsibilities," a Fulani interviewee said. "It is only present in Bandiagara city . . . It has only helped us escape when we were subject to executions . . . We, Fulani, need to act nicely toward the Dan Na Ambassagou, since the state is unable to provide us with security."[140]

For Dogons, the state in Bandiagara is seen as a silent accomplice to the attacks on the Dogon villages.[141] "The state, I do not recognize it anymore. It does not exist over here," an interviewee expressed.[142] "I consider the state to have abandoned the Dogon country," said another interviewee.[143]

It is perceptions of the state's absence that pushed many to join self-defense groups. The shift in local governance mechanisms put justice, security, and governance decision-making at the heart of each community and created space for CBAGs to fill the gap in security-based decision-making. As a Donso from Macina said, "We are openly present and exercise control over our localities abandoned by the Malian state."[144] However, because CBAGs are numerous and each one has its areas of operation, the murky division of control amongst armed groups confuses communities about who is the security and justice provider in their area.[145] In Mopti and Ségou Regions control and influence over territories shift, and the strength of different groups is difficult to assess. However, their narratives as providers of protection, vengeance, and governance remain a constant in the absence of a central government capable of resolving conflict.[146]

Discourses of legitimacy

The presence of jihadist groups bolsters CBAG legitimacy in parts of Central Mali. Interviews in Kolongo-Tomo, Macina Cercle, Ségou Region, highlighted that Donso self-defense groups' activities were less accepted, because the lack of a noticeable jihadist presence negated a need for protection.[147] Thus, local youth "have boycotted recruitment into self-defense groups."[148] According to the interviewees, this is due to a non-permanent threat and presence of jihadists in the community. Without an imminent threat to security and livelihoods from non-Donso armed groups, there is little justification for Donso CBAGs to perpetrate violence in the eyes of the communities they purport to protect. Hence, residents perceived the Donso hunters as illegitimate, citing abuses of power and violent treatment of the local population and referring to them as disruptors rather than guarantors of peace.[149]

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139 Interviews in Bandiagara and Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.
140 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
141 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
142 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
143 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
144 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
145 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.
146 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
147 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
148 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.
149 Interviews in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

In addition to security aspects, the mobilization of armed groups and related conflict dynamics have a clear effect on the economy of Central Mali, which CBAGs can capitalize on. For instance, in fear for their safety, merchants traveled less to Central Mali and between markets to conduct trade. The lack of mobility challenged the ability of populations to participate in weekly markets that are also key social events. Aware of this, CBAGs have framed themselves as crisis managers supporting economic recovery, while local communities represented by traditional leaders are taking governance into their own hands. The legitimization discourse of CBAGs in the region primarily focuses on the provision of security in the state's absence[150] and is generally unable to extend past ethnically driven conflict. Community members have praised CBAGs' actions for securing agricultural land, pasture, and market space.

CBAGs are also credited for their efforts to reach a peace agreement between jihadist groups, Donsos, and Dogon to support economic recovery.[151,152] An accord signed on August 1, 2019, successfully curbed the violence between the Fulani and Bambara communities in the commune of Femaye, Mopti Region, and enabled the return of internally displaced people.[153] Such peace efforts allowed transit routes to reopen and guaranteed safety to traveling merchants and populations, appeasing tensions and giving respite to conflict-affected communities.[154] While these accords might not last long—the Niono Accord in Ségou Region quickly fell apart[155]—they allow CBAGs, including jihadists, to present themselves as those looking out for the people while the central government remains distracted and occupied by the political and security turmoil in the country. Communities obey armed groups, including jihadists, and peace accords in search of peace, tranquility, and survival in ongoing conflict. However, compliance does not necessarily translate into providing active fighters and other means of material support.

CONCLUSION

The scale of violent incidents and the ethnic dimensions of the conflict, specifically in Mopti and Ségou Regions, is alarming. 2020 was the most violent year, putting the area on a trajectory of further escalation.[156] In Central Mali, the conflict's rural nature makes it more prone to protraction and casualties. The recurrent village massacres are a source of traumatization and moral outrage. The government's historical inability to intervene neutrally disqualifies it from leading any de-escalation

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150 All interviewees deemed this to be the most important element in armed groups' continued existence and operation in the region.

151 Interviews in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

152 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, and Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

153 Pauline Rouquette, "L'accord de paix entre Peuls et Dogons au Mali, une chance de neutraliser les groupes armés," *France24*, August 6, 2019, https://www.france24.com/fr/20190806-mali-accord-paix-peuls-dogons-chance-repousser-groupes-armes-terroristes.

154 "Koro: Les Acteurs Economiques Saluent la Reprise du Trafic Routier," *L'Essor*, June 2021, https://www.lessormali.com/koro-les-acteurs-economiques-saluent-la-reprise-du-trafic-routier.

155 Baché, "Mali: «Les habitants vivent très mal, tout manque»."

156 Annika Björkdahl, and Susanne Buckley-Zistel, eds., *Spatializing Peace and Conflict: Mapping the Production of Places, Sites and Scales of Violence* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Jana Krause, Resilient Communities: Non-Violence and Civilian Agency in Communal War (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108675079; José Luengo-Cabrera (@J_LuengoCabrera), "Mali: monthly civilian fatalities by attributed perpetrator. Data provider: @ACLEDINFO," Twitter, June 15, 2021, https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1404852979912609794.

efforts. The consistent increases in killings and availability of weapons heightens the likelihood of more large-scale violence, and the legitimization of CBAGs as security providers positions them to maintain at least partial community support. Current dynamics between the different communities foresee an ascendant trend in violence if no de-escalation initiatives are undertaken. This research mapped current local perceptions and hopes to point to some pathways forward.

Many locals perceive the current crisis as temporary and look forward to the return to a stable life where "Mali stays one and indivisible, secular, and open to the world."[157] As no single group has gained majority acceptance amongst the diverse populations settled in Central Mali, there is an opening for the new transitional government[158] to present themselves as a neutral party to mediate a sustainable peace agreement amongst the various CBAGs, spur economic growth that considers youth employment needs, and support reintegration programs for jihadists and other armed group members.[159] The transitional government's roadmap for Central Mali highlights the importance of disarming self-defense militias, promoting communal and armed group dialogues and redeploying the state—all improvements in considering the multidimensional, intercommunal drivers of instability.[160] However, without a clear action plan, this model could fall back on the previously unsuccessful approach of solely focusing on jihadist threats.

The government and its security forces must comply with accountability mechanisms and renounce discriminatory practices to rebuild trust.[161]The government also needs to give voice to all segments of society, including women, in reconciliation and counter-jihadist activities. "It is women who must be on the front line [in trust-building within the population], given that they are in touch directly with the men, who have taken up arms or are willing to do so, who are their fathers, husbands, sons and brothers."[162,163,164] Women are key political actors and should be included in conflict management mechanisms.

Just in the past three years, the allegations of abuse by security forces have disillusioned communities. In February 2018, in response to the government's Integrated Security Plan for the Central Regions

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157 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

158 Although this report was written before May 2021, this is also relevant to the current transitional government.

159 Interviews in Diafarabé and Bandiagara, Mopti Region, and in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

160 Stephen L. Esquith, "Mali's roadmap for lasting peace has laudable goals: but it doesn't go far enough," *The Conversation*, August 24, 2021, https://theconversation.com/malis-roadmap-for-lasting-peace-has-laudable-goals-but-it-doesnt-go-far-enough-166419.

161 Interviews in Diafarabé and Bandiagara, Mopti Region, and in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

162 Interviews in Diafarabé, Mopti Region, March 2020.

163 Interview in Bandiagara, Mopti Region, March 2020.

164 Interview in Macina, Ségou Region, March 2020.

(PSIRC),[165] the military reinforced its presence in Koro, Bankass, and Douentza cercles.[166] By July 2019, 3,500 security forces were deployed in the area, but these forces were repeatedly accused of extra-judicial abuses against civilians, especially the Fulani who were accused of collaboration with Katiba Macina.[167] Allegations against domestic and international security forces have received little attention from the central government or the international community, leaving local human rights organizations in a difficult position to investigate and bring to light potential human rights violations. For instance, in January 2021, Fulani local organizations and villagers alleged that a French air strike had killed 20 civilians and described other incidents of killing women and children. These allegations have been dismissed as false by the French and Malian governments, further eroding the trust between Fulani communities in Central Mali and the central government.[168]

The PSIRC faced further setbacks as jihadist attacks pushed back the Malian forces, weakening their visibility and interaction with local communities.[169] The government's shift from a military approach to a governance approach aiming to increase community trust via the December 2019 Stabilization Strategy for Central Mali (SSCM)[170] has not yielded any significant results. But with a transition government in place, making its transition roadmap actionable is one key step toward improving government responsiveness to community needs.

Recommendations

Based on the review of the relevant literature and the field research conducted in Central Mali, the report concludes with recommendations for local and international policymakers, development practitioners, and conflict specialists to better understand conflict-sensitive potentials to de-escalate violence and design more effective security initiatives and peacebuilding efforts. On many aspects of this conflict, further research is needed to explore current dynamics in detail and viable opportunities for a more tranquil future in Central Mali.

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165 Ministere de la Securite et de la Protection Civile, Republique du Mali, "Plan de Securisation Integree des Regions du Centre (PSIRC—Mopti et Segou)," February 2017, https://www.hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/PLAN-DE-SECURISATION-INTEGREE-DES-RE-GIONS-DU-CENTRE.pdf; Aurélien Tobie, "Central Mali: Violence, Local Perspectives and Diverging Narratives," *SIPRI*, December 2017, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2017/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/central-mali-violence-local-perspectives-and-diverging-narratives.

166 International Crisis Group, "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys': Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists," May 28, 2019, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/276-speaking-bad-guys-toward-dialogue-central-malis-jihadists.

167 Zeenat Hansrod, "Central Mali: Populations Caught between Terrorism and Anti-Terrorism," *RFI*, November 21, 2018, https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20181120-malian-civilians-trapped; *RFI*, "Mali : Boubou Cissé annonce des mesures sécuritaires dans le centre," July 8, 2019, https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190708-mali-boubou-cisse-annonce-mesures-securitaires-le-centre.

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- Allegations of abuse and discrimination by Malian security forces exacerbated key grievances within Fulani communities. For any government-led strategy to improve community trust in political leadership to succeed, government leaders and the international community must consider and respond to allegations of abuse by any parties to the internal armed conflict. The Malian government and international stakeholders must elevate the voice of local human rights and development organizations and investigate alleged crimes followed with well-publicized actions to fix a security model undone by conflict and distrust.

- Peaceful co-existence is inconceivable until the long-term damage of jihadist groups and CBAGs in stoking ethnic violence is reversed. CBAGs will continue being legitimized to drive security behaviors based on identity politics led by the growing population of marginalized, radicalized youth. Any security approach must acknowledge that tensions amongst ethnically heterogenous communities will exist even if the jihadist threat is removed.

- Lessons learned from French alignment with Tuareg groups in northern Mali for counterterrorism efforts must be applied to avoid any national, international, or multilateral security effort aligning with CBAGs. Rumors of French alignment with Dan Na Ambassagou are likely to intensify already existing social and ethnic tensions by more clearly pitting Fulanis and Dogons against one another—namely through reinforcing the Fulani-jihadist connection by creating Dogon-French linkages. The potential for an evolving mission or a set of principles of CBAGs in their fight to maintain power could entangle external actors into siding with certain ethnic communities over others, further harming to social cohesion and government trust-building.

- Security sector reform and disengagement, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) are unlikely at this time, and any effort to integrate CBAG members into a larger, national security force or law enforcement organization is primed to fail. DDR should not be a priority now for stabilization efforts, when ethnic tensions remain unaddressed. CBAG members will likely hold a single-minded objective to protect their own community or ethnic group. Integrating too soon would serve to empower CBAGs—an obvious liability to national-level sustainable peace and justice.

- Women are not a monolithic group: age, ethnicity, location, and religious beliefs all play roles in women's diverse opinions and associations with the ongoing violence.[171] Taking a conflict-sensitive approach to addressing women's needs, behaviors, and potential contributions to positive change has not been adequately explored. To fully understand the potential roles women in Central Mali can play in peacebuilding processes, further research is required to understand

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171 Rida Lyammouri and Anna Schmauder, *Supporting Efforts in Engaging with Local Religious and Traditional Leaders in Burkina Faso and Mali* (Helsinki: The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, 2021), https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Supporting-efforts-in-engaging-with-local-religions-and-traditional-leaders-in-Burkina-Faso-and-Mali-1.pdf; Abatan and Sangaré, "Katiba Macina and Boko Haram: Including Women to What End?."

women's roles in the current conflict and opportunities to positively incorporate women's voices into peace and security agendas.

- Communities believe that poor economic prospects are resulting in greater risk of individuals joining armed groups. Following a careful review process, governments and state security actors should conduct thorough assessments of interdictions, bans, and curfews before implementation that may cause economic harm by preventing individuals from accessing markets. For the transitional government to begin normalizing economic activity, opening trade and providing skills training are simple measures to engage youth and adults in licit income production.

- Responses thus far have been slow and impeded by implementation challenges. Given the fluid, constantly evolving dynamics, programming related to conflict and violence prevention, economic development, and humanitarian assistance requires more flexibility and more speed. An increase in rapid assessments and analysis could improve the ability of implementers and program decision-makers to proactively respond to dynamic changes in the situation.

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About the Report

RESOLVE NETWORK

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